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**Exploring Inner Motifs through Expressionism in "*The Silent Patient*" by
Alex Michaelides**

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Abstract:

This research delves into the intricate psychological landscape of Alicia, the protagonist of Alex Michaelides' "The Silent Patient." Departing from traditional narrative techniques such as confessional diaries, this study proposes the utilization of expressionism as a more nuanced approach to depict Alicia's inner motifs. Through a qualitative textual analysis, supplemented by insights from the author, this research aims to unravel the layers of Alicia's psyche and her deliberate choice of silence following a traumatic event. By examining the novel through an expressionistic lens, this seeks to study the underlying emotions, symbolism, and motifs that contribute to the richness of Alicia's character and the thematic depth of the narrative.

**Exploring Inner Motifs through Expressionism in "*The Silent Patient*" by Alex
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The Silent Patient is Alex Michaelides' first novel. It was published in the year 2019. *The Silent Patient* can be considered as a psychological thriller with two plots entwined with each other. Peter Hutchings states varied films have been labelled psychological thrillers, but it usually refers to "narratives with domesticated settings in which action is suppressed and where thrills are provided instead via investigations of the psychologies of the principal



characters." (Hutchings 2013) The therapist Theo Faber is fixated with learning Alicia's true motivations, and the book centres on Alicia, who abuses her husband Gabriel as a result of painful experiences she has endured. Rather than investigating a crime, it focuses on the mind of the criminal.

Critics, the German scholar Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, the founder of the painter's group Die Brücke, propagate the ideology of Expressionism in paintings. Expressionism's style was highly individualised and expresses the psychological strains. (Motta) In literature, confession is an autobiographical reflection of one's lives secret aspects through writing. Psychologist Leslie Lothstein focuses on the theme of Alicia's husband's murder and her silence throughout six years of psychotherapy to examine the resistive patient in a forensic hospital. The main focus was on the role of silence in the psychotherapy of violent patients, issues surrounding silence, deception in the consultation room and the meaning of such communications in the course of forensic psychotherapy. (Lothstein 2020) A lecturer Mohammad Afzal Hossain in Mawlana Bhashani Science and Technology University, Bangladesh examines the idea of containment, childhood growth, and silence. From a psychoanalytic standpoint, the critic illustrates how the nature of Alicia's relationship with her father influenced her formative psychic development and evolved to her husband's murder. (Hossain 2021) Above mentioned scholars attempt to investigate Alicia's mental state and how she reacts to therapy. Although Alicia's mental health issues are acknowledged and the work has already been assessed from a psychiatric perspective, the current research aims to look at the methods of communication she uses to communicate her mental health.

The research aims to demonstrate how *The Silent Patient* makes use of the ideas of expressionism and confession. This explains why, when it comes to revealing her feelings, Alicia prefers expression to confession. The main character Alicia's melancholy feelings are depicted through expressionism paintings and confessions written in her diary. Alicia does not withhold a random character; rather, her feelings are influenced by her emotional connection to the shown persona. It is unknown what frame of mind she is in when she writes in her journal. Depending on the mood, it can be changed, but once the painting is finished, it cannot be.



Alicia Berenson was an artist who maintained a diary to record her sentiments, but for her, painting proved to be a more effective way to express her feelings than writing them down. At times, the occurrences of her life and her confession in the journal didn't resemble, for her the optimal solution to represent the problems of her life was through paintings. All of her paintings expressed the struggles she was confronting.

Alicia painted a portrait after she had killed her husband. She painted 'Alcestis', extremely detailed. It showed her in the studio naked, with a pale face and her long red hair cascading across her shoulders, translucent skin showing through her blue veins, and fresh deep scars on both of her wrists. She was holding a paintbrush between the figures. Her mouth was open, her lips were parted, and she was staring straight ahead as her head was turned over her shoulder. The darkest parts of the shadows behind her in the dark combined to form an angel and a figure of a man hidden in the shadows, watching her. She didn't say anything after the picture was finished for six years. "Alicia remained silent- but she made one statement. A painting." (Michaelides 9) Her main criteria for expressing her emotions were through painting. A pale face described her suffering. Deep scars on her wrist indicated she did not want to live any longer, which she mentions on the last page of her journal entry. She wanted to punish herself for what she had done with Gabriel.

A man staring at her from the shadows makes it clear that there was someone in her life bothering and stocking her, leading her to make the darkest decisions. "As soon as I heard that, something in my brain clicked and the jigsaw came together-the picture was complete." (Michaelides 321) she wrote it in the diary. She was referring to Theo, a figure who was following him from behind in the artwork. This demonstrates to us in no uncertain terms that what she later confessed, her image was already telling us. She had already expressed her life to everyone through the painting before she went silent.

Another painting she painted was of 'The Grove', a red-brick hospital, while she was undergoing treatment in the hospital. It was blazing and intense itself. It was a composition in which the woman was Alicia, it can be identified as she wore the same dress that Alicia was wearing on a particular day she drawn a picture and her red hair assured that it was her. She



was being carried by a man. Her sentiments for Theo were captured in the painting of The Grove. After the artwork was completed Theo took a look on it, he did identify the man in the painting as being him, but it was unclear from the artwork whether Theo was attempting to save her or was ready to hurl her into the flames

"I was carrying Alicia in my arms, holding her aloft while the fire licked at my ankles." I couldn't tell if I was depicted in the act of rescuing Alicia or about to throw her in the flames." (Michaelides 195)

She depicted herself in an unsafe hand in the drawing she made. She was being treated by Theo, a psychiatrist, but she was still in danger. Even though she was silent, it was evident from her painting that something was wrong. A painting provided a glaring illustration of her precarious position. Alicia was not at ease being around Theo. Her overwrought feelings of being in a risky situation while receiving treatment from Theo are portrayed by the fire around the hospital. "It was on fire, burning to the ground" (Michaelides 194) She portrayed the hospital where she was receiving treatment as being on fire, and then demonstrated herself in Theo's hand without making it clear whether she had been saved or had been thrown into it. It amply illustrates her unwarranted predicament. She made an effort to explain the entire incident through her paintings, conveying the feelings she was unable to express verbally.

Alicia utilises art to represent her prior experiences with individuals in her life. She painted Lydia Rose, her aunt. She was seen in the painting lying on a little bed nude, and the bed was buckling beneath her weight. She was folding and rippling around the room like waves of grey custard while pounding on the floor. Alicia had a difficult upbringing. She despised her aunt so much, as evidenced by the harshness of the artwork itself. She blamed Alicia for her sister-in-law's death when Theo visited her at home. "My poor brother, Vernon, he never recovered from Eva's death. I took care of him. I took care of Alicia. Was she grateful?" (Michaelides 148) Her artwork was shown to be accurate about her feelings toward her aunt. She had no affection for Alicia. Living with Lydia was challenging for Alicia because she was never complimentary of her. The only family members Alicia had as a child were her



father, Lydia, and her cousin Paul, yet she depicted in her paintings how poorly her father and Lydia treated her. Her life was never simple; from childhood to adulthood, she dealt with a lot of issues. She depicted every experience she experienced in her life through her paintings. In reality, she never spoke to her aunt, but she did express her dislike for her through painting.

Michaelides effectively illustrates the notion that using art rather than language to convey one's conscious and unconscious thoughts is beneficial. Alicia was able to depict her circumstances through her paintings. Her drawings were an ordinary way for her to deeply convey her emotions. Alicia's emotions could not be properly communicated through Dairy. Her life and paintings are inextricably linked. Her life is faithfully portrayed in her artwork.

In the novel, Expressionism made Alicia feel comfortable discussing her psychological state. She was able to use her paintings to express her trauma. It enabled her to communicate emotions that she was unable to freely express to anybody in person. She felt better psychologically as a result of it. It even aids in stress reduction. Alicia's paintings allowed her to easily communicate everything that was going on within her head. Individuals relieve stress by expressing their emotions through painting.

“Art activity provides a concrete rather than verbal medium through which a person can achieve both conscious and unconscious expression, and can be used as a valuable agent for therapeutic change.” (Dalley xi)

While Alicia was attempting to portray Lord Jesus, he instead portrays Gabriel, her husband. “Gabriel is portrayed as Jesus, crucified and hanging from a cross as his wounds are oozing blood. His eyes weren't lowered like Jesus instead; the eyes are unblinking, torturing and brazenly accusing.” (Michaelides 160) Although Gabriel was depicted throughout the book as being the ideal husband, the artwork she created showed her true feelings for him. Although she spoke highly of him in her diary, the picture she unwittingly painted while attempting to paint Jesus revealed the mental state she was in due to Gabriel. He had a relationship with Theo's wife, and in truth, he never truly loved Alicia. He picks himself over Alicia when a stalker asks if either can be saved. She was greatly impacted psychologically, and it dispersed



her. She painted his picture, his eyes, which were showing deep dark secrets, which in reality had never been revealed.

She made an effort to express her ideas down on the canvas because she thought it could relieve her stress and since the eyes she painted were quite revealing of her mental state, she did not like how she felt about Gabriel. She attempts to convey her situation in which she was deliberately avoiding many things that were happening in front of her regarding Gabriel.

“I’m not really responding to what’s going on in front of me. I need to open my eyes and look.” (Michaelides 66) she tried to love him, as she confessed in her diary, but the portrait said something different about her mental state. She draws Gabriel on canvas, with his eyes being crucial. She tried to pretend about her feelings while confessing in the diary, but it came across in the paintings unintentionally.

According to Vija B. Lusebrink and Palo Alto, The human body responds to both internal and external stimuli as a complex organism with numerous intricately synchronised and interconnected systems. Specifically, how images and their expression reflect emotional experiences and how those experiences affect ideas and behaviour are the main areas of focus in art therapy. Sensory pathways are activated as internal images form. According to the literature, art therapy interventions mostly benefit the following general areas: enhancement of mental, emotional, and cognitive development; as well as reconstruction and rehabilitation of physical deficits. (Lusebrink 125)

Her mental health was well displayed in her artworks. She found that art enabled her to express her emotions. She painted several works of art on canvas that represented the emotions she experienced for the individuals in her life. The art she names "Voila" appears to be an almost photographic rendition of the car accident that claimed the life of her mother. At the wheel of the wreck, a woman's corpse lay slumped. She appeared lifeless and covered in blood. Her mother's spirit was ascending to heaven like a huge bird from the corpse. The mental trauma she had as a child was clearly illustrated by this simulation of a car crash. She had a difficult childhood.



Her father considers her to be the cause of her mother's demise. "My girl," he kept saying "my poor girl my Eva... Why did she have to die? Why did it have to be her? Why didn't Alicia die instead?" (Michaelides 271) her dad would ask her. She endured psychological anguish throughout her life. After her mother passed away, Alicia's father frequently questioned her as to why she didn't die instead. Her father never treated her well. "He killed me," she said. "Dad just – killed me." (Michaelides 272) she was greatly impacted by those statements. The words did reveal her mental state; her childhood was painful. She thought that his father's comments had actually killed her. One of the reasons she killed Gabriel was that she was unable to recover from it.

"There exists in all of us a conflict between the way we would like to feel or behave and the way we believe that others would like us to. This has its origins in childhood when our personal need for gratification clashed with our parents requirements." (Dalley 26)

Michaelides illustrated how her father's words affected her psychologically. She was inconsolable. She made an effort to ignore the statements, but she was left traumatized. She had to draw down the thoughts she was having in her head on canvas in order to escape them. Painting enabled her to release the feelings she had been harbouring inside her heart for a long time. She painted it so she could express her feelings without worrying about being judged. Her father's affection was ripped away from her due to a car accident. She experienced a great deal of loneliness as a child, which contributed to the disturbing life she ultimately led. Her mental condition due to the trauma was clearly visible in her actions throughout.

Trauma is not only expressed through paintings but indeed the medical patients that participate in art therapy can relieve their emotional tension through art.

"The purpose of art therapy is to get the patients drawing and painting and, more importantly, talking about their art work, linking it to their emotional state. It's a great way to get their unconscious onto page." (Michaelides 180-81)



When Alicia was undergoing the treatment, Theo occasionally took Alicia to an art therapy session in the Grove, where she was under the doctor's care and could express her feelings through painting. For many individuals, art therapy is thought to be a stress-relieving activity. While at The Grove, Alicia paints a picture of the hospital where she was in Theo's hands, and it was unclear whether Theo was saving her from the fire or whether she had been tossed into it. Expressing one's feelings through art aids in putting into words the precise emotions experienced at the time.

Alicia was eventually able to convey her mental wellness through art. She found it simple to portray the trauma she had experienced as a child and during her marriage to Gabriel through her art. It allows her to express herself in front of people. After six years of complete silence, it was the medium she chose to express feelings towards Theo. She felt relieved after sharing her sentiments because it not only helped her to display her true mental state, it made it easier to live a stress-free lifestyle. When Alicia was writing her ideas down, she occasionally questioned whether she should write them down or not, but when she was painting, her natural inclination was to express her emotions through the art. "No-Stop. Stop-I'm not writing about that. I'm not." (Michaelides 68) While writing, she occasionally restrains herself from verbalising her emotions. She did occasionally feel hesitant to communicate her exact thoughts. Instead, because she was able to paint the same emotions with ease, she found that expressing herself through painting was extremely simple for her. Though she intended to paint the Lord Jesus, she instead painted Gabriel in the picture. For many patients, the most effective approach for expressing feelings is through art therapy. It does tend to happen that the artist's final artworks reflect her personal life experiences. It does help a painter to put her life experiences into it.

Painting was not only resort she retained; she also tries to express her emotions through confession. Writing down a diary is one form of confession, but another is confessing something to someone. Either way confession doesn't seem a good way to express her emotions out.



“Psychological Processes Underlying True and False Confessions”, convey a cognitive behavioural model which was proposed by Gudjonsson, the model argued that the likelihood of confession is best understood as a relationship between the antecedents and consequences of providing a confession. An antecedent to confession could involve social isolation due to confinement, emotional distress, and/or situational factors. (Kate 19)

As Alicia portrays it, her confession to her loved ones did not have the desired effects instead, it caused her to feel alone. She became anxious since no one could comprehend her.

Max tries to force a kiss on her; Alicia tries to confess her rage in front of him. She reassured Max that he would tell Gabriel the truth since she believed that Gabriel should be aware of how his brother is in reality. However, as she tried to confess to Max, he grabbed her arm and drew her towards him, telling her that he adored her and kissing her once again. He cautions her not to reveal anything to Gabriel when she tries to speak in front of him again. She made an attempt to express her rage to Max, but it did not help. “I felt his rough lips all over mine, and his tongue pushing its way into my mouth. Instinct took over.” (Michaelides 132) He assaulted her once more and warned her not to tell Gabriel anything. As she attempted to approach him, she experienced even more trauma. Her mental health was severely compromised. It was easy for her to let her emotions out while she was painting. While trying to confess in a diary or in person doesn't assist her at all, it makes her situation worse. She ended up suffering as a result of making her confession to Max; he abused her and severely scarred her. Confession did not serve her well.

Not only with Max it turned out to be worse but even Alicia made an effort to tell Gabriel that she was afraid of being stockpiled. She said, "The man is outside. “I said, he is outside the house.” (Michaelides 227) Gabriel tells her not to play games with him in reaction to her remark; he never once considered her worry. He chooses to take her to the doctor on his own, disregarding her feelings. Alicia was uncomfortable with it. She confessed to receiving some concern from him that he chose to visit the doctor. She tries to explain to him why he spoke those exact words, but Gabriel just shakes his head and schedules a visit with Dr. West. She was inconsolable and screamed: "You think I'm fucking crazy, but I'm not crazy! I'm not, I'm



not, I'm not!" (Michaelides 230) She tried telling Gabriel about her worries since she thought he would be able to help her, but he was unsupportive. She ultimately made a mess of herself. They became untrustworthy as a result. She becomes aware that Gabriel is not yet willing to believe what she has to say, which has a terrible psychological impact.

Hiemstra, R., a critic, has demonstrated the advantages of keeping a diary to record subjective feelings. He says that keeping a journal can improve one's capacity for self-discovery, assist in finding solutions to issues, and promote psychological healing and progress, (Rog 19-26) yet in the novel, Alicia struggles as a result. Her actions have many repercussions. It drives her to self-destruction rather than self-discovery. Instead, writing about her trauma in an effort to find a resolution instead tragically led to her being in a coma. The diary does not appear to have been beneficial for Alicia; instead, it has had adverse effects on her.

She was silent for six years after killing Gabriel. Her psychiatrist, Theo Faber, tries to encourage her to communicate. After multiple attempts, she finally speaks in front of Theo. Gabriel passed away as I was talking. She confessed it as such when he asked her about the day of the murder. She lied to Theo since he was the one who had been trying to stalk and kill her. He actually makes an effort to assist Alicia by revealing the genuine nature of her husband, but the blow of the truth is so tremendous that she decides to murder him. Theo realises that Alicia had recognised him as she had made a false confession in front of him. He quickly grabs her wrist and inserts a needle into her vein. He overdosed her, which caused her to fall into a permanent coma. She makes the mistake of confessing in front of him. She turns into a living skeleton. Theo overdosed on her in an effort to rescue himself.

She had to confront him due to her mistaken confession. Her decision to confess turned out to be incorrect rather Paintings proved to be easier for her than talking about it. It was a medium proved to be innocuous for Alicia. Theo was already painted as an antagonist in her works, "Alcestis" and "The Grove." Her paintings were safe to express the real side of Theo, but her confession left her as a forever-living skeleton.



To conclude, this research paper attempts to portray events that happened in Alicia's life and explains why, for her, expressionism through painting was a better option than confession throughout the novel. Between a diary and painting, painting always assisted in accurately capturing her irrational feelings. A painter creates paintings by feeling whatever is on his or her mind and then putting it on canvas; once it is finished, it cannot be changed. Once done, it will always be the same, but while confessing to someone or in a diary, one chooses his words carefully. Their writing may change as their emotions do. The same thing occurs to Alicia. Every stage of confession put her in trouble; instead, she used paintings to express herself.

Every argument in the paper aims to illustrate why, in Alicia's case, using expressionism was preferable to confessing. Every time she attempted to confess, whether to a diary or to a specific individual, it had severe repercussions. Her artwork was instrumental in enabling her to continue living. Through her paintings, she was able to communicate her emotions. She employed both options, but given the previous justifications, it can be concluded that for Alicia, using paintings was preferable to using confession.



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