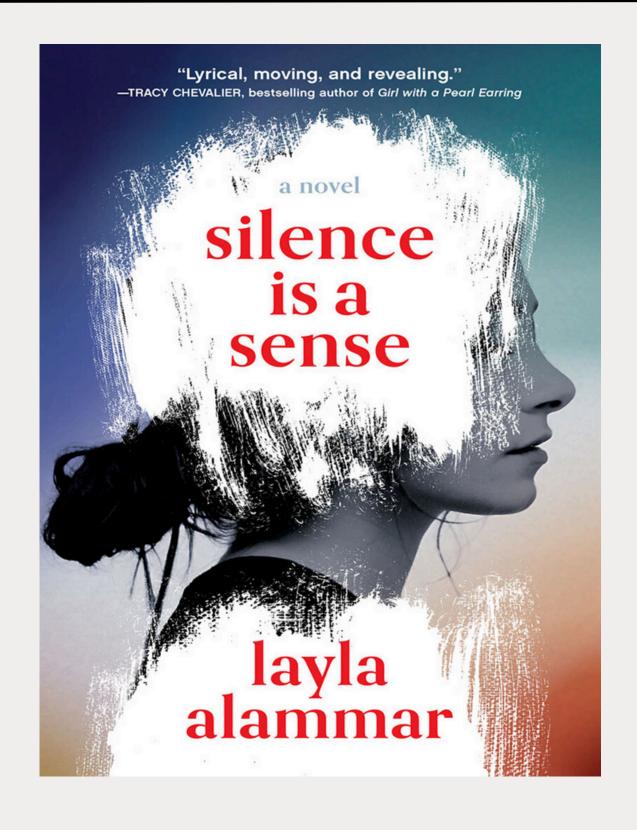
SILENCE IS A SENSE

LAYLA ALAMMAR



First Impressions?

AGENDA

OI BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW

O2 CONTENT AND KEY DEVICES

O3 DEPICTING TRAUMA

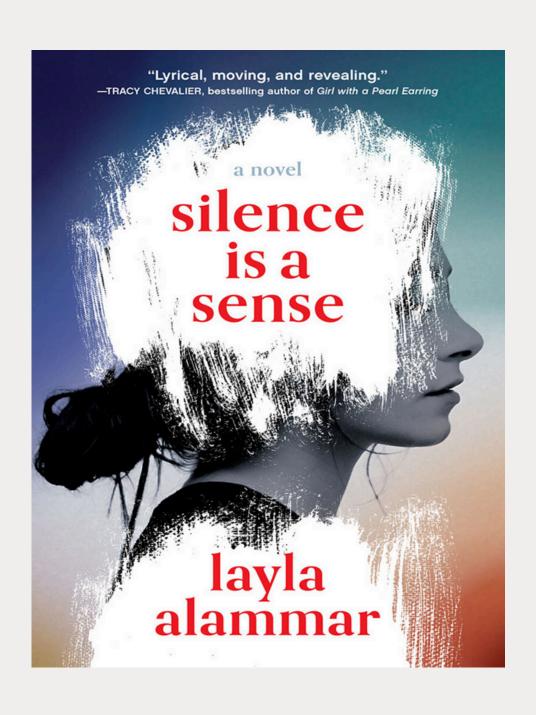
O4 WRITING AND THE PUBLISHING INDUSTRY

O5 IDENTITY AS AN ARAB WOMAN

BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW

OVERVIEW

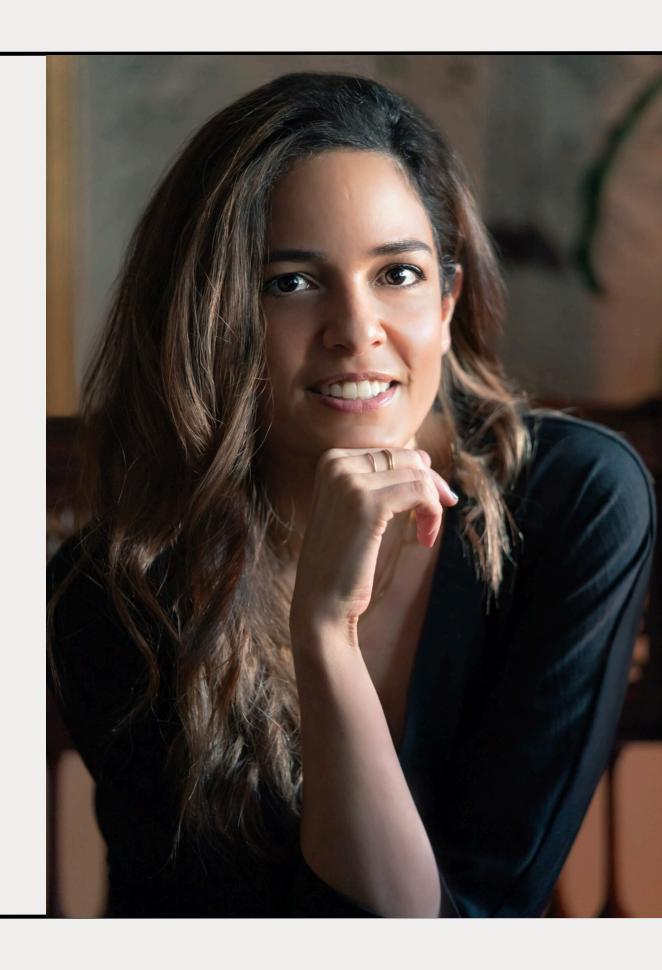
- contemporary novel published in 2021
- author: Layla AlAmmar
- centers on an unnamed refugee woman living in the UK



- Narrative Style
 - o first-person narrative
 - o stream of consciousness
- Key Themes:
 - o Trauma
 - Silence
 - Identity
 - Exile
 - Alienation
 - Resilience

LAYLA ALAMMAR

- writer and academic from Kuwait
- has a PhD in Arab women's fiction and literary trauma theory and an MSc in Creative Writing from the University of Edinburgh
- short stories have appeared in the <u>Evening Standard</u>, <u>Quail Bell Magazine</u>, the <u>St Andrews University Prose Journal</u>, and <u>Aesthetica Magazine</u>
- debut novel: The Pact We Made, 2020



CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

- The Syrian war's devastation and displacement crisis have forced millions to seek asylum worldwide and the novel highlights the mental burden refugees carry beyond physical displacement.
- Literature like AlAmmar's novel provides a voice for refugees through fiction, exposing psychological and social realities often overlooked.
- The protagonist uses observation and silence as coping mechanisms to navigate an unfamiliar world

IMPACT AND RELEVANCE

- Sheds light on the lived experience of refugees beyond statistics and headlines.
- Challenges stereotypes about Muslim women and refugees.
- Encourages empathy through nuanced storytelling.
- Relevant to discussions on migration, identity, trauma and media representation.

CONTENT AND KEYDEVICES

SUMMARY

- The protagonist is mute due to trauma from the war in Syria and her refugee journey across Europe
- She lives isolated, rarely leaving her apartment, observing life through windows both physically and metaphorically.
- Writes under the pseudonym "The Voiceless" for an online magazine, exposing the commodification refugee stories.
- Struggles with her past memories and present alienation in a foreign society.

KEY CHARACTERS

• The unnamed protagonist (also known as "The Voiceless")

UK

- Josie, her editor
- The Neighbours
 - No-Lights-Man (Adam)
 - o The Dad, Helen, Chloe, Matt
 - The Juicer
 - The Old Couple (Ruth and Tom)
- The imam
- Hasan

Past/Syria

- Family
- Friend Group
 - o Ossama
 - Khalid
 - Amer
 - o Donya

STYLISTIC FEATURES AND THEMATIC DEVICES

First – person narration and stream of consciousness

- Provides intimate to the protagonist's psyche.
- Mimics trauma's impact on memory and thought process.

Fragmentation

- Non-linear structure with flashbacks and memories.
- Reflects the disjointed experience of trauma and exile.

CHARACTERISATION AND SOCIAL ISOLATION

- She assigns nicknames to neighbours, maintaining emotional distance.
- The protagonist's anonymity reflects loss of identity.
- Isolation is both self-imposed and socially enforced, emphasizing invisibility and alienation

Symbolism

Silence

- complex, multifaceted
- evident in every thematic aspect of the novel

Windows

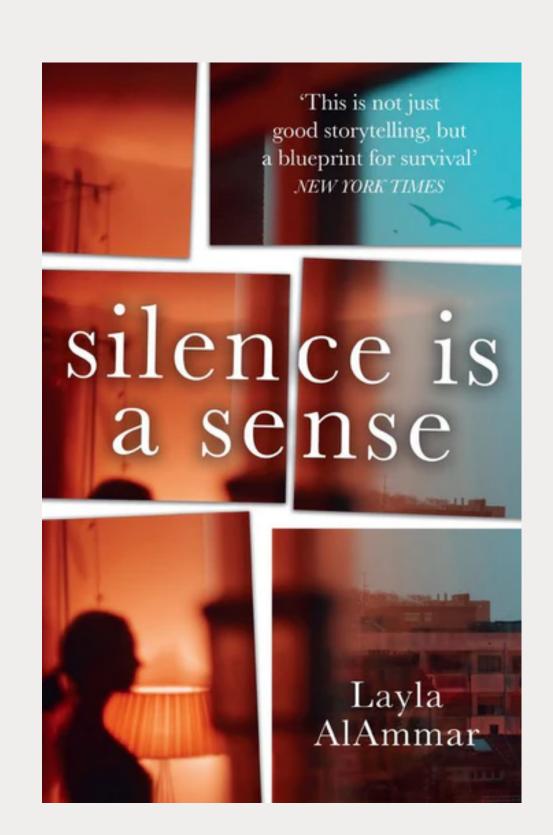
- barriers and points of observation, symbolizing isolation
- importance highlighted on alternate cover

Motif of voice and voicelessness

- Explores who gets to speak and how trauma silences.
- Contrast between inner rich narration and external silence.

Juxtaposition

- Contrasts protagonist's past in Syria with present in the UK
- Highlights persistence of trauma despite physical safety.



How does silence function as both protection and erasure in the novel?

DEPICTING TRAUMA

VISIBLE MANIFESTATIONS

- Recurrent panic attacks triggered by noise her neighbours make or the incident at the mosque
- wonders why they still affect her so much when she has survived so much worse
- Detachment & isolation: watches life through her window; avoids contact, even at the mosque
- Nameless narrator → even though the reader knows her inner thoughts this distances her from us

TRAUMA AND MEMORY

- Suppresses memories yet they "haunt" the narrative; in them danger is always looming
- Journey across Europe is "encoded" in her body perpetual flight, never settled
- Dreams/nightmares blur with reality she doubts accuracy of her own recollections

"But I was talking about memories, not dreams, though there are more than enough of those and the latter have a nasty habit of muddying the former. There is a kind of deceit to memories, where you're never sure something happened the way you remember." (AlAmmar, 16)

SILENCE AS A TRAUMA RESPONSE

- Layla AlAmmar: "She has been traumatised into muteness by these experiences, both back home in Syria and on her journey to the U.K. And there's this long theory about silence and trauma and silence as a response to trauma." (NPR)
- Trauma "mutes" her; silence fills her in the hospital room after arrival in the UK
- Question posed: How long can a silence last before the psyche cracks?
- continuous reminders that she needs to "use her voice" and "speak out"

CAN THERE BE RECOVERY?

- Starts writing about and confronting memories
- Gradual re-connection: bonds with Adam & Chloe, attends Hasan's wake, goes "beyond the window"
- final sentence is her telling Adam her name
- Still states that trauma never fully leaves; recovery # erasure

"Rooms do not hold on to the horror that was lived in them. It's a silly superstition to think they do. They have no need for lingering terror or the residue of panic or the vapours of resentment. We carry these things in ourselves, in the rooms and boxes of our hearts and minds." (AlAmmar, 240)

"You are recovered?' This startles a loud laugh out of me. Is there any such thing as recovery? When life has been nothing but a cumulative, recurring trauma - thirst, hunger, cold, poor, weak, hot, ill, battered, bruised, broken limbs, blood, blood, blood - can recovery ever happen in any meaningful way?" (AlAmmar, 237)

Would you say that the novel tells the story of a woman overcoming trauma?

What does the novel say about the relationship between personal trauma and public storytelling?

WRITING AND THE PUBLISHING INDUSTRY

SILENCE IN WRITING

- Publishes essays under pseudonym "the Voiceless"
- Although she does not speaking, she is using "her voice" nevertheless through writing
- "silent" on personal issued but speaks out about political things
- AlAmmar:

"A large part of the silence is a learned silence. [You] grow up in this environment where you cannot speak, and there is this oppressive silence that governs the entire country where speaking out quite literally gets you killed, to then expect her to just be able to freely express her opinions, and in a very personal way that [her editor] wants, it's understandable that she would hesitate to do that." (NPR)

"In a way it is about privacy. When you come from a place where the walls have ears and you spend your life hiding and fabricating, trying to learn the rules to games you have no hope of ever winning and searching for cracks from which to scurry out, your instinct is to hold certain matters close to the chest. It's about self-preservation, that most basic of human instincts." (AlAmmar, 15)

EDITOR VS. AUTHOR: Who Controls the Narrative?

Protagonist

- not sure how to trust her own mind/memories
- resents the idea that it is her job as a Muslim to convince the public not to be scared of her
- painful to write or even think about her memories; has the feeling that she would "flay herself"

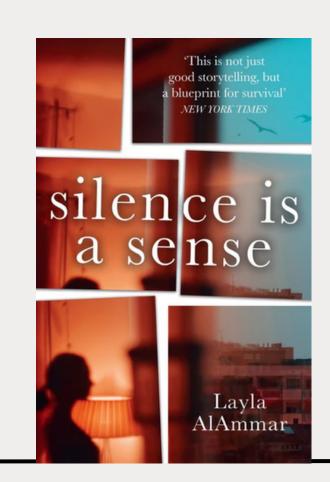
shift: starts writing about her memories after the mosque is vandalised but there are still parts that she won't include

Josie/Publishing industry

- her job is to think about reader engagement and how to cater to expectations
- obsession with refugee stories, the hardships, struggles, their "humanization"
- obsession in the west with memories

once she writes about her memories: Josie wants something easy to digest, talks about "character development, tries to aestheticize her story

"They - and by 'they', I mean my editor and the people at the magazine you're currently reading and some of you who have left comments in the empty spaces below - want me to reveal myself as some microcosm of refugee society. They want to see, in me, all the hopes and ills and frustrations and struggles and singular stories of some five million plus people. [...] By seeing 'me', by knowing 'me', you might feel some degree of empathy for them all. Humanize. That's what they say, when they're fawning over certain books and documentaries and films. A word uttered easily and without too much thought. A well-intentioned word that nevertheless concedes the argument that some people are not people and so require art form to render them human." (AlAmmar, 123)



Fiction as Liberation?

- starts writing a short story
- hesitant because writing fiction might cheapen the experience beyond what she can bear
- can write about her experiences and memories without being told that it is too "unrealistic" "Yes, Josie, fiction is very liberating"
 - hands in Sweet Dew for award using her own name

- Writing as a way to overcome trauma?
- Says trauma always stays with her and is made to go into certain directions with the writing
- But: parallel between opening herself up and opening herself up in the writing, using her voice

Is the protagonist is "giving in" to her editor's and Western society's expectations by turning to fiction and repackaging her memories?

Is a novel is the right medium to tell a story that is rooted in trauma or does it desensitise the audience to future stories?

IDENTITY AS AN ARAB WOMAN

Syria as Memory: Distance, Limits, and Haunting

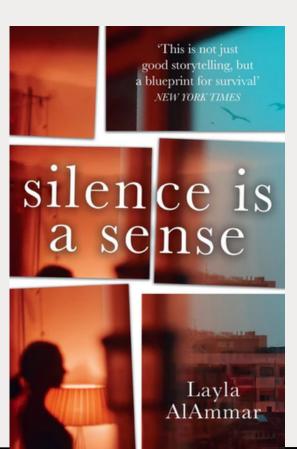
- Keeps emotional distance from Syria avoids saying her name, avoids remembering
- Family memories both comforting and burdensome; feels she's "dragging" them behind her; going with them to Egypt would have been "reading one oppression for the other"
- Revolution offered hope, but always a sense of danger
- Syria = confinement, UK = imagined freedom yet that "utopia" proves imperfect
- Dreams and flashbacks show that she felt some kind of alienation from her culture before she left

Muslim Identity: Between Estrangement and Belonging

- severely judges religious zeal and nationalism of any kind
- feels alienation: unhappy that she can be identified so easily as Muslim even after she tried to "assimilate" hates the idea of being so transparent
- voices controversial opinions on Islam and assimilating to Western culture receives backlash
- keeps away from Muslim community in the town
- as "The Voiceless" speaks out against the conflation of the Muslim terrorist and refugee and the racism Muslim people experience daily

"It's terribly presumptuous. I frown down at the cobblestone pavement beneath my feet, wondering what it is about me that screams Muslim. [...] I am fair-skinned with dark hair that I have not covered since the day I left home. I dress in jeans and jumpers and the same damn clothes everyone else here wears. I've assimilated, Josie, so why does this imam automatically assume I'm a Muslim in need of his spiritual guidance? [...] I hate that he sees me, hate the idea that I am, in this particular way, so transparent." (AlAmmar, 45)

"I move with purpose through the shop, not wanting to spend more time here than necessary. Is it right that I should reject it all? The mosque with its hip imam? This shop with its food from home? How much farther do I have to walk for this feeling to leave me?" (AlAmmar, 208)



The Question of Home

- Mosque as echo of "home": familiar shadows trigger memories of Syria.
- Fading brightness: memories scenes darken as she accepts she can't return or restore what was lost.
- Correction reflex: calls Syria home but catches herself—the UK must be home now
- War as statistics vs. her lived memories: numbers on British news are her childhood landmarks
- Home is neither the one or the other stuck in a liminal space
- Label refugee suggests endless flight Does "refugee" secretly contain the idea of never-ending exile?

Is her detachedness and estrangement from her past and the Muslim community a coping mechanism for dealing with her loss and trauma?

At the end of the novel, the protagonist interacts with the Muslim community in the town and uses her name for the first time. Is the conclusion of the novel thus a reconcilliation with her identity as an Arab Muslim woman?

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