
ORIGINAL ARTICLE | OPEN ACCESS

Beyond Survival: Memory, Trauma and Human Resilience during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Sarah Hall's *Burntcoat*

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Received: 21 July 2026 | Revised: 12 August 2026 | Accepted: 16 August 2026 | Published: 19 August 2026 |
Volume 3, Issue 2 (2026), Pages 62–69: DOI: <https://doi.org/10.66558/jsshi.2026.2.2>

Keywords

Burntcoat
COVID-19 Pandemic
Memory
Trauma
Human Resilience

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic changed daily life in ways that went far beyond physical health. It affected how people felt, how they connected with others, and how they made sense of their own experiences. Literature written during and after this period has tried to capture these effects in a way that statistics cannot. Sarah Hall's *Burntcoat* is among the earliest novels to take up this task. The story follows Edith Harkness, a sculptor whose memories of childhood, love, illness and loss slowly build a picture of what it meant to live through the pandemic. This paper reads *Burntcoat* through three connected ideas: memory, trauma and human resilience. The paper draws on established work in trauma and memory studies to support this reading. The analysis finds that memory in the novel works to hold identity together during crisis, that trauma is shown as something that builds slowly rather than arriving all at once, and that resilience appears less as heroic action and more as the quiet decision to keep creating, loving and remembering. Taken together, these three ideas show that *Burntcoat* is not only a record of a health emergency but also a study of how people carry on. The paper adds to the small but growing body of scholarship on pandemic fiction by treating memory, trauma and resilience as parts of one process rather than as separate themes.

Citation: Sondarva, A (2026). Beyond Survival: Memory, Trauma and Human Resilience during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Sarah Hall's *Burntcoat*. *Journal of Social Sciences, Humanities and Innovation*, 3 (2), 62–69. <https://doi.org/10.66558/jsshi.2026.2.2>

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic was one of the defining events of the twenty-first century. Beyond its toll on public health, it changed how people lived, worked and related to one another. Lockdowns, travel bans and social distancing broke up daily routines almost overnight, and many people went through long

stretches of isolation, grief and worry. Medical research recorded the physical side of the crisis in great detail, but numbers alone could not explain what it felt like to live through it. Literature took on that job instead, giving shape to the fear, hope and quiet endurance that so many people experienced during those years.

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Writers have long turned to moments of crisis, plague, war, famine, disease, as material for fiction. The COVID-19 pandemic has produced its own wave of such writing, and these books do more than record events. They show how people remember hard experiences, how they rebuild relationships afterward, and how they look for meaning when very little feels certain. Because of this, pandemic fiction sits in an interesting spot within literary studies: it is part historical record and part emotional inquiry.

Sarah Hall's *Burntcoat*, published in 2021, is one of the most notable novels to come out of this response. It tells the story of Edith Harkness, an internationally known sculptor, as she looks back over her life while facing illness and the prospect of her own mortality. The narrative moves back and forth between past and present rather than following events in order, and through this movement Hall explores childhood memory, artistic ambition, intimate relationships and the emotional weight of a pandemic that reshapes both private and public life. This non-linear structure mirrors how memory actually works and shows how traumatic experience can stay active long after the event itself has ended.

Memory is one of the novel's central concerns. Edith's recollections travel across different periods of her life and connect childhood experiences to what happens during the pandemic. These memories keep relationships alive, mark her growth as a person, and expose wounds that still shape who she is. Hall treats remembering as something more than simple recall; it becomes part of how a person survives at all. Through memory, Edith holds on to the people she has loved, makes sense of her own life, and links her private history to something larger and shared. In that sense, the act of telling a story becomes itself a form of endurance.

Trauma runs closely alongside memory in the novel. Hall treats trauma as an emotional condition that reaches well beyond physical illness. The pandemic brings fear, uncertainty, loneliness and grief, and these sit alongside older wounds from Edith's childhood that never fully healed. The novel makes clear that trauma is rarely a single, isolated event. Painful experiences build up over time and shape how a person reads the present. Edith's memories of her mother Naomi's brain injury, combined with the emotional strain of the pandemic, show how trauma can affect identity, relationships and the capacity to cope. This reading is consistent with the broader understanding in trauma studies that traumatic experience often continues to shape a person well after visible recovery has taken place (Caruth, 1996).

Human resilience is the third strand the novel takes up. Hall does not present resilience as heroic or as a full return to how things were before. Instead, it grows out of small, ordinary acts, compassion, creativity, and simple hope. Edith's commitment to sculpture shows that making art can preserve human experience even during the most uncertain times. Her relationship with Halit shows that closeness and love remain possible even under isolation and fear. By focusing on these everyday forms of endurance, Hall argues that resilience is not about avoiding pain. It is about choosing to keep living with some sense of dignity and purpose.

Recent scholarship on pandemic literature has drawn on trauma studies, memory studies and the medical humanities to examine how fiction from this period records historical

experience while also revealing the emotional cost of illness, isolation and disruption. Work on *Burntcoat* specifically has looked at its treatment of art, ecology, illness and psychological strain. Much of this work, however, treats memory, trauma and resilience as separate concerns rather than looking at how they work together. This paper tries to close that gap.

This study looks at how memory, trauma and human resilience are woven together in *Burntcoat*. It argues that Hall treats survival as an ongoing process of remembering, facing emotional pain, and rebuilding a sense of self through creativity and relationships with others. The paper uses close textual analysis, informed by trauma theory and memory studies, to read the novel's account of the pandemic. In doing so, it aims to show that *Burntcoat* works not only as a response to a global health emergency but also as a lasting reflection on how people manage to keep going with compassion, hope and imagination intact.

Literature Review

The COVID-19 pandemic has pushed scholars across several disciplines to think about how literature relates to lived experience. Medical research has mostly stayed focused on how the virus spreads and how it can be treated, but literary scholars have taken up a different question: how does fiction hold on to emotional suffering, isolation, uncertainty and recovery? Pandemic literature has grown into an important field for this reason. It preserves experiences that scientific reports simply cannot capture, giving readers access to fear, grief, hope and resilience on a personal level.

Fiction about epidemics is not new. Writers have long used outbreaks of disease to reveal what a society is made of, its strengths as well as its cracks. What sets the COVID-19 pandemic apart is its global scale, the role of technology in how people experienced it, and how quickly contemporary fiction responded to it. Many recent novels show how ordinary life was reshaped by lockdowns, physical distance, broken routines and constant uncertainty, while also asking how people adapt without losing hope or dignity.

Burntcoat has attracted scholarly attention in part because it was one of the first novels to engage directly with the pandemic. Rather than telling the outbreak in chronological order, Hall stays close to Edith Harkness's inner life, letting childhood memory, artistic work, romantic love and illness sit alongside one another. Critics have noted that the novel blends private experience with public history, so that individual memory becomes a record of a much larger social event (Demir, 2025). This is part of what separates *Burntcoat* from more conventional disaster fiction: its real subject is not the spread of disease but what it feels like to live through uncertainty.

Scholarship on the novel has grown quickly since then. Dhannoon (2023) reads *Burntcoat* alongside Sarah Moss's *The Fell*, combining Caruth's trauma theory with a psychoanalytic reading to trace how quarantine and infection surface unconscious fear and loss in both novels. Working from an ecocritical angle, Chmielewska (2024) turns to the recurring imagery of water in *Burntcoat*, arguing that it dissolves the boundary between body and environment and adds a material dimension to how the novel represents vulnerability during the pandemic. These readings confirm that the novel rewards

more than one theoretical approach, which supports the case for bringing memory, trauma and resilience together rather than treating them apart.

Memory has become one of the central concepts in recent literary criticism, especially in work that deals with historical crisis and personal identity. Assmann (2011) makes the case that memory works on two levels at once, individual and collective. Personal memory holds on to lived experience, while cultural memory lets a whole society remember events that shape its identity. Literature matters here because stories often preserve emotional material that official historical records tend to leave out. In *Burntcoat*, Edith's memories link her private experience to larger historical events, showing how memory can act as a bridge between one life and a shared history.

Trauma studies offer another useful lens for reading the novel. Cathy Caruth (1996) argues that trauma is often not understood fully at the moment it happens. Instead, it returns later, through memory, dreams and emotional reflection, so that people keep revisiting painful events long after they have technically ended. This idea fits *Burntcoat* well, since Edith's memories move back and forth between childhood, adulthood and the pandemic. The novel's broken, non-linear structure reflects trauma's continuing pull rather than treating it as something finished and closed.

Scholars have also pointed out that trauma is not only physical. Emotional pain caused by grief, uncertainty, separation and fear can outlast the event that caused it by a long way. During the pandemic, many people struggled with the psychological weight of prolonged isolation, broken relationships and an uncertain future. Hall gives this weight a clear shape through Edith's reflections, showing that emotional recovery can move much more slowly, and less predictably, than physical healing. The novel is part of a growing body of fiction that takes this emotional aftermath seriously.

Resilience has also drawn more attention in both psychology and literary studies in recent years. Older accounts of resilience often described it as an unusual capacity to rise above hardship. More recent scholarship treats it instead as a gradual process of adjustment, one in which people keep functioning even while things remain difficult. Bonanno (2004) argues that resilience should not be read as an absence of suffering but as the ability to adapt well after a traumatic experience. This idea runs through *Burntcoat* as well. Edith continues to feel grief, uncertainty and physical illness, yet she stays committed to her art, her relationships and her own reflection. Hall treats resilience less as a finished achievement and more as something ongoing.

Art holds a central place in most discussions of resilience in the novel. Scholars increasingly argue that creative work gives people a way to process difficult experience and to hold on to memory that might otherwise slip away. In *Burntcoat*, sculpture is Edith's main way of answering crisis. Her work keeps emotional experience intact while also creating lasting symbols of survival and remembrance. Hall suggests that creativity turns private suffering into something with a wider cultural life, so that difficult experience keeps meaning even once the moment of crisis has passed.

The interdisciplinary field of medical humanities has widened the study of pandemic fiction still further. This field brings

together literature, medicine, philosophy, history and ethics to look at illness as something people live through, not just as a biological fact. Scholars in this area argue that fiction offers real insight into emotional suffering, patient experience and the social costs of disease. Miksanek (2024) makes a related point, arguing that the contemporary novel is well placed to illuminate the experience of illness and the practice of medicine in ways that clinical writing alone cannot. *Burntcoat* reflects this way of thinking by treating illness not simply as a diagnosis but as something that reshapes identity, relationships, memory and everyday life.

Even with all this scholarship, some gaps remain. Existing studies tend to focus on one theme at a time, trauma, illness narrative, artistic expression, or ecological concern, rather than looking at how these ideas interact. As a result, the way memory, trauma and resilience work together in the novel has not been fully explored. Looking at them together gives a fuller sense of how Hall represents survival during the pandemic and shows how emotional recovery grows out of connected psychological and social processes.

This study responds to that gap by treating memory, trauma and human resilience as themes that depend on one another rather than as separate concepts. This combined approach allows for a more complete reading of *Burntcoat* and adds to ongoing conversations in pandemic literature, trauma studies, memory studies and the medical humanities.

Research Gap

Existing work on *Burntcoat* has mostly looked at the novel from single angles, trauma, illness narrative, artistic representation, ecological concern, or the psychological effects of the pandemic. These studies are valuable, but they generally treat these themes as separate from one another. Very little research has looked at how memory, trauma and human resilience relate to each other within one interpretive frame.

Much of this scholarship also tends to focus either on the psychological consequences of the pandemic or on Hall's narrative technique, without considering how memory sits between trauma and resilience and connects the two. This gap limits a fuller reading of Edith Harkness's emotional journey and of the novel's broader statement about survival during a global health crisis.

This study tries to address that gap by reading memory, trauma and human resilience as connected parts of one process. It argues that Hall presents survival as an ongoing act of remembering, recovering emotionally, creating art and holding on to hope. Through this combined reading, the study aims to add something to current discussions of pandemic literature and to offer a broader interpretation of *Burntcoat*.

Research Objectives

1. To examine how memory is represented in Sarah Hall's *Burntcoat*.
2. To analyse the psychological and emotional dimensions of trauma during the COVID-19 pandemic as shown in the novel.
3. To explore the forms of human resilience that emerge in response to illness, isolation, grief and uncertainty.
4. To look at the role of artistic expression as a source of emotional endurance and hope.

5. To show how memory, trauma and resilience together shape the novel's account of survival during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research Questions

1. How does Sarah Hall represent memory in *Burntcoat*?
2. How does the novel portray psychological trauma during the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. What forms of human resilience emerge through Edith Harkness's experiences?
4. How does artistic creativity contribute to emotional recovery in the novel?
5. How do memory, trauma and resilience together redefine the meaning of survival in *Burntcoat*?

Methodology / Research Design

This study uses a qualitative approach built on close textual analysis. The primary source is Sarah Hall's novel *Burntcoat* (2021). Secondary sources include scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles and theoretical work on trauma, memory, resilience, pandemic literature and the medical humanities.

The analysis works through the novel's main characters, its narrative structure, its use of symbol, and how its themes develop over the course of the story, paying particular attention to how memory, trauma and resilience are represented. This reading is informed by Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma (1996), Aleida Assmann's account of cultural memory (2011), and Bonanno's work on psychological resilience (2004). Together, these perspectives provide an interdisciplinary basis for understanding how Hall turns the lived experience of the pandemic into literary form.

Rather than working with quantitative data, this study relies on interpretation and critical reading of the text. Close reading is used to trace patterns of remembrance, emotional suffering, artistic creation and recovery. The theoretical framework chosen here allows individual experience in the novel to be read against broader social and historical realities. Through this qualitative approach, the study treats *Burntcoat* as both a work of fiction and a cultural record of one of the major crises of the twenty-first century.

Results and Discussion

Memory as Personal and Collective Witness

Memory is one of the most important elements of *Burntcoat*. Hall does not treat it as a simple record of past events. Instead, memory becomes an active force that shapes identity, holds relationships together, and gives meaning to a life. The novel suggests that memories are never really separate from the present; they keep shaping thought, feeling and decision long after the events themselves are over. Through Edith Harkness's reflections, the novel presents memory as both a private experience and a shared record of the pandemic. Remembering becomes a form of survival because it protects a person's sense of self while also holding on to the emotional history of a society living through crisis.

From its opening pages, the novel treats storytelling as a way of surviving. Edith recalls her mother's belief that stories help people get through hard times, and this idea sits at the centre of the whole book, since Edith tells her own life through remembered fragments rather than through a straightforward timeline. Her memories move between childhood, adulthood, artistic success, romantic love and the pandemic without

warning. These shifts show that memory does not run in a straight line; it comes back unexpectedly, usually pulled along by feeling rather than by chronology. This mirrors how people actually remember things that matter to them, especially anything tied up with love, loss or trauma.

The novel's broken structure reinforces this idea. Most narratives move from beginning to end in order. *Burntcoat* does not, and instead lets past and present sit side by side. Edith's memories surface whenever a feeling, a place or an experience calls up something earlier in her life. This back-and-forth movement makes the novel feel closer to how a mind actually works than to a written record of history. Hall shows memory to be fluid, selective and deeply emotional, and the structure of the book becomes itself an expression of remembering, so that readers feel some of the same uncertainty and continuity that memory carries with it.

Edith's childhood memories matter a great deal because they explain so much of her emotional life later on. Her mother Naomi's brain injury changes the family for good. Naomi survives, but her personality, language and behaviour are never the same again. Edith grows up looking after a parent whose identity has changed beyond recognition, and this experience shapes how she later understands vulnerability, responsibility and endurance. These early memories stay active well into adulthood. Hall suggests that emotional experience from early life keeps influencing how a person responds to grief, uncertainty and loss much later on. This continuing influence of earlier experience is also evident in literary studies of nostalgia, where childhood memories have been shown to shape characters' present perceptions, emotional responses and choices (Tahir, 2024). Memory therefore works as a kind of hidden thread running through every stage of Edith's life.

Memory and identity are closely tied together in the novel as well. Edith comes to understand herself through the stories she remembers. Her recollections hold on to facts, but also to feeling, relationship, ambition and value. Hall treats identity as something built again and again through memory rather than as something fixed from the start. As Edith looks back over different parts of her life, she slowly sees how each experience has added to who she has become. Memory lets her keep a sense of continuity even as illness, age and the pandemic bring so much uncertainty.

Hall also connects memory to physical space. *Burntcoat*, the converted warehouse where Edith lives and works, is far more than a setting. It becomes a kind of living archive of her life. Every sculpture, room and object carries some emotional weight because each has been present for something important. During the pandemic, the building keeps her physically safe, but it also becomes a place where memory survives through art and reflection. It stands for a kind of permanence in a world thrown into uncertainty, holding both the visible evidence of Edith's work and the quieter traces of her emotional history. In this way, Hall turns a physical space into a symbol of remembered experience.

The link between memory and love gets just as much attention. Edith often returns to memories of her relationship with Halit, recalling conversations, shared moments and closeness. These memories keep shaping her life even after loss enters it. Hall suggests that memory allows love to exist beyond physical

presence. Death and separation change relationships, but remembering keeps the emotional connection alive. Edith's recollections become a kind of devotion that resists the full disappearance of the people she has loved, so memory works as a form of continuity that protects relationships from being entirely lost.

The novel also widens personal memory into something collective. Edith's experiences are her own, but they also stand in for feelings shared by millions of people during the pandemic. This movement between personal remembrance and collective history is also evident in literary representations of other periods of social crisis, where individual memories of loss and disrupted relationships become connected to wider historical trauma (Batool & Kallu, 2025). Lockdowns, distancing, fear of infection and long isolation were common across very different societies. Hall records these realities through one person's experience rather than through public history, and as a result Edith's memories become part of a larger cultural record that holds on to the emotional atmosphere of the pandemic. This shift from private remembrance to shared witness supports Assmann's (2011) argument that cultural memory lets a society hold on to experiences that shape its historical identity. *Burntcoat* shows that literature plays a part in this process by recording feeling that official documents often miss.

Art strengthens the tie between memory and survival even further. Edith's sculptures hold experiences that are hard to put into ordinary words. Sculpture becomes another form of memory, giving physical shape to emotion, relationship and historical moment. Hall suggests that artists preserve not only their own experience but also something of the emotional life of the people around them. Edith's work therefore works as both a personal statement and a form of shared remembrance, and through art, memory gains a kind of permanence that can speak across generations.

Hall also connects memory to mortality. As Edith faces illness, she becomes increasingly aware that memory might outlast her. Rather than causing despair, this awareness pushes her toward reflection. Instead of fearing that her own life will disappear, she works to preserve meaningful experience through storytelling and art. Hall presents remembering as a kind of resistance against forgetting, arguing that while a life is temporary, memory can carry emotional and cultural meaning well beyond it.

This treatment of memory also reflects what literature more broadly does during historical crises. Fiction holds on to experience that might otherwise fade from public awareness. Statistical reports can describe numbers of infections, deaths and recoveries, but they cannot really communicate loneliness, hope, fear or love. Through Edith's memories, *Burntcoat* records the emotional history of the pandemic, so that later readers understand not only what happened but also something of how it felt to live through it. In this sense, literature becomes a form of historical testimony.

From a theoretical angle, Hall's treatment of memory supports the idea that remembering works on both an individual and a cultural level. Assmann (2011) argues that societies keep their identity through shared memories held in story, art and tradition, and Edith's personal narrative shows this process at work, since her private experience gradually comes to stand

for a larger historical moment. Caruth (1996) similarly notes that traumatic memories tend to return unexpectedly, showing that the past keeps influencing the present. Hall builds this psychological reality into the novel by letting memories surface naturally rather than arranging them into a tidy chronological order.

In the end, *Burntcoat* treats memory as an essential human resource that makes survival possible during periods of deep uncertainty. Edith remembers suffering, but also kindness, creativity, friendship and love. These more hopeful memories keep despair from taking over her life entirely. Hall pushes back against the idea that memory only holds pain; it also protects hope, compassion and a sense of who a person is. Through this balanced picture, the novel suggests that memory is one of the strongest resources people have, since it lets individuals and whole societies keep meaning intact even in the face of serious loss.

To sum up this section, memory works as both a personal and a collective form of witness throughout *Burntcoat*. Hall treats remembering as a living process that keeps identity intact, preserves relationships and holds on to historical experience. Edith's reflections turn private experience into something closer to cultural memory, showing that storytelling itself becomes an act of survival. With tying memory to identity, love, art and history, Hall gives a thoughtful literary response to the emotional side of the pandemic, one that sets up the ground on which the novel's treatment of trauma and resilience is later built.

Trauma and the Emotional Reality of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Trauma is one of the central concerns of *Burntcoat*. Hall moves past the physical effects of illness to focus on its emotional and psychological cost. The novel shows that the pandemic affected people not only through disease but also through fear, uncertainty, separation and grief. Hall presents trauma as something that changes how a person remembers the past, reads the present and imagines the future. Through Edith's life, the novel shows that trauma stays active well after a crisis has technically ended, continuing to shape identity, relationships and emotional wellbeing.

One notable feature of trauma in the novel is how gradually it builds. Hall does not describe it as one dramatic event. Instead, emotional suffering grows out of repeated uncertainty, isolation and loss. Edith lives through a period where ordinary routine disappears, physical contact turns risky, and every encounter carries some possibility of infection. This ongoing uncertainty creates a kind of psychological pressure that shapes both thought and behaviour, so the pandemic becomes less a single event and more an emotional environment that Edith has to live inside.

The relationship between Edith and her mother Naomi offers another view of trauma. Naomi's brain injury during Edith's childhood permanently changes the family. Naomi survives, but her personality and behaviour are transformed, and Edith goes through a strange kind of grief, since she loses the mother she once knew while still living beside her. Hall suggests that trauma often involves loss that others cannot easily see. These childhood experiences prepare Edith, in a sense, for the later crisis of the pandemic, showing that emotional wounds from very different periods of life stay connected.

Hall also looks closely at the emotional cost of prolonged isolation. During lockdown, *Burntcoat* becomes both a place of safety and a kind of confinement. Edith and Halit are physically protected inside the building, but they remain cut off from the wider world. The restrictions on movement and social contact slowly build loneliness and emotional fatigue. Hall treats isolation as more than physical distance; it becomes a psychological condition that changes how people think, communicate and understand themselves. The novel reflects what many people went through during the pandemic, when ordinary human contact became limited by public health rules. Fear stays present through nearly the whole narrative. Unlike the sudden fear caused by immediate danger, the pandemic creates a slow, constant anxiety. Every trip outside, every physical symptom, every interaction with another person becomes a reminder of possible infection. Hall captures this invisible threat well by showing how ordinary activity becomes emotionally hard. The characters have to manage everyday life while carrying this weight of uncertainty, and this prolonged fear reflects the emotional atmosphere felt across the world during the pandemic.

Grief is another important expression of trauma in the novel. Hall treats grief as both personal and shared. Edith mourns the people she has loved, particularly Halit, whose absence keeps shaping her emotional life. But the novel also recognises broader forms of grief tied to the pandemic. People lost familiar routines, opportunities, celebrations and physical closeness with family. Hall widens the meaning of grief beyond death alone, and the pandemic becomes a period in which whole communities mourn the temporary loss of ordinary life.

Hall's picture of trauma fits closely with Caruth's argument that traumatic experience often returns through memory rather than staying confined to the past (Caruth, 1996). Edith's recollections surface unexpectedly across the novel, showing that emotional wounds keep shaping present experience. The broken narrative structure reinforces this, since memories appear through emotional association rather than in chronological order. Hall uses the shape of the narrative itself to represent trauma's ongoing pull.

The novel also shows how trauma affects relationships. Fear of infection changes what closeness, trust and intimacy mean. Simple things like touch, conversation or shared space turn emotionally complicated. Despite this, Edith and Halit keep supporting each other, and their relationship shows that emotional connection remains possible even under extraordinary pressure. Hall suggests that compassion matters even more during periods of shared suffering.

Another point worth noting is the link Hall draws between trauma and the body. Emotional distress in the novel sits alongside physical weakness, illness and exhaustion. Edith becomes more and more aware of her own physical condition as the story goes on. Hall does not separate emotional and physical experience; she treats them as closely bound together, which reflects the lived reality of the pandemic, when mental and physical health so often affected each other.

Even with all this suffering, the novel does not stay stuck in despair. Hall repeatedly suggests that recognising trauma is a necessary step toward healing. Edith does not try to erase painful memory. Instead, she accepts it as part of her life while

continuing to make art, hold on to relationships, and reflect on her experience. This shows that recovery does not require forgetting; healing grows instead out of acknowledging pain while still finding some meaning in life.

Overall, *Burntcoat* treats trauma as both an individual and a collective experience that reshapes identity during a time of crisis. Hall reminds readers that the emotional cost of the pandemic reaches beyond medical recovery. Fear, grief, uncertainty and memory keep shaping people's lives long after the immediate danger has passed. Through Edith's story, the novel offers a compassionate view of psychological endurance and lays the ground for its wider argument about resilience.

Human Resilience through Love, Art and Hope

Even though *Burntcoat* is honest about trauma, its lasting message is one of resilience. Hall shows that resilience is not the absence of pain but the ability to keep living with purpose in spite of suffering. Through the novel, Edith responds to illness, grief and uncertainty through creativity, love, compassion and self-reflection. Hall treats resilience as an ordinary human quality that grows slowly through everyday choices rather than through extraordinary achievement.

Art is the strongest symbol of resilience in the novel. Edith's sculptures hold on to human experience that might otherwise fade with time. Through her art, she turns emotional suffering into something with lasting cultural life. Hall suggests that art lets people communicate what ordinary language cannot always express, and sculpture becomes a form of remembrance that protects human dignity against loss and forgetting. This broader relationship between creative expression, memory and healing has also been recognised in recent scholarship, which highlights the role of art and literature in preserving collective memory and supporting processes of individual and collective healing (Banda, 2026). The building called *Burntcoat* also stands for resilience. Through the pandemic, it works as Edith's home, studio and emotional shelter all at once. The outside world is marked by uncertainty and fear, but inside *Burntcoat*, creativity and love continue. Hall turns the building into a symbol of stability, suggesting that resilience often starts with building spaces where people can feel protected, understood and emotionally secure.

Love is another important source of resilience. Edith's relationship with Halit grows during one of the most uncertain periods in modern history. Their connection offers comfort, companionship and hope despite the danger around them. Hall does not present love as some easy solution to suffering. Instead, she shows it as a source of strength that lets people get through hard times together. Their relationship shows that emotional intimacy stays possible even when society is gripped by widespread fear and separation.

Memory also feeds into resilience. Edith's recollections hold on to meaningful relationships, personal achievement and moments of happiness alongside memories of grief. Hall suggests that positive memory helps a person keep hope alive during uncertain times. Rather than getting stuck in painful experience, Edith draws strength from remembering the people she has loved and the life she has built, so memory supports resilience by keeping identity and purpose intact.

Hall also suggests that resilience grows through acceptance rather than denial. Edith slowly comes to see uncertainty as an

unavoidable part of being alive. Instead of fighting this, she learns to keep living while accepting her own vulnerability. This attitude fits Bonanno's (2004) view that resilience involves successful adaptation rather than a complete escape from emotional pain. Hall shows that real resilience grows through patience, compassion and the willingness to keep going even when things remain difficult.

The novel also widens resilience beyond the individual by recognising the importance of community. Surviving the pandemic depends on cooperation, empathy and shared responsibility. Edith's story stays personal, but it reflects the experience of countless people who relied on family, healthcare workers, neighbours and friends. Hall therefore treats resilience as both a personal and a collective process.

Hope is one of the novel's most enduring themes. Hall does not offer easy optimism or simple answers to suffering. Instead, hope shows up through small acts of kindness, artistic commitment, emotional honesty and the will to keep creating despite uncertainty. Edith's sculptures stand for this hope, since they preserve human experience for people who come after her. Through art, Hall suggests, people keep making meaning even during their darkest moments.

The novel ultimately redefines what survival means. Staying alive physically is not enough on its own. Real survival means holding on to memory, compassion, creativity and connection with others. Edith's story shows that resilience is measured not only by whether a person keeps living but by whether they keep some sense of humanity intact while doing so. In this way, Hall turns the pandemic into a lasting reflection on the strength of the human spirit.

In summary, *Burntcoat* presents resilience as the natural continuation of memory and trauma. Memory preserves experience, trauma reveals human vulnerability, and resilience lets people rebuild their lives with dignity and hope. Through Edith's art, her love for Halit, and her determination to keep going despite uncertainty, Hall offers a hopeful picture of human endurance that reaches well beyond the historical moment of the pandemic.

Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic reshaped everyday life around the world and left its mark on literature as well. Writers responded by recording the emotional, psychological and social cost of living through this period of deep uncertainty. Sarah Hall's *Burntcoat* is one of the earliest novels to take on the experience of the pandemic directly, following Edith Harkness through questions of memory, trauma and resilience. Rather than focusing on the medical side of the crisis, Hall looks at its lasting effects on identity, relationships, art and emotional recovery. Because of this, the novel holds a significant place within pandemic literature, turning a historical crisis into a deeply human story.

This study has looked at *Burntcoat* through the connected themes of memory, trauma and human resilience. The analysis shows that these three themes cannot really be separated from one another, since each contributes to how the novel represents survival. Memory holds on to personal experience and protects identity. Trauma exposes the emotional cost of illness, fear, grief and isolation. Human resilience lets people keep living with dignity, creativity and hope despite everything uncertain

around them. Together, these themes give a fuller picture of Hall's literary response to the pandemic.

The study found that memory works as both a personal and a collective form of witness. Edith's recollections preserve relationships, childhood experience, artistic achievement and emotional connection that keep shaping her present life. Hall treats memory as active rather than as a passive record of the past. Through storytelling and reflection, private experience becomes part of a wider cultural history, and the novel shows that literature can preserve emotional truth that historical documents and scientific reports often cannot capture. Memory becomes an act of survival because it protects identity while making sure the pandemic's experiences are not forgotten.

The analysis also confirms that trauma reaches well beyond physical illness. Hall portrays the emotional cost of fear, prolonged isolation, uncertainty, broken relationships and grief with real sensitivity. Edith's experience shows that psychological suffering often continues after a crisis has technically passed. Trauma shapes memory, identity and emotional wellbeing while changing how a person understands themselves and the world. By treating trauma as both a personal and collective experience, Hall gives a realistic account of the pandemic's emotional legacy.

Human resilience emerges as the novel's central message. Hall does not treat resilience as something that requires extraordinary courage or full emotional recovery. Instead, it grows through creativity, compassion, love, remembrance and acceptance. Edith's sculptures preserve experience that might otherwise fade, and her relationship with Halit shows how important emotional connection is during uncertain times. The novel suggests that survival means more than physical endurance; true survival requires holding on to hope, dignity and humanity despite hardship.

These findings also point to the important part literature plays in helping people understand global crises. Scientific research explains the biological and medical side of disease, but literary narrative shows how people actually experience fear, loneliness, hope and recovery in everyday life. *Burntcoat* contributes not only to contemporary fiction but also to the wider fields of trauma studies, memory studies and the medical humanities. Hall's novel is a reminder that historical events live on not just in statistics and official records but in stories that hold on to emotional experience.

This study adds to existing scholarship by looking at memory, trauma and resilience within a single interpretive frame rather than treating them separately, as earlier studies have often done. The present research shows that these themes work together throughout the novel and jointly shape Hall's account of survival during the pandemic. This combined reading offers a broader interpretation of *Burntcoat* and contributes to the ongoing growth of pandemic literature as a field of study.

This study is limited to a single literary text. Future research could compare *Burntcoat* with other pandemic novels, by writers such as Jodi Picoult, Louise Erdrich, Catherine Ryan Howard or Ling Ma, to look at different cultural takes on memory, trauma and resilience. A similar combined framework has already proved useful outside pandemic fiction: Bhatt and Mishra (2025), for instance, read memory and trauma together to explain how Emily St John Mandel's

Station Eleven represents the persistence of humanity after collapse, which suggests that the approach taken here could travel well to other crisis narratives. Comparative work could also explore how writers from different national traditions represent the longer-term emotional cost of the COVID-19 pandemic.

To close, Sarah Hall's *Burntcoat* shows that survival is not only about overcoming illness. Through memory, people hold on to identity. Through trauma, they face emotional reality. Through resilience, they keep creating, loving and hoping despite uncertainty. Hall turns the COVID-19 pandemic into a lasting piece of literary testimony that honours both individual experience and collective history, reminding readers that even in periods of real suffering, people continue to find strength through remembrance, compassion, creativity and meaningful relationships with one another.

List of Abbreviations

COVID-19: Coronavirus Disease 2019

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

Acknowledgements

The author is grateful to all scholars whose published work supported the development of this study. Thanks are also due to Sarah Hall, whose novel *Burntcoat* provided the primary literary text for this research. No financial or material support was received for this research.

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