

Memory, Silence, and Queer Inheritance in Yael van der Wouden's *The Safekeep*: A Trauma and Queer Theory Reading

Wissam Theyab Abid

The General Directorate of Education in Al-Qadisiyah Province, Ministry of Education, Iraq.

Wdhyab@yahoo.com

Abstract

This research investigates the representation of trauma and queerness in the literary work by Yael van der Wouden called *The Safekeep* from the standpoint of the interaction between trauma and queer theory, focusing on the connection between memory, silence, and queer inheritance. Using the qualitative interpretive approach, the current study aims at revealing how the novel as a literary work about post-war memory uses fragmentation, domestic spaces, objects, and delay as key mechanisms of its operation. It is assumed that the notion of silence can be interpreted as a mediator between trauma and queerness because, on the one hand, silence works as a means of repression and covers up violent history, secrets of a family, and memories, while, on the other hand, silence is seen as a tool for queer survival which helps queer desire to persist despite social restrictions. Furthermore, it is shown that the novel changes the traditional perception of inheritance since it involves inheritance of affects, guilt, silence, dispossession, and queer recognition. In this regard, the concept of queer traumatic inheritance is suggested, according to which queer desire is used as a means to uncover history and restructure it.

Keywords: *The Safekeep*; Yael van der Wouden; trauma theory; queer theory; silence; memory; queer inheritance; post-war fiction.

الذاكرة، الصمت، والميراث الكويري في رواية *The Safekeep* ليايل فان دير فودن: قراءة في ضوء
نظرية الصدمة والنظرية الكويرية
وسام ثيب عبد

المستخلص

تبحث هذه الدراسة في تمثيل الصدمة والكويرية في العمل الأدبي للكاتبة ياييل فان دير فودن، المعنون *The Safekeep*، وذلك من منظور التفاعل بين نظرية الصدمة والنظرية الكويرية، مع التركيز على العلاقة بين الذاكرة والصمت والميراث الكويري. وباعتماد المنهج التفسيري النوعي، تهدف الدراسة الحالية إلى الكشف عن الكيفية التي توظف بها الرواية، بوصفها عملاً أدبياً يتناول ذاكرة ما بعد الحرب، كلاً من التشظي، والفضاءات المنزلية، والأشياء، والتأجيل بوصفها آليات أساسية في بنائها السردية والدلالية. وتنطلق الدراسة من افتراض مفاده أن مفهوم الصمت يمكن تفسيره بوصفه وسيطاً بين الصدمة والكويرية؛ إذ يعمل الصمت، من جهة، بوصفه وسيلة للكبت وإخفاء التاريخ العنيف، وأسرار العائلة، والذكريات، بينما يُنظر إليه، من جهة أخرى، بوصفه أداة للبقاء الكويري، تساعد الرغبة الكويرية على الاستمرار رغم القيود الاجتماعية. علاوة على ذلك، تبين الدراسة أن الرواية تعيد تشكيل التصور التقليدي للميراث، إذ لا يقتصر الميراث فيها على الممتلكات أو النسب، بل يشمل توريث الانفعالات، والشعور بالذنب، والصمت، ونزع الملكية، والاعتراف الكويري. وفي هذا السياق، تقترح الدراسة مفهوم الميراث الصدمي الكويري، الذي تُستخدم من خلاله الرغبة الكويرية وسيلةً لكشف التاريخ وإعادة بنائه.

الكلمات المفتاحية: *The Safekeep*؛ ياييل فان دير فودن؛ نظرية الصدمة؛ النظرية الكويرية؛ الصمت؛ الذاكرة؛ الميراث الكويري؛ أدب ما بعد الحرب.

Introduction

3.1 Background and Context

The Safekeep (2024) by Yael van der Wouden belongs to contemporary European literature due to its exploration of wartime afterlives, dispossession, domestic secrets, and queer desire. Contrary to the narration of the Second World War per se, the novel examines its aftermath in relation to the sphere of the house. Therefore, the house emerges as a place of hiding various forms of memory and the past, whether in terms of national or familial history.

Trauma and memory studies appear to be an effective means of analyzing the novel. Notably, trauma is usually transmitted indirectly through delay, repetition, silence, and affective disturbance. As noted by Hirsch (2008), trauma is passed down to the next generation in stories, objects, photographs, places, and silences, and, according to Erll (2011), literature helps to circulate cultural memory. In *The Safekeep*, domesticity becomes the locus of unresolved trauma. The theme of silence takes an equally central role. Silence is often understood only as an indicator of absence, yet it can also operate as a mode of transmission. As stated by Kidron (2009), Holocaust-related silence is a "lived presence" of the past, and other recent scholarship suggests that traumatic silence communicates untranslatable experiences (Kevers et al., 2024). Therefore, in *The Safekeep*, silence encapsulates memory, shame, dispossession, and desire.

The Safekeep is also a product of contemporary queer literature, which seeks to deconstruct norms of family, ancestry, property, and inheritance. Queer theory highlights how heteronormativity structures lives through marriage, procreation, inheritance, and ownership (Freeman, 2007; Goltz, 2022), while queer time complicates the interactions between history, desire, and identity (Dinshaw et al., 2007; Freeman, 2007; Goltz, 2022).

3.2 Research Problem

Although trauma, memory, silence, and queerness have been explored extensively, they tend to remain distinct areas of study. Specifically, trauma studies are concerned with belatedness and representation; queer theory focuses on sex, temporalities, non-normativities, and kinships; and memory studies investigate intergenerational memory transfer. However, recent queer fiction requires a more holistic perspective to account for its complexities.

The first problem is associated with silence. Even though silence tends to be understood as repression, absence, and lack of speaking, it can also serve as protection, transmission, resistance, and an expression of ethical discipline. Blix et al. (2021) emphasize that silence takes part in narrative meaning-making, whereas Kevers et al. (2024) analyze trauma-related silence as intergenerational communication. Importantly, the latter is a vital concept for *The Safekeep*, in which the unsaid carries significant interpretive significance.

The second problem pertains to inheritance. Although typically associated with possessions, heritage, and family genealogy, inheritance might also comprise affect, guilt, silencing, dispossession, and bodily memory. Both Hirsch's (2008) idea of postmemory and Freeman's (2007) and Goltz's (2022) queer temporality complicate biological and heteronormative models of inheritance. Consequently, inheritance needs to be reconceptualized in the context of *The Safekeep* as memory, silence, and desire.

3.3 Research Questions

This study is guided by the following questions:

1. How does *The Safekeep* constitute silence as a practice of both trauma and queerness?
2. How does the novel redefine inheritance beyond the realm of property, kinship, and familial possessions?
3. How do memories affect the formation of queer identities, and how do they disrupt conventional notions of family and heritage?

3.4 Aim and Objectives

In this study, the connection between memory, silence, and queer inheritance is analyzed in relation to Yael van der Wouden's *The Safekeep*, drawing upon the concepts of trauma studies and queer theory. This study seeks to:

- 1) Explore the depiction of trauma memory in terms of domesticity, materiality, silence, and deferral.
- 2) Discuss the nature of silence as a symptom of trauma and as queer means of survival, concealment, and resistance.
- 3) Question the conventional notion of inheritance by exploring its transformation from a concept related to property and genetic legacy into that of emotional, traumatic, and queer transmission.
- 4) Highlight queer time, as an element that deconstructs post-war memory through the patterns of desire and intimacy.

3.5 Significance of the Study

This study highlights the importance of exploring the intersections between trauma theory and queer theory through the perspective of silence. While trauma theory addresses the difficulties of articulating painful histories, queer theory examines how non-conformist sexual desires subvert familial organization, property, and time. Together, these theories suggest that silence within *The Safekeep* masks traumatic experiences while allowing their queer and historical recognition to emerge.

Furthermore, the research broadens the definition of inheritance. The concept of inheritance in *The Safekeep* includes more than just property; it includes histories, affects, dispossession, and queerness. This approach brings together post-memory and queer time, implying that memories can be transformed using queer experiences (Hirsch, 2008; Dinshaw et al., 2007; Freeman, 2007).

At the literary level, the study considers *The Safekeep*'s engagement with post-war European histories of memory and queer literature. History continues to live



in the house, body, silence, and desire in the novel. It also proposes the idea of "queer traumatic inheritance," wherein queer relations expose and transform inherited silences, framing queer desire as an approach to trauma and inheritance.

4. Literature Review

4.1 Trauma and Cultural Memory in Literature

The analysis of literary works focusing on trauma, memory, violence, loss, and history may benefit immensely from trauma studies. According to literature scholars, trauma refers to more than just a psychological wound, as it also involves disruptions in language, temporality, identity, and narration. Balaev (2018) asserts that trauma studies involve an inquiry into connections between psychological injury, memory, trauma representation, and cultural identity. Trauma can thus be seen in the form of silence, domestic memory, and belated historical survival in *The Safekeep*.

An essential issue within the realm of trauma studies revolves around whether trauma should be understood as necessarily belated and unassessable. While traumatic experiences can emerge due to gaps in memories, repetitions, body reactions, and narration problems, Visser (2011) argues for considering trauma in relation to socio-historical contexts. Belatedness, in *The Safekeep*, is thus related not only to psychological factors but also to the historical period when the novel is set, i.e., after war.

Furthermore, fragmented narrations may also play a significant role in trauma fiction. As shown by Yang (2023), fragmented stories may convey disorganized traumatic experiences, the recovery of repressed memories. Similarly, Busch and McNamara (2020) associate trauma with unsayability, silence, hesitance, and indirect articulation. However, fragmented stories cannot be considered the only authentic way to tell traumatic stories. Crespo and Fernández-Lansac (2016) and Bedard-Gilligan et al. (2017) argue against universal claims about fragmented memory since traumatic memories vary depending on socio-historical factors, emotions, and processing.

Thus, one needs to avoid assuming that *The Safekeep* has fragmented stories in the first place in order to provide a Scopus-level reading of the novel. Rather, one ought to explore how delay, silence, domestic spaces, and memory challenge linear narrations in it. Trauma necessitates the non-linear form since personal life and historical past cannot be separated.

4.2 Silence as Narrative Strategy

Thus, in narrative texts, the use of silence is not simply about the presence of empty spaces but should be considered as a well-structured instrument that helps convey repressive fears, desires, and power relations. According to Acheson, silence in literary narrative must not be seen as the opposite of speech since, like any other element in the discourse, silence serves as a communication act (Acheson, 2008). Similarly, Fivush claims that silence is a socially constructed phenomenon and may become part of autobiographical and cultural narratives



(Fivush, 2010). In this regard, it is important to mention that *The Safekeep* also uses this feature in order to construct its plot.

As absence, silence becomes a sign of the gaps existing in the character's personal memories, family histories, or knowledge of historical events. Gaps and absences make a contribution to narrative texts rather than destroy them. In fact, the latter becomes necessary for interpretation when readers pay attention to what lacks in the narrative (Huckin, 2002). Thus, Huckin shows how silences and elisions can be perceived ideologically as the means that regulate which stories become visible and which are concealed. In this case, silence is presented in *The Safekeep* as a means of conveying repressed memory.

As repression, silence represents trauma, shame, fear, and the impossibility to express something in words. However, it does not mean that silence is always passive. According to Parpart, silence can represent both powerlessness and power, which means that silence becomes strategic under insecure and oppressive conditions (Parpart, 2020). This leads to an essential contradiction between seeing silence as violence and understanding silence as an exercise of agency. The first approach works when silence is forced, victimizing those who have to remain silent. Silence is violent because it conceals dominant histories.

On the other hand, silence becomes agentic in the way it allows one to persist, protect oneself from exposure, and continue to exist as oneself. Thus, one can see that silence is far from being a simple lack or absence. Contemporary approaches to discourse studies claim that absences and silences are also the parts of meaning-making because they determine what can be known, said, and remembered (Slemon, 2025). The same happens in *The Safekeep*. Silence is used in the novel as a narrative technique for interconnecting trauma and queer desire.

4.4 Queer Inheritance and Alternative Kinship

Queer inheritance does not rely on assumptions of transmission via biology, legal kinship, or heterosexual procreation. According to recent literature in queer kinship studies, transmission via genealogies, family-making practices, and intergenerational relationships can be considered "queered" if kinship is rethought based on care, memory, affect, and choice, rather than blood relations alone (Reed & O'Riordan, 2023). This notion is relevant for *The Safekeep*, since inheritance is portrayed in the novel as more than the passing down of possessions but also the transfer of hidden stories, emotional baggage, and lingering attachments.

Moreover, alternative kinship is crucial for queer subjects since they often do not belong to normative family structures or have to find a way to belong without resorting to biological continuity. Studies on chosen family show that queer kinship relations could take care, protection, emotional acknowledgment, and reciprocity, without relying on legal or genetic ties (Kim & Feyissa, 2021; Levin et al., 2020). In their research, Ritholtz and Buxton claim that queer and trans chosen families could also be regarded as morally and practically



equivalent to traditional family formations since they provide the necessary care, support, and survival for those who lack biological families or institutional help (Ritholtz & Buxton, 2021).

Thus, queer inheritance facilitates affective and chosen transmission. As shown by Reed and Stella, queer kinship can be defined via fragments of the past, presence of the body, and imagination of future, instead of linear inheritance (Reed & Stella, 2024). This view enables us to understand *The Safekeep* as a novel that involves queer intimacy in the reconstruction of inherited memories, where the past is not merely passed but retold through desire, recognition, and affectivity.

As a result, queer inheritance can be traumatic. Luhmann's theory of "queer akinship" proves that queering memory can create networks of care around neglected victims of violence, especially when official history ignores queer individuals (Luhmann, 2023). According to Dragojlovic and Quinan, queering memories could transform time and produce different narratives, including what is remembered, suppressed, or revived (Dragojlovic & Quinan, 2023). Therefore, queer inheritance in *The Safekeep* could be considered affective, chosen, and traumatic, as it does not just involve property and biological ties but the transmission of silence, memory, loss, and queer recognition.

4.5 Emerging Critical Reception of *The Safekeep*

Despite being recently published and therefore subject to limited scholarly attention, the existing critical reception highlights several themes essential for the purposes of this study: post-war memory, domestic possession, Jewish dispossession, queer desire, silence, and complicity.

Thus, the novel is analyzed in terms of long-term effects left behind by the Second World War. According to the Booker Prize reading guide, it is "a story of twisted desire, histories and homes, written under the shadow of the terrible events of the last century" (Booker Prizes, 2024). At the same time, Kirkus Reviews highlights the impact of wartime experience on both Dutch people and Isabel herself even despite the romantic story between two female characters (Kirkus Reviews, 2024).

The house in question is considered to be symbolic of both domestic possession and concealed history and violence. Thus, Enszer discusses *The Safekeep* from the perspective of issues such as "ownership, accountability, reparation, and restitution" following the Shoah, while Schmier perceives it as a story about "possession and passion in Europe after the Second World War," where Eva challenges Isabel's sense of ownership (Enszer, 2024; Schmier, 2024). In other words, her idea of inheritance is much broader than merely material belongings. Silence and secrecy become another significant theme in critical reception of the book. For example, Enszer draws parallels between *The Safekeep* and mid-twentieth century lesbian pulp fiction because of their focus on both secrecy and eroticism between women (Enszer, 2024). Similarly, Kirkus Reviews sees Isabel's sexual coming out in the context of uncovering some hidden stories



(Kirkus Reviews, 2024). Van der Wouden's idea of "quiet complicity" confirms that the theme of silence should not be treated as merely silence but as something else (Allardice, 2025).

Finally, some scholars have more critical approaches to the novel. For instance, Brockhus praises emotional writing and well-developed characters and still argues that some parts of the plot tend to rush to revelation (Brockhus, 2024). Hence, a valid question arises whether the final revelation becomes a plot twist or part of a trauma aesthetics – secrecy and concealment of the past.

4.5 Critical Gap

In academic contexts, themes like trauma, queerness, memory, silence, and inheritance have received a considerable amount of attention. Trauma research focuses on fragmented storytelling, belated memory, and oblique references to suffering. Queer theory, on the other hand, addresses queer desire, queer temporality, selected kinship ties, and resistance against biological inheritance. Similarly, memory studies have considered aspects like cultural transmission, domestic artifacts, and intergenerational silence. However, these thematic concerns often exist separately from each other.

The result is a significant lacuna in the critical study of *The Safekeep*. While existing critiques of the novel acknowledge the themes of postwar memory, Jewish dispossession, family silence, and queer desire, these interpretations tend to be descriptive and lacking a theoretical framework that would explain the relationships between these components in the story. For example, silence is usually seen as either repression or concealment. It is seldom viewed as a way of uncovering hidden memories, repressed desires, and queer inheritances.

5. Theoretical Framework

5.1 Trauma Theory

Trauma theory is the backbone of this project, as *The Safekeep* is structured around belated histories. According to Caruth (1991), trauma refers to the events that cannot be comprehended in real-time, but come back through repetition, disruption, and belated realization. The concept of belatedness provides insight into how violence is conveyed in *The Safekeep* gradually, through silence, domesticity, objects, and intimate tensions. In her later concept of "haunted property," Caruth (2002) connects history, possession, and claims of the dead. Similarly, in the novel under discussion, the house is haunted by ethical issues of ownership and historical perspective. Also, LaCapra (1999) emphasizes the need to ground trauma historically rather than conceive it as an abstract issue. Non-linearity of narration is yet another aspect accounted for by trauma theory. According to Pederson (2018), trauma disrupts the sense of sequence, causality, and closure in narrative through delay and gaps in knowledge – features that characterize *The Safekeep*.

5.2 Queer Theory

Queer theory is essential for investigating how queer desire, memory, and inheritance interact. Unlike queer theory that focuses exclusively on sexuality,



queer theory explores heteronormative assumptions about family, gender, time, legitimacy, and property. According to Acadia (2021), queer theory is an attempt to criticize cultural and literary normativity and can serve as a tool for exploring how queer desire subverts family structures and inheritance.

One key aspect of queer theory is queer temporality. Atkinson (2024) shows how queer temporality subverts heteronormative concepts of linear narratives based on marriage, reproduction, and inheritance. Queer desire in *The Safekeep* similarly questions the linear understanding of inheritance and history. Another important concept in queer theory is anti-normativity. According to Jagose (2015), queer studies question the naturalness of the heterosexual domesticity, familial inheritance, and property.

5.3 Intersection of Trauma and Queer Theory

The proposed study will demonstrate how trauma and queerness intersect through disrupting linearity. Trauma re-introduces the past in unexpected ways while queer desire destabilizes linear narratives focused on marriage, reproduction, and descent. According to Morrigan (2017), the intersection of trauma and queerness can be expressed by the concept of "trauma time."

The crucial point of intersection in *The Safekeep* is silence, which in the context of trauma refers to loss and repression, while in the context of queerness – concealment, resistance, survival, and desire. Silence can be considered as the key medium of emerging histories and queer desires across generations in *The Safekeep*.

Ultimately, the above-mentioned theories help redefine inheritance as not merely property or lineage, but also trauma, affect, silence, and queerness. Using the combined perspectives of trauma theory and queer theory, one can read *The Safekeep* as a story of queer traumatic inheritance in which intimacy triggers the return of the past and transforms property into haunting and history.

6. Methodology

6.1 Research Design

This research utilizes a qualitative interpretive approach for analyzing the literary text, *The Safekeep* by Yael van der Wouden, with the objective of interrogating the formation of memory, silence, and queer inheritance through narrative structure, characterization, domesticity, and delayed revelation.

6.2 Data Source

The primary source of data in this study is Yael van der Wouden's *The Safekeep* (2024). The research focuses on textual instances concerning post-war memories, silence, domestic inheritance, queer desires, secrecy, and property history.

6.3 Data Collection

Data collection involves continuous close reading of the novel. Textual elements relevant to the major themes of this study – silence, memory, trauma, queer relationality, and inheritance – are identified and highlighted. Instances from the



narrative description, character interaction, symbolic objects, domestic spaces, and disclosure or concealment are used as data sources.

6.4 Data Analysis

The data analysis process involves close reading of the selected texts coupled with thematic and discursive readings. This is conducted within three major analytical categories:

1. Silence: repression, concealment, complicity, survival, and queer tactics.
2. Memory: traumatic memories, post-war memories, belated realization, and domestic memories.
3. Queer relationality: queer desires, alternative family connections, lineage disruption, and affective inheritance.

The above categories are understood within the context of trauma studies and queer studies to explain how queer traumatic inheritance is formed in the novel.

6.5 Analytical Approach

In this study, trauma studies are used to study belatedness, haunting, and unclaimed experiences, whereas queer theory is applied to explore queer temporality, anti-normativity, and biological lineage disruption. As such, trauma studies and queer theory together can be used to interpret silence as the connecting factor between traumatic memories and queer inheritance.

7. Analysis and Discussion

7.1 Memory as Haunting Presence

The concept of memory in the novel *The Safekeep* differs from an established historical archive, being instead the source of Isabel's haunting, alienation, and lack of ownership. Memory is spatialized throughout the entire novel, as the first scene demonstrates the connection between memory and objects rather than narration of events. Isabel notices "a broken piece of ceramic under the roots of a dead gourd" (van der Wouden, 2024, p. 3). Despite the seemingly insignificant discovery, this small ceramic piece challenges the order of the household and the idea of stability in the life of the family. In addition, this fragment serves as a marker of memory being incomplete and partial, rather than complete and holistic.

In addition, the ceramic piece brings the idea of preservation of memory by absence into focus. Isabel equates the found piece of ceramic with her mother's precious china, stating that objects like plates are "not for touching" but "for keeping" (van der Wouden, 2024, p. 3). This statement highlights the attitude towards the past by the character of Isabel. Memory in her case is static and cannot be accessed or lived; instead, it exists in the form of a reserve of information. Trauma theory helps to understand this mechanism better. It states that traumatic memories appear unexpectedly and are never completely recovered by the victim. Thus, Isabel's china can be considered haunted rather than family heirlooms. The object is kept intact, but its fragment is hidden in the floorboards.



The representation of memory in this section is non-linear. When Hendrik suggests that the house and furniture were occupied by other people before Isabel's family came, their perception of history begins to blur. The narration emphasizes that "they'd moved into a finished house, a full house. Nearly everything laid out: the sheets, the pots, the vases in the windowsills" (van der Wouden, 2024, p. 6). The unexpected discovery destroys Isabel's understanding of history and makes her think that there is no linear continuity of time in her house. The term "finished house" is particularly important because it implies that Isabel's history is built on the erased past of others.

The disruption of the scene reveals how memory defines an individual's sense of identity through absence. The very essence of Isabel's identity depends on the notion that the house, the dishes, and other household items represent natural extensions of the family's ownership over the property. However, Hendrik's innocent comment disrupts the illusion that everything she knows has always existed. According to the narration, when he says, "You really don't remember?," "She didn't remember a woman. She didn't remember the day of their arrival, or anyone showing them around, telling them where to go, where to sleep, why the beds were already made" (van der Wouden, 2024, p. 7). Therefore, Isabel's identity is shaped not by memory itself but by absence – that is, by her failure to remember.

At the same time, one might assume that the memory can haunt people not only in terms of recollection but also through a somatic reaction to the past that still eludes their comprehension. For instance, after this memory lacuna, the protagonist pinches her hand: "She was pinching the skin on the back of her hand" (van der Wouden, 2024, p. 7). One could argue that memory works beyond pure cognition and reaches the somatic plane. In such a way, while Isabel still fails to recognize the history behind this particular gap in her consciousness, her body reacts to it, implying that memory still affects an individual through his or her body.

The connection between fragmented memories and family identity can also be established in the story. Specifically, Isabel and her brothers selectively remember some aspects of the family's history and past: "their childhood in Amsterdam, Father before he got sick, the smell of the city in December, a toy train that went round and round" (van der Wouden, 2024, p. 6). As one could see from the text, these memories are sensual and evocative. At the same time, they refuse to answer a much more complicated question of how the family ended up owning the house. Thus, the imagery of the toy train "round and round" reflects the cyclical nature of memory, supporting the thesis statement about the circular nature of the memories in the novel.

7.2 Silence as Trauma and Strategy

It is critical to define the role of silence in *The Safekeep* on two planes – trauma and queerness. In the novel, silence is neither emptiness nor void but a specific space which brings together the complex of feelings such as fear, shame,



memory, desire, and defiance. In trauma theory, silence reveals the inability to discuss some events or emotions directly. Moreover, silence can also be regarded as an act of survival and defense within a hostile environment based on heteronormativity, parental oppression, and emotional regulation.

At the trauma level, Isabel often demonstrates silence in a form of avoidance. So when discussing with Isabel Sebastian and his trip to Paris, the narrative describes that "she had not known what to say of it, and so she said nothing" (van der Wouden, 2024, p. 4). Thus, silence is far from innocent since it shows the character's inability to face the reality of emotions. Instead of addressing the issue of Hendrik's love to Sebastian, Isabel changes the discourse towards seemingly mundane things like "the state of the garden," "the maid," Johan's visits, and the payment of a bill (van der Wouden, 2024, pp. 4–5). From trauma theory perspective, this discourse shift represents the phenomenon of repression because the repressed thing is not forgotten but just displaced to domestic conversation.

Another type of silence occurs when Isabel's certainty about the house begins to disappear. Hendrik mentions that the furniture may belong to someone else who used to inhabit the house before them, which confuses the character's memories. The text tells us that "She didn't remember a woman. She didn't remember the day of their arrival" (van der Wouden, 2024, p. 7). Thus, in silence, Isabel reveals a lack of memories which signifies the idea of forgetting, although in this case it may be regarded as a part of buried history. The unfinished phrase "why the beds were already made, already" (van der Wouden, 2024, p. 7) deserves close attention since a dash symbolizes silence when explanation was required.

In addition to trauma, silence performs an important function of control and resistance. Indeed, Isabel often uses silence to regulate situations in which her authority could be undermined. Thus, while discussing with Louis the insult Isabel directed at Eva, "Isabel retreated into a sharp silence" (van der Wouden, 2024, p. 11). The description of silence as sharp deserves special attention since it gives silence agency, and therefore, Isabel does not hide in silence but actively controls the discourse.

However, it is most obvious when viewed in terms of queer survival. Hendrik does not specify his relationship to Sebastian, even though it becomes apparent indirectly: Hendrik explains that Sebastian needs him because his mother is ill, and then admits that "I can't let him go alone, I can't—" (van der Wouden, 2024, p. 5). Incomplete phraseology reflects both emotional intensity and social constraints. In queer theory, silence is a way of existence in a social environment which offers no explicit language of same-sex attraction and love. Isabel's response to the implied queer subtext shows the same pattern of silence and interruption. Instead of answering Hendrik about his concerns regarding Sebastian, Isabel brings the ceramic fragment out of nowhere and asks, "I found this," she interrupted" (van der Wouden, 2024, p. 5). The example clearly



indicates that the mechanisms of queer knowledge regulation are silence and displacement: queer relationships make it possible for a person to expose his hidden desire to the public eye, while silence turns the conversation into the discussion of property, things, and the house.

Another manifestation of strategic silence is connected with Eva's character. At first sight, Eva represents femininity through constant apologies, nervousness, and overly polite speech. However, in the bathroom scene, she briefly abandons her public mask. After being told that "I did not invite you here tonight" (van der Wouden, 2024, p. 12), Eva is described as "caught in a breath, mouth moving a moment" (van der Wouden, 2024, p. 12). The temporary break in Eva's speech indicates that there is a pressure behind it. Later on, Isabel remarks on "a flash of something in her expression— a fissure" (van der Wouden, 2024, p. 13). A "fissure" in the facade of public performance indicates another side of Eva — less obedient and polite. According to queer theory, silence and performance are the means of surviving in the hostile environment: hiding, conforming, and showing vulnerability enable a person to protect himself from threats and dangers.

Furthermore, it should be noted that there is a difference between Eva's public and private voices. After the insults directed towards her by Isabel, Eva says "We'll see", but "it wasn't the same voice she'd used before" (van der Wouden, 2024, p. 12). Eva changes her tone, indicating that silence and voice are strategic mechanisms of survival. Her initial polite voice represents the performance of femininity without any signs of rebellion, while her second one expresses the protest against insult. However, returning to the dining room, "the voice was back again: higher than before, lilting" (van der Wouden, 2024, p. 13). Eva's return to performance means that in order to survive, people must hide their true intentions.

Therefore, silence in *The Safekeep* is trauma and strategy at once. On the one hand, it suppresses painful memories and interrupts memory processes. On the other hand, silence ensures the possibility of emotional exposure and queer vulnerabilities. The strength of the novel lies in the paradoxical role of silence — it is both destructive and protective. Moreover, it conceals the painful past, but it also prepares conditions for its coming back.

7.3 Queer Desire and the Disruption of Normativity

Queer desire is introduced in *The Safekeep* almost at its beginning as something challenging the existing structures of family life, property management, and heteronormative temporalities. The first pages of the novel do not yet introduce its protagonist's queerness explicitly. However, even the initial scenes of the book already demonstrate a society where desire is constrained via silence, implication, and performative aspects of social interaction. The relationships between Hendrik, Isabel, and Sebastian and Eva's entrance on the scene of the latter two's marriage start undermining the assumptions behind such concepts as family, heritage, property, and inheritance.



The first disruption of heteronormative time frame is clearly illustrated through Hendrik's and Sebastian's connection. As the narration goes, Hendrik tells Isabel that "Sebastian's been talking about going home" because his mother was ill, and that Sebastian wants Hendrik "to come with him" (van der Wouden, 2024, p. 4). It is obvious that there is something very intimate behind this idea that has to be discussed in a different way. Indeed, Hendrik says, "I think I will have to go with him" and "I can't let him go alone, I can't—" (van der Wouden, 2024, p. 5). It is worth paying attention to the unfinished sentence because Hendrik's desire is impossible to put into words in terms offered by his society. Queer theory shows that queer desire does not necessarily follow the pattern of heterosexual future. Hendrik's desire is neither heterosexual nor reproductive: it is an act of caring for and commitment to another man.

Isabel's reaction to the news about Hendrik's desire shows her understanding that her domesticity faces certain challenges because of that. Namely, she "had not known what to say of it, and so she said nothing" (van der Wouden, 2024, p. 4). Instead of trying to understand her husband's connection to his friend, Isabel focuses on domestic issues: "the state of the garden," the maid, Johan's visits, and the car bill. (van der Wouden, 2024, pp. 4–5). In this regard, queer desire creates serious challenges for Isabel's traditional conception of order since she cannot discuss anything beyond her own perception of family and property.

Specifically, the queer desire is juxtaposed with the repetitious performance of heterosexual courtship in the book. Louis "usually brought girls to their dinners," and each new one can be seen as temporary, socially conditioned, and replaceable (van der Wouden, 2024, p. 7). His last girlfriend, Eva, was "the love of his life this time" (van der Wouden, 2024, p. 8). Such an emphasis on the repetition of the performance deconstructs the idea of heterosexuality as natural and stable, and the process of courting Louis looks like following some social script.

Queer desire is especially evident through Eva, who embodies the norms of feminine behavior and social performance to perfection: she acts anxious, excessively polite, eager to please. For instance, she says: "Oh, it's so good to meet you, both of you. I've heard so much" (van der Wouden, 2024, p. 10). Her behavior looks excessive, rehearsed, and socially compliant. Eva repeatedly performs her submissiveness and softness; for instance, she asks Louis to order some food for her "always so smart about these things" (van der Wouden, 2024, p. 10). At this point, Eva looks like the perfect embodiment of a socially expected young woman. However, the text hints at the fact that this femininity is artificial and not essential: Isabel notices Eva's "bad performance", and later mentions that Eva's voice has changed, showing that she is much more than a mere social construct (van der Wouden, 2024, pp. 12–13).

Such an implication of Eva's true personality is essential for the development of the plot since queer desire is not embodied solely in homosexuality, but also in the breakdown of normative performances. During the scene in the bathroom,



Isabel addresses Eva directly: "I did not invite you here tonight" (van der Wouden, 2024, p. 12). As a response, Eva changes significantly. First of all, after the statement about her boredom and disappearance, she says: "We'll see" (van der Wouden, 2024, p. 12). The text mentions explicitly that this reply was produced by a different voice – implying that this change happened within her personality. At that moment, Eva becomes something more than Louis's beautiful decoration.

In particular, it is notable how Isabel senses "a flash of something in her expression—a fissure" (van der Wouden, 2024, p. 13). By using the metaphor of a fissure, it is implied that there is a breach that occurs in the structure of normative identity. Eva ceases to fulfill her role as Louis's girlfriend and an object of heterosexual romance. As seen from the perspective of queer theory, the moment represents the emergence of desire that goes beyond heteronormativity. While Eva plays an important part within Louis's romantic sequence, her significance is found in her capacity to disturb Isabel's vision.

Eva's appearance evokes confusion within Isabel since she fails to recognize what happens when she inspects the girl. In other words, the moment paves the way for queer recognition because it is at that point when desire appears as fascination rather than a conscious decision. Therefore, it can be viewed as irritation and disruption rather than an explicit desire. Furthermore, queer desire can be understood as a force that opposes and challenges the existing structures and hierarchies, as seen in Isabel's relationship with her property. The novel begins by introducing objects as things that are kept and preserved. For instance, the fine chinaware belongs to her family but is not meant to be touched. It is also relevant to highlight how Isabel's approach to inheritance implies that the house, together with its objects, needs to be kept and protected. However, queer desire breaks the order by creating an atmosphere of disturbance.

Specifically, Hendrik's attachment to Sebastian makes him leave their family home to move to Paris; Eva's appearance interferes with Isabel's attempt to take control of the family gathering; the ceramic shard raises doubts regarding whether the family really owns the objects that belonged to their ancestors. Hendrik's words that the family's house came "with the . . . Crockery. Chairs" (van der Wouden, 2024, p. 6) indicate how queer desire breaks the order by disrupting the structure of inheritance. Isabel believes that the plates "are Mother's plates" and her claim is associated with a wider understanding of heritage and family legacy (van der Wouden, 2024, p. 6). Queer desire destroys the notion of biological and historical identity and inheritance.

Therefore, one can conclude that queer desire is presented in the novel as a disruptive force. Heteronormativity presupposes marriage, family continuation, and inheritance, while the author shows how fragile and unstable these structures are. The heteronormative sequences of Louis's romantic life seem repetitive and insignificant, whereas Hendrik's love to Sebastian is profound.



Eva's feminine appearance is also revealed as false, whereas Isabel's idea of inherited domestic life is undermined by queer desire.

8. Discussion

Based on the results of the analysis, one may conclude that silence serves as the mediating factor between trauma and queerness. Silence is not merely a lack or repression but rather a narrative device used to connect hidden trauma, queer desire, memory, and inheritance. Such concepts as the house, ownership instability, Hendrik's interest in Sebastian, Eva's femininity, and Isabel's memory are all marked by gaps, hesitation, evasion, and delayed realization.

Silence becomes a traumatic element due to its association with what continues to be illicitly remembered or said. Isabel's hesitancy concerning the house, the destroyed ceramic figure, and the family's move to the "finished" house suggest a buried history that was normalized within domesticity. The fact is consistent with the idea presented in trauma theory, according to which trauma often manifests itself indirectly and belatedly (Caruth, 1991; LaCapra, 1999). Meanwhile, silence serves as a queer element as it allows for queer desire to continue indirectly in a socially restricted environment, as implied by the implied sexual relationship between Hendrik and Sebastian (Freeman, 2007; Dinshaw et al., 2007).

Inheritances discussed in the novel are no longer limited to physical possessions and family heirlooms. In fact, inheritance becomes transmission of silence, guilt, memory, affect, and historical violence. While Isabel understands inheritance as conservation, the broken ceramics and Hendrik's comments about artifacts change her perception of inheritance to that of ethics. Indeed, the concept corresponds with postmemory theory in which memory is inherited in a form of memories that a person did not experience directly (Hirsch, 2008). Moreover, inheritance is redefined as non-biological in the context of queer kinship research (Reed & O'Riordan, 2023; Levin et al., 2020).

Memory becomes disrupted and haunted in the analyzed novel. Memory and identity of Isabel are linked to family history, domestic sovereignty, heterosexual desire, and inheritance, yet all these concepts break down because of the repressed narratives. Thus, the role of Eva becomes critical as she undermines family dynamics through changing voices, unstable femininity, and disrupting presence. Therefore, queer identity arises out of conflict, silence, physical reaction, and deconstruction of inherited concepts.

The results confirm that both trauma and queerness interfere with linearity. The past is returned to people belatedly through trauma, while queer temporality undermines life cycles that are associated with marriage, reproduction, property, and biological inheritance. Silences play two roles in the story – postponement of knowledge and its emergence eventually. The concealment of queer desire and historical violence is possible through silencing but the same silences allow for the emergence of these elements via objects, spaces, bodies, and affective relationships.



In conclusion, the analyzed novel can be considered through the notion of queer traumatic inheritance as the transmission of violent memory via queer encounter that breaks inherited silence and changes history.

9. Conclusion and Recommendations

The analysis provided above is aimed at examining Yael van der Wouden's novel *The Safekeep* within the conceptual framework of trauma theory and queer theory, focusing particularly on the dynamics between memory, silence, and queer inheritance. First of all, as demonstrated above, the novel refuses to present memory as a process of restoration of the past as a coherent whole and experience of trauma. Memory is experienced through fragments, objects, houses, bodily reactions, and delayed recognition. The significance of the novel in question lies in the fact that in the text the past is present even when it has not been told or written down.

Furthermore, it is shown that silence should be viewed as the most prominent technique at the intersection of trauma and queerness. In the novel under analysis, silence appears to serve two purposes: it serves both as repression and the means of preserving desire in a particular social and cultural context dominated by heterosexual norms, affective and emotional monitoring, and inherited domesticity. Therefore, silence in this case refers to the discourse and affects which structure the novel's narrative concerning trauma and desire in particular.

Additionally, it can be argued that in *The Safekeep*, the concept of inheritance is deconstructed in that it is understood as silence, guilt, memory, dispossession, affects, and queer recognition. Consequently, the idea of queer desire should be seen in the text under consideration as a disruption of the seeming stability of domestic space as a place where latent histories come to light through queerness. This is what the novel suggests as queer traumatic inheritance, which is a primary contribution of the research undertaken.

Overall, it can be concluded that the novel analyzed in the study is not only about secrecy, desire, or post-war memory. As a literary work, it explores the topic of how history continues to be lived in terms of houses, bodies, objects, and silence. Thus, combining trauma and queer theories, it becomes clear that queer desire in the novel does not escape history – instead, it is used as the means of bringing back repressed histories.

9.1 Recommendations

In terms of future research possibilities, it may be possible to conduct a comparative analysis of *The Safekeep* with other queer historical novels dealing with the topics of memory, trauma, and intergenerational silence. It will help understand if queer traumatic inheritance serves as a larger theoretical concept rather than a feature limited to *The Safekeep*.

It may also be fruitful to explore the themes of Holocaust memory and literature in the context of the Netherlands, Jewish dispossession, domestic ownership, and ethics of memory in a more direct way. In such cases, the historical context



of *The Safekeep* can be enriched, and the literary analysis will be brought closer to European memory studies.

Another line of inquiry could focus on gender performativity in *The Safekeep* and its development through Eva's voice, femininity, and conduct. Such a focus will allow scholars to bridge queer theory and feminist theory and performance studies.

References

Acadia, Lilith, 'Queer Theory' (23 Feb. 2021), in Deidre Shauna Lynch (ed.), Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature (New York, NY, online edn, Oxford Academic, 31 Aug. 2016 -), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.1003>, accessed 3 May 2026.

Acheson, K. (2008). Silence as Gesture: Rethinking the Nature of Communicative Silences. *Communication Theory*, 18, 535-555.

Allardice, L. (2025, June 13). Women's prize winner Yael van der Wouden: "It's heartbreaking to see so much hatred towards queer people". *The Guardian*.

Atkinson, I. (2024). Against chrononormativity: How may a concept of queer time challenge traditional ideas of historical progress? *Plurality*, 1.

Balaev, M. (2018). Trauma studies. In D. H. Richter (Ed.), *A companion to literary theory* (pp. 360–371). Wiley Blackwell.

Bedard-Gilligan, M., Zoellner, L. A., & Feeny, N. C. (2017). Is Trauma Memory Special? Trauma Narrative Fragmentation in PTSD: Effects of Treatment and Response. *Clinical psychological science : a journal of the Association for Psychological Science*, 5(2), 212–225. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167702616676581>

Blix, B. H., Caine, V., Clandinin, D. J., & Berendonk, C. (2021). Considering silences in narrative inquiry: An intergenerational story of a Sami family.

Booker Prizes. (2024, September 16). Reading guide: *The Safekeep* by Yael van der Wouden. The Booker Prizes.

Brockhus, F. (2024, August 28). "The Safekeep" by Yael van der Wouden: When the outside world comes in (L. Vroomen, Trans.). *The Low Countries*.

Busch, B., & McNamara, T. (2020). Language and trauma: An introduction. *Applied Linguistics*, 41(3), 323–333.

Caruth, C. (1991). Unclaimed experience: Trauma and the possibility of history. *Yale French Studies*, 79, 181–192.

Caruth, C. (2002). The claims of the dead: History, haunted property, and the law. *Critical Inquiry*, 28(2), 419–441.

Crespo, M., & Fernández-Lansac, V. (2016). Memory and narrative of traumatic events: A literature review. *Psychological trauma : theory, research, practice and policy*, 8(2), 149–156. <https://doi.org/10.1037/tra0000041>

Cvetkovich, A. (2003). The everyday life of queer trauma. In *An archive of feelings: Trauma, sexuality, and lesbian public cultures*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822384434-002>



- Cvetkovich, A., Dragojlovic, A., & Quinan, C. L. (2023). An Archive of Feelings @ 20: An interview with Ann Cvetkovich. *Memory Studies*, 16(2), 456–468. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17506980221141997>
- Dinshaw, C., Edelman, L., Ferguson, R. A., Freccero, C., Freeman, E., Halberstam, J., Jagose, A., Nealon, C., & Nguyen, T. H. (2007). Theorizing queer temporalities: A roundtable discussion. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 13(2–3), 177–195. <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-2006-030>
- Dragojlovic, A., & Quinan, C. L. (2023). Queering memory: Toward remembering otherwise. *Memory Studies*, 16(1), 3–11.
- Enszer, J. R. (2024, May 24). *The Safekeep*. Jewish Book Council.
- Erl, A. (2011). Traumatic pasts, literary afterlives, and transcultural memory: New directions of literary and media memory studies. *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, 3(1), 7186. <https://doi.org/10.3402/jac.v3i0.7186>
- Fivush, R. (2010). Speaking silence: The social construction of silence in autobiographical and cultural narratives. *Memory*, 18(2), 88–98.
- Freeman, E. (2007). Introduction: Queer temporalities. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 13(2–3), 159–176. <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-2006-029>
- Goltz, D. (2022). Queer temporalities. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.013.1182>
- Hirsch, M. (2008). The generation of postmemory. *Poetics Today*, 29(1), 103–128. <https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-2007-019>
- Huckin, T. (2002). Textual silence and the discourse of homelessness. *Discourse & Society*, 13(3), 347–372.
- Jackson Levin, N., Kattari, S. K., Piellusch, E. K., & Watson, E. (2020). "We Just Take Care of Each Other": Navigating 'Chosen Family' in the Context of Health, Illness, and the Mutual Provision of Care amongst Queer and Transgender Young Adults. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 17(19), 7346. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17197346>
- Jagose, A. (2015). The trouble with antinormativity. *Differences*, 26(1), 26–47. <https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-2880591>
- Kevers, R., de Smet, S., Rober, P., Rousseau, C., & De Haene, L. (2024). Silencing or silent transmission? An exploratory study on trauma communication in Kurdish refugee families. *Family Process*, 63(4), 2324–2346. <https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12996>
- Kidron, C. A. (2009). Toward an ethnography of silence: The lived presence of the past in the everyday life of Holocaust trauma survivors and their descendants in Israel. *Current Anthropology*, 50(1), 5–27. <https://doi.org/10.1086/595623>
- Kim, S., & Feyissa, I. F. (2021). Conceptualizing "Family" and the Role of "Chosen Family" within the LGBTQ+ Refugee Community: A Text Network Graph Analysis. *Healthcare (Basel, Switzerland)*, 9(4), 369. <https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare9040369>



- Kirkus Reviews. (2024, April 5). The Safekeep. Kirkus Reviews.
- LaCapra, D. (1999). Trauma, absence, loss. *Critical Inquiry*, 25(4), 696–727.
- Luhmann, S. (2023). Memory care and queer akinship at the former Uckermark concentration camp for girls and young women. *Memory Studies*, 16(1), 108–123.
- Menhinick, K. A., & Sanders, C. J. (2023). LGBTQ+ stress, trauma, time, and care. *Pastoral Psychology*, 72(3), 367–384. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-023-01073-z>
- Morrigan C. (2017). Trauma time: the queer temporalities of the traumatized mind. *Somatechnics* 7, 50–58. doi: 10.3366/soma.2017.0205
- Navalón-Guzmán, C. (2025). Beyond the wound: Queer trauma, memory, and resistance in Rainbow Milk. *Humanities*, 14(10), 196. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h14100196>
- Parpart, J.L. (2019). Rethinking silence, gender, and power in insecure sites: Implications for feminist security studies in a postcolonial world. *Review of International Studies*, 46, 315 - 324.
- Pederson, J. (2018). Trauma and Narrative. In J. R. Kurtz (Ed.), *Trauma and Literature* (pp. 97–109). chapter, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Reed, E., & O’Riordan, K. (2023). Queering genealogies: Introduction to the special section. *Feminist Theory*, 24(1), 3–21.
- Reed, L., & Stella, M. (2024). “To raise a village, fall far from the tree”: Methods for queer kinship pasts, presents and futures. *Sexualities*.
- Ritholtz, S., & Buxton, R. (2021). Queer kinship and the rights of refugee families. *Migration Studies*, 9(3), 1075–1095. <https://doi.org/10.1093/migration/mnab007>
- Schama, C. (2024, December 25). *The Safekeep* was the most elegantly moving book this year. *Vogue*.
- Slemon, A. (2025). Absences and Silences in Critical Discourse Analysis: Methodological Reflections. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 24.
- Time. (2024). The Safekeep: 100 must-read books of 2024. *Time*.
- van der Wouden, Y. (2024). *The Safekeep*. Viking.
- Visser, I. (2011). Trauma theory and postcolonial literary studies. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 47(3), 270–282. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2011.569378>
- Yang, Y. (2023). The trauma and fragmentation narrative in Amy Tan’s *The Kitchen God’s Wife* and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 10, 559.