

**RECLAIMING THE ALZHEIMER'S VOICE: EMOTIONAL
INTELLIGENCE AND IDENTITY IN STILL
ALICE BY LISA GENOVA**

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Abstract

Literature portrays the concepts of nature, emotions, spirituality, feelings, and resilience and it covers all fields of study in our day-to-day life. Emotional intelligence refers to an individual's capacity to understand and manage emotions. Joy, fear, and disgust are components of emotion that are experienced by everyone. The present study aims to explore the importance of identity and the role of using emotional intelligence to speak back against silence in Still Alice written by Lisa Genova. The objective of this study is to examine the profound impact of early-onset Alzheimer's disease on the life of Alice Howland, a distinguished Harvard professor. As Alice faces the challenges of her diagnosis, the novel highlights the deterioration of her cognitive functions and its effects on her career, relationships, and self-perception, pushing her to voicelessness. Through Alice's journey, Genova effectively portrays the emotional intelligence required to sustain one's life beyond silence. Alice undergoes many challenges due to this life-altering condition, showcasing her resilience, adaptability, and evolving dynamics with her family. Still Alice fosters a deeper understanding and

empathy for individuals living with Alzheimer's, emphasising the importance of emotional support and the strength of the human spirit in reclaiming the Alzheimer's voice and maintaining personal identity.

Keywords: Emotional Intelligence, Identity, Alzheimer's Disease, Voice, Self-Perception, Illness

Mankind down the ages has come across numerous deadly diseases that pose a threat to all lives. However, humans with high intelligence fight back and escape deadly challenges by discovering solutions to the same. Thanks to the advancements in the fields of biomedicine and other related areas, which provide hope to humanity and protect lives. Despite all the findings and solutions to human problems, the rate of illness grows exponentially, particularly chronic diseases. In ancient times, people were affected by chronic diseases and heard of them very rarely. But the scenario of modern times is different because cases of chronic diseases are common in every nook and corner of the world.

One of the significant media for representing the agony of lives affected by chronic diseases is literature and one of the remarkable writers who portrayed the life situation of patients suffering from this form of disease is Lisa Genova, a prolific American writer who poignantly depicted the sufferings of the protagonist in the novel *Still Alice*. It is an engrossing narrative that delves into the life of Alice Howland, a Harvard Professor diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer's disease. Alice, her husband John, and their three already independent adult children pursuing their own professional interests and passions lead a happy and unblemished family life.

But once Alice learns about her diagnosis, despite being endowed with the attributes of having reached the height of mental development and high social status, she begins to experience gradual mental disintegration and desocialization. This paper explores the multifaceted impact of Alzheimer's on Alice's life, emphasising the role of emotional intelligence in her journey toward reclaiming her voice and maintaining her identity rather than to be silent. The analysis examines the effects of the disease on Alice's professional life, personal identity, and familial relationships, while highlighting the

resilience and adaptability required to navigate such challenges. Through this exploration, the study aims to foster a deeper understanding of the illness experience, contributing to better empathy in future health care providers and enhanced comprehension of patients living with marginalised conditions.

Alice Howland's diagnosis of early-onset Alzheimer's disease marks the beginning of a significant transformation in both her personal and professional life. Initially, Alice is a highly esteemed Professor, whose life is defined by her intellectual achievements and academic contributions. However, as Alice's cognitive abilities deteriorate, she faces the harsh reality of losing her professional identity. In Alice's personal life, though she is sometimes excluded from family conversations, she receives considerable support from her husband John, who does not allow Alice's diagnosis to become an overwhelming burden but rather focuses on making their situation manageable. In this context, John's care for Alice expresses his love and commitment ensuring their quality of life, future outlook, and progression of Alice's illness do not become sources of unbearable stress. Thus, Alice's emotional intelligence combine with the support of her caregiver John enables her to maintain a good quality of life characterised by serenity, tranquillity, psychological well-being, and stability throughout the novel.

I think that even if you don't know who I am someday, you'll still know that I Love You. (Genova 124)

Alzheimer's disease profoundly impacts Alice's sense of self. The gradual loss of memory and cognitive function challenges her understanding of who she is, as she grapples with the erosion of her intellect and independence. 'The more time we spend with other people who openly discuss emotions, the more skilled we become at identifying and understanding emotions' (Bradberry 135). Alice's self-perception evolves throughout the novel, reflecting her internal struggles and the moments of clarity and confusion that define her journey. Genova's portrayal of Alice's internal world offers a nuanced depiction of the emotional and psychological aspects of living with Alzheimer's disease, giving voice to an experience.

At some point, there would simply be no point. (Genova 284)

Alice is not merely struggling individually; rather, in the workplace, she loses opportunities and is increasingly neglected by family members. This emotionally affects Alice and adds stress and trauma to her daily life, robbing her tranquillity that once gave her life purpose. Though Alice becomes aware of her diagnosis, she does not initially perceive it as a factor that should affect her in every situation. She struggles to accept that an incurable disease has altered the way her family and colleagues treat her, as if predicting a diminished version of herself.

Alice's sense of loss is profoundly connected to her loss of language. As the disease progresses, Alice's erosion of identity is primarily rooted in her linguistic deterioration. She becomes confused when talking to others and grows unsure of the message or context while reading. Telephone conversations prove particularly difficult. 'Words sometimes ran together, abrupt changes in topic were difficult for her to anticipate and follow, and her comprehension suffered' (Genova 106). This loss of language, the tool through which she built her academic career and expressed her identity, silences her voice and marginalises her within both professional and personal spheres.

However, emotional intelligence plays a crucial role in Alice's ability to cope with her diagnosis and its consequences and to resist complete voicelessness. Alice demonstrates greater practicality and determination than many of those around her, showcasing her resilience and efforts to maintain a connection with her past self, while establishing new forms of agency. 'Empathy builds on social awareness; the more open we are to our own emotions, the more skilled we will be in reading feelings' (Goleman 119). Alice's emotional awareness enables her to navigate her challenging reality and advocate for her needs, reclaiming fragments of her voice even in her declining situation to silence her entirely. The dynamics within her family, including the varied reactions and coping mechanisms of her husband and children, illustrate the importance of empathy, communication, and emotional support in preserving the humanity and voice of those living with Alzheimer's disease.

The measure of a life well-lived is not in the quantity of memories, but in the quality of them. (Genova 211)

Alice begins realising her 'self' more after she is diagnosed with the Alzheimer's disease. She never on any occasion displays dismay or collapse of her senses. She does not seem to fall out of time or space. She feels alienated and humiliated only due to external forces. 'And in terms of motivation, when people believe that their failures are due to some unchangeable deficit in themselves, they lose hope and stop trying' (Goleman 150). This reveals that the sense of loss experienced by Alzheimer's disease patients often comes not from the disease itself but from emotional and mental stress caused by the negligence and humiliation imposed upon them by others. The disease does not silence them; rather, they are silenced by societal attitudes and dismissive treatment.

While Alice announces that she has Alzheimer's disease, her husband John is reluctant to accept the fact and keeps arguing and researching more about it. Eventually, he begins to demonstrate greater care, monitoring her medication intake and bedtime routines. Each member of the Howland family responds differently to Alice's diagnosis, reflecting the diverse emotional landscapes that a family traverses when faced with such a crisis. When the whole family discusses issues about Alice, she feels deprived of the opportunity to participate in the conversation or to have her opinion sought in matters that directly relate to her. There are two aspects to be discussed in this situation. Firstly, the exclusion that Alice suffers makes her feel that people treat her as if she was 'deaf'. But when she realises her presence or absence is not a matter of concern to her family members in discussions pertaining to her, she feels that she is degraded and pushed from a state of 'living' to one of mere 'existence'. This systematic discussion portrays how individuals with Alzheimer's are marginalised and rendered voiceless not by their condition but by the responses around them.

They talked about her as if she weren't sitting in the wing chair, a few feet away. They talked about her, in front of her, as if she were deaf. They talked

about her, without including her, as if she had Alzheimer's disease. (Genova 183)

Alice starts losing confidence when her own children and husband fail to empathise with her. All she needs from them is something beyond empathy, an encompassing understanding that gives her the feeling of not being excluded from the family. Alice's journey is marked by remarkable resilience and adaptability. Despite the progressive nature of Alzheimer's, Alice endeavours to retain her identity and autonomy for as long as possible. Alice also experiences moments of childlike innocence. 'Chronic conditions thus challenge us to reimagine what we take illness to mean beyond what medicine offers' (Cohen 30). Genova brings out the second childhood in Alice in many instances, especially when she takes enough care in eating her ice cream. Nothing else matters to her. She wants only ice cream to taste and to feel the warmth by holding John's hands.

Alice tries to bring herself back in the situations she is coping with her daughter who is pregnant. It hurts her in every situation to think about what happens if the diagnosis is transferred to future generations. The upcoming little one cannot tolerate the same way as Alice has responded to the family in the same way Alice has. Genova's depiction of Alice's resilience serves as a testament to the human spirit's capacity to endure and adapt in the face of profound challenges. A large number of genetic risk factors for sporadic disease have been identified. A small proportion of patients (less than 1%) have inherited mutations in genes that affect processing of A β and develop the disease at a much younger age (mean age of approximately 45 years) (Masters et al. 15056).

Still Alice is not only a narrative about illness but also a powerful tool for fostering understanding and empathy. We can see the broader implications of the novel, particularly its role in raising awareness about Alzheimer's disease and giving voice to those who are often silenced. Alice proves her intelligence, the intelligence that goes beyond words, words written, words spoken. Her cognition of words unsaid, words that are sweeter because they are unsaid, words that are more powerful because they are unheard but felt. Alice's younger daughter Lydia is an actress. She enacts a monologue asking her

mum to tell her what the scene is about. When Lydia asks her to explain the scene, she says, 'I feel love it's about love'. This situation demonstrates Alice's ability to communicate the emotional truth even when words fail her, showcasing that losing language does not mean losing voice or understanding.

Alice's struggle to overcome her loneliness and to combat the dread due to alienation is remarkable. She loses friends because of her early-onset Alzheimer's disease. She feels the urge to find a space where she can find her counterparts with Alzheimer's disease. 'In the darkest of moments, hope is the light that leads us forward' (Genova 304). By providing an intimate look into Alice's experiences, Genova encourages readers to develop deeper empathy for those affected by Alzheimer's and to appreciate the complexities of living with the diagnosis. The novel reclaims the narrative authority about Alzheimer's patients by challenging the tendency to speak about them rather than making them silent.

Still Alice by Lisa Genova offers a profound exploration of the impact of early-onset Alzheimer's disease on an individual's life. Through Alice Howland's journey, the novel highlights the importance of Emotional Intelligence, resilience, and familial support in coping with the disease. Genova's compassionate and insightful portrayal of Alzheimer's fosters a deeper understanding and empathy for those affected and emphasising the enduring strength of the human spirit and the critical need to preserve the voices of marginalised individuals who are living with cognitive decline. With the slow degeneration of Alice's memory and vocabulary, the narration takes a dramatic form as Alice observes and understands what happens around her, adapting and even finding moments of peace in her new reality.

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