

A Feministic Inquiry into Gender Ambivalence in Alex Micheladas’

“The Silent Patient.”

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Abstract

This research paper seeks to analyse the gender dichotomy from a feministic perspective in the novel *The Silent Patient*, written by Alex Micheladas. The paper focuses on the primary protagonists, *Alicia* and *Kathy*, and their experiences as they navigate through a difficult period of their lives. This is a qualitative study which uses Glick and Fiske’s ambivalent sexist theory, from a feminist standpoint to further understand whether the predicament of these characters has a direct correlation to their gender. The relevance of this study stems from the imperative need to challenge gender roles and redefine societal structures, especially in the context of the marginalization of women and the analysis of sexism in *The Silent Patient* contributes to the wider discourse on women's experiences and societal factors that shape gender roles globally.

Key words: Feminism, Gender, Marginalization, The Silent Patient. Feminist theory, standpoint

1. Introduction

Glick and Fiske’s theory of Ambivalent sexism considers sexism as a multifarious construct with two opposing sexist attitudes: hostile and benevolent. Hostile sexism can be defined as outright animosity towards women whereas benevolent sexism condescends and patronizes women in the disguise of a positive demeanor. According to Glick and Fiske, benevolent sexism refers to the set of attitudes that restrict women to the stereotypical roles they perform in society but that are subjectively positive. These attitudes also tend to prompt pro-social behaviours such as helping or actions seeking intimacy like self-disclosure. Benevolent sexism is conspicuously

rooted in traditional stereotypes and patriarchy when men are the providers and protectors of women. Though not as obvious as hostile sexism, its effects are equally damaging.

Traditional theories of Feminism defined sexism only along the lines of aversion and hostility towards women. However, Glick and Fiske (1996, 2001) argued in their theory that sexism toward women is mostly ambivalent, which involves both hostile as well as benevolent sexism. The theory exemplifies how interdependence and male dominance are the predominant features of gender relationships in society which underlines ambivalent sexism. On one hand, male dominance in social, political and economic spheres fuels hostile sexism, which portrays women as incompetent and inferior. Whereas, on the other hand, in the domestic sphere men and women are intimate as well as highly interdependent which creates benevolent sexism, with a need for women to be protected. This paper seeks to analyze the bidimensional sexist attitudes towards the two female characters of Michealeda's novel, *The Silent Patient* using a feministic perspective and to understand whether their unfortunate predicament in the novel is directly related to the attitudes projected to them because of their gender.

The relevance of this study stems from the imperative need to challenge gender roles and redefine societal structures, especially in the context of the marginalization of women. It underscores the often-overlooked dangers of benevolent sexism due to its conspicuous nature. This study seeks to confront and dismantle gender stereotypes using a feministic approach in light of ambivalent sexist theory. Also, it advocates for redefining the societal frameworks to promote more gender inclusion and equality. Additionally, the analysis of sexism in *The Silent Patient* contributes to the wider discourse on women's experiences and societal factors that shape gender roles globally.

The novel, *The Silent Patient* tells the story of Alicia Berenson through dual narratives. Alicia is a renowned painter who kills her husband, Gabriel by shooting at him five times and then falls silent. This refusal to explain her motive creates a mystery and leads her to Grove, a psychiatric facility where psychotherapist Theo Faber attempts to unravel her motive. However, her continued silence makes it challenging. After continued mediation and therapy, Alicia communicates with Theo through her diary, through her painting and finally, she verbally recounts

the events of life leading to the murder of her husband. Meanwhile, in the parallel narrative, Theo shockingly realizes his wife Kathy's infidelity to Gabriel. This instigates him to seek revenge and in doing so he intrudes into Alicia's home to make her understand that Gabriel does not love her. The readers understand from the final pages of Alicia's diary that it was Theo, who convinced her to kill Gabriel.

This research paper also examines gender-based prejudice which includes seemingly positive sexist attitudes towards women. The theory of ambivalent sexism evaluates these attitudes through two components which are hostile sexism (HS) and benevolent sexism (BS). Where HS is characterized by feelings of antipathy that lead to objectification, harassment and prejudice against women. It also includes harmful and often aggressive attitudes, stereotyping women as dependent, fragile, emotional and less intelligent thus maintaining the patriarchal and dominant role men have in society, also dictating how women should behave and even think.

On the contrary, BS revolves around protective paternalism implying that women need men's protection. It also implies that gender roles are contrasting but complementary to each other. Women are weak but morally pure whereas men are more competent but morally corruptible. Even though BS appears to be romantic and pleasant it perpetuates the same harmful traditional stereotypes and gender role schemas of patriarchy, thereby justifying the male-dominated society. As Glick and Fiske (1996) say, "benevolent sexism may be used to compensate for, or legitimate, hostile sexism ('I am not exploiting women; I love, protect, and provide for them')" (p. 492). Thus, regardless of BS appearing to be less misogynistic, it is equally potent in promoting prejudice and legitimizing patriarchy.

2. Review of Literature

Postmodernist critique of the text, *The Silent Patient* was carried out by researchers, Ashraf, Zaidi and Aqeel (2020). The characters are analysed using lenses of memory and intertextuality. The study concludes on how the victims in the beginning of the novel develop into victimizers in the end. In "Exploring the Concept of Containment, Childhood Development and Silence in Alex Michaelides's Novel, *The Silent Patient: A Psychoanalytic Critique*", Hossain (2021) investigates Alicia's relationship with her father to understand the impact of childhood psychological

development. He found that her uncontained childhood manifested itself into a toxic marital relationship. In her study, Roy tries to understand Alicia's hysteria from Freud's psychological perspective along with femininity. She found that her 'hysteria' does not signify compromise but reflects her revolt and aggression against oppressive patriarchal systems that have bound her in chains.

Ambivalent sexism theory was applied by Brewington, Hackathon and Velez in 2022 to conduct an archival analysis of the frequency of sexist depictions in movies for their research article, "Sexism, Actually? Analysis of Ambivalent Sexism in Popular Movies". In the paper, they tallied depictions of assault, benevolence and hostility to understand it across different genres and periods. This method of archival analysis aided the researchers in analyzing the social context and in better understanding of the change in society.

In "Portrayal of Ambivalent Sexism in Fernando 's Green is the Colour," Rani (2019) explores the significance of ambivalent sexism in its male characters. She employs social rule theory to distinguish the physical features of the two genders and to emphasize how men are made to believe that they are superior to women. Glick et al. (2004) speculated that both positive and negative traits of masculinity are directly correlated to power and status. Negative masculinity is the direct product of "excesses of selfish ambition over concern for others" (Glick et al., 2004, p. 714). In the lines of Glick and Fiske's analysis of ambivalent sexist theory, Brewington, Hackathorn Velez (2022) argue that there are only two kinds of women's representation in the media either "belonging on a pedestal or in the gutter, often referred to as the Madonna-whore dichotomy" (p. 1544). Both of these are harmful as they underline the same patriarchal norm of men being intelligent and strong and women fragile and dependent.

In their theory, Glick and Fiske (1996) suggested that Benevolent Sexism had three components which are paternalism, gender differentiation and heterosexuality. Each of these components was based on the gender dichotomy in society. Paternalism stands for the dominating protective control, which is the essence of patriarchy, underlying the role of a man as the provider and protector. The second component of gender differentiation implies how both genders contrast

and complement each other, by which women are seen as mirrors to reflect on the self-esteem and importance of men. Glick & Fiske 1996, p. 493).

Another example of a complementary component is how men work outside whereas women work inside their homes for men's welfare and well-being. The third factor implies that women can use other techniques to manipulate men and gain dominance, which may further lead to hostility. Both Hostile and Benevolent sexism are vile and potent in propagating misogyny.

3. Methodology

This research paper attempts to analyze how sexism is depicted in Alex Michaelides' award-winning novel *The Silent Patient*. Peter Glick and Susan Fiske's theory on ambivalent sexism is applied to assess sexist depictions. This paper also seeks to examine these situations to understand the reason behind the predicament of both female characters in the novel. The researcher employs textual analysis to connect the elements of theory to the attitudes of sexism portrayed in the novel. This study aims to bring light to the imperative need to redefine and restructure gender roles and standing in society as well as to mitigate the marginalization of women. This will be carried out by highlighting the hypocrisy subsumed in benevolent sexism.

(BS) which will be beneficial in understanding multifarious social factors that affect gender roles as well as women in all cultures around the globe. To eliminate stereotypical gender roles, it is important to identify how hostile sexism and benevolent sexism manifest in society and how it is portrayed in literature and popular culture. *The Silent Patient* reflects the inherent gender inequality in society, especially in its portrayal of the experiences of women who can be seen as facing abuse which ranges from subtle remarks to deeply traumatizing physical abuse as well as inherent paternalistic and protective behaviors. The two major research Aims posed through this study are;

1. To identify the instances of ambivalent sexism with a specific focus on the attitudes projected to Alicia and Kathy.

2. To understand whether the predicaments of the two female protagonists in the novel is correlated to their gender.

4. Analysis

This Study analyses, *The Silent Patient*, a novel written by Alex Michaelides was published on 5th September 2019. Michaelides is a Cyprus-English writer who was born in Cyprus in 1977. He completed his Master's in English literature from the University of Cambridge. He later completed an MFA in Screenwriting at the American Film Institute in Los Angeles. This award-winning novel blends crime, mystery, psychology, thriller and Greek mythology to create a well-scripted page-turner.

A close analysis of the characters reveals how Theo is the epitome of Protective paternalism and how there is a recurring pattern within his interactions with Kathy and Alicia. This repetitive behaviour reflects a benevolent sexist (BS) attitude, which on the face appears to be kind and heroic. The undertone of this is the propagation of misogyny and the establishment of men as superior to women (Brewington,2022). Theo's paternalistic protective attitude reassures his dominance over the lives of Kathy and Alicia. We see in the novel that, actually no one has sought for his involvement, he appoints himself as their sole protector and advocate. Theo is the instigator of the events which lead to the murder of Gabriel. As soon as he gets to know about Gabriel's infidelity, Theo intrudes into Alicia's life. He is consumed with the thought of helping and saving her from her marriage when he has no idea who they are or the nature of their marriage. This urge signifies BS, "Perhaps I was wrong, assuming she knew nothing about the affair? Perhaps she did know. . . But somehow I didn't think so. She looked innocent" (Michaelides, 2019, p. 303).

Theo attributes Alicia with feminine qualities of maternal love, warmth and innocence which makes her incapable of understanding the reality of even her marriage or the relationship with her husband. Similarly, with Kathy, Theo's wife we see the same manifestation of BS. Instead of confronting her, about her infidelity and trying to work out a solution. Theo completely isolates himself and becomes obsessed with putting an end to her extramarital relationship with Gabriel. Theo takes up this responsibility without even Kathy knowing, putting himself in the position of a

protector and saviour. This behavior brings about a series of repercussions in both Alicia's and Kathy's lives. The former murders Gabriel, and ends up in a psychiatric facility while the second falls into depression and loses her artistic pursuits. "she's become quite withdrawn, depressed even. Her doctor wanted to put her on antidepressants, but I discouraged it" (Michaelides, 2019, p. 319). We see how both these characters face adversity and have their life disrupted, because of Theo's actions. This intrinsically problematic attitude is evident throughout the novel, as Theo firmly believes it to be his responsibility to rescue both these women when it is he who puts them in their misery.

Michaelides' use of Ancient Greek and Elizabethan symbols enforces strong symbolism. Alicia paints her portrait naming it after Euripides's Greek play *Alcestis*. This highlights her similarities with the tragic heroine, they were both betrayed by their husbands and chose to express their anguish through silence. The second symbolism is Kathy playing *Desdemona*, wife of *Othello* who suspects her of infidelity. Both of these indicate the innocence and powerlessness of these women when compared to the strong patriarchal sect in society. Her portrait, *Alcestis* is her desperate cry where she is screaming to the society, but in silence. This is also an indication of a complex dichotomy of her innocence and guilt. Alicia is first introduced in the novel as pure and innocent, whereas towards the end she becomes angry, hurt and a murderer. The reference to this ancient imagery of betrayal indicates the misogyny that women has been facing for centuries. *Desdemona* – Kathy's scenario is also a symbol of hostile sexism (HS) because even though she is painted as the villain by Theo who strongly believes her to be cheating on him. The novel does not talk about her side of the story and Kathy is denied a voice. The reader knows Kathy only through Theo. In the Shakespearean tragedy, *Othello* wrongly accuses *Desdemona* and ends up killing her out of jealousy. Though not mentioned, it is also a possibility that Theo's suspicions are just hallucinations and manifestations of his fear and substance abuse. His mental instability is evident in these lines, "it was disorienting. From behind, from a distance, the man didn't look dissimilar to me—for a few seconds, I had a confused, out-of-body experience, convinced I was watching myself walking in the park with Kathy" (Michaelides 2019, 242). This indicates the opposing dimensions in ambivalent sexist theory, Theo has strong paternal traits (BS) through which he

wants to take full control of Kathy's life at the same, his hostile sexism is presented in all the scenarios where he accuses her of infidelity and blames her for destroying their marriage.

It can also be understood that despite the presence of both BS and HS attitudes in the novel, there are vivid instances where contrast can be seen in emphasizing the differences of perception in Gender dichotomy. This can be seen in the mental states of Theo and Alicia during their spouses' affair and also on how it is revealed to them. When Theo is distressed and anxious in Kathy's absence, Alicia is so consumed by her art that she does not realize Gabriel's absence. This also adds on to the BS attitude projected by Theo to Alicia, "[s]he looked innocent, as I had once looked. It was my duty to enlighten her. I could reveal the truth about the man she was living with, whose bed she shared. I had no choice. I had to help her" (Michaelides 2019, 303). which legitimizes gender stereotypes. Theo is sure about Alicia fragility and the need for protection. Whereas Alicia has not noticed any disparities in her marriage nor has questioned Gabriel's absence. This underscores, that sexism in general sees women as weak and morally pure when contrasted to the other gender, men who are strong, competent and independent.

Conclusion

This paper analysed the novel *The Silent Patient* by Alex Michaelides to identify the presence of two components of the ambivalent sexist theory which are Benevolent Sexism and Hostile Sexism and introspected into the female protagonists to understand the cause of their predicament. It was seen that even though male characters display traits and attitudes which seem helpful and favourable at the surface level, it is equally condescending as hostile sexism. It should also be noted that both components propagate stereotypical gender roles and harmful ideologies of oppression. Both Kathy and Alicia's lives were in absolute misery, purely because of the interference of Theo, who stepped in to "save" them. It can also be seen that sexism in literature is not always apparent but is conspicuously evident in the subtexts which perpetuate and reinforce objectivity, inequality and marginalization of women.

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