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NAVIGATING SUBALTERN IDENTITY AND RESISTING MARGINALIZATION: A POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVE OF MUHAMMAD HANIF'S *OUR LADY OF ALICE BHATTI* (2011)

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Abstract

This paper takes into consideration Muhammad Hanif's *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti,* a postcolonial Pakistani novel, that grapples with the intricate dynamics of subaltern identity and the multifaceted marginalization of the protagonist, Alice Bhatti. Anchored in the critical concepts of postcolonialism, this search discovers how Alice is marginalized based on her gender, religion, caste, class, and profession. Gayatri Spivak's (2003) concepts of 'subaltern' and 'marginalization' have been used as a theoretical framework. By utilizing a qualitative approach such as textual analysis of the primary text, this study has deployed postcolonial concepts to highlight how the male section of the Karachi society tries to objectify and exploit Alice. The current research also studies the strategies adopted by Alice to counter marginalization and the lusty attempts made by both patient and doctor to subdue her. This investigation aims to develop a deeper understanding of how Alice suffers from multifold marginalization in a patriarchal society that always tends to push her to be a subaltern. Alice develops herself into a capable person who somehow fights against the patriarchy of society with the same magnitude in the opposite direction. In addition, this study will attempt to reimagine our assumptions of what it means to be a subaltern and marginalized in the 21st century.

Keywords: *Subaltern Identity, Marginalization, Postcolonialism, Gender, Patriarchy, Our Lady Of Alice Bhatti*

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1. Introduction

Postcolonialism is a literary theory which traces the impact of colonialism in the world and its effects on the various aspects of colonized people. Leela Gandhi defines postcolonialism as "a theoretical resistance to the mystifying amnesia of the colonial aftermath" (4). Edward Said was the first person who laid the foundation of postcolonial theory by publishing his book *Orientalism* in 1978. Said's theory of postcolonialism is mainly based on what he considers the false image of the Orient or the East that has been fabricated by Western explorers, poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists, and imperial administrators (Hamadi 2014). As Spivak asserts, "Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject constitution and object formation. The figure of the woman disappears …there is no place from where a sexed Subaltern can speak" (307). This marginalization can be multifaceted: religious, economic, class, caste, and gender at the same time. Through this marginalization, the powerful and dominant try to make silent the voices and authorities of the weaker and thus make them a subaltern: a voiceless and underprivileged section with no real space and recognition. She further avers, "In the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the Subaltern as female is even more deeply in the shadow" (287).

In South Asia and other places, even after colonization women still suffer the fate of marginalization and live as subalterns under the power, and influence of men, whose collective hegemony of power abuses, and males' oriented ideas constitute the sheet of patriarchy: a repressive institute by males for the suppression of females. Muhammad Hanif's novel "Our Lady of Alice Bhatti" depicts the life and events of a woman who faces multifaceted marginalization and is forced to become a subaltern. But Alice is a Christian nurse from a Choohra class in Karachi. She doesn't give up and tries to break the norms that confined her to stay silent and subordinate to the lusty and opportunist men of her society.

The present study is the analysis of Hanif's *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* and explores this literary piece from the perspective of the subaltern and the multifaceted marginalization that the protagonist faced. Hanif is a Pakistani novelist who is renowned for his depiction of true realities prevailing in Pakistani society.

1.1. Problem Statement

This study examines Hanif's *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* and addresses the various layers of marginalization and subaltern status of postcolonial Pakistani society experienced by Alice throughout the novel. Alice has numerous weaknesses in her character that make her a subaltern; belongs to the Christian minority in a society where Muslims are in majority. She is a young lady in a man-centric culture and does not have a strong economic

status. Moreover, she stays at a place which is of no worth, and also, she is the daughter of a sweeper. This research utilizes Spivak's framework and delves into the complex layers of postcolonial subaltern identity and marginalization. Ultimately, this study aims to highlight the plight of Alice and her struggles against patriarchal oppression.

1.2. Research Questions

1. How does Hanif's *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* portray Alice's subaltern identity and marginalization within Pakistani postcolonial patriarchal structures?
2. What strategies does Alice employ to resist patriarchal oppressions and her exploitations in daily life?

1.3. Research Significance

This study is significant because it contributes to the postcolonial discourses on marginalization and subaltern status. This project portrays the patriarchal society of postcolonial Pakistan unravels the complexities of individuals and minorities, and sheds light on the impact of oppression on marginalized communities. Alice has been displayed as a holy figure who resists the power dynamics of patriarchal structures for her survival and provides insight to support the resistance of marginalized groups. Moreover, it delves into the nuances of postcolonial concepts in the context of Pakistani literature.

2. Literature Review

Abroo Nazar in her article "Silencing of the Subaltern in Our Lady of Alice Bhatti" quoted Nayar (2008) describing the postcolonial subaltern in these words: "If the native was the subaltern in the colonial era, post-colonialism created its Subaltern, 'women,' 'lower castes, and classes, ethnic minority rapidly became the Others within the postcolonial nation-state." (98). The same goes for Alice's marginalization; she suffers manifold marginalization because of her gender, class, religion, and profession. Nazar in her article also mentioned Jones (2011) who opposes that "ethnic and racial contrasts are utilized to develop contrast and freeze certain groups in the area of mediocrity". Awan and Ahmad (2019) analyze *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* in the light of Lyotardian language games. They highlight the language of the masters and the narrative they consistently use for the submission of the slaves of the colonized. This article is a postmodern linguistic understanding of the primary text and explores a very different perspective than my study. Altaf and Shehzad (2019) in their article explore the culture of resistance against the institutions in *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* and use Gramsci's theory of resistance and suppression of the subaltern class. Siraj et.al (2021) go in a very similar direction to my

study to unveil the marginalization of women in *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*. They explore the oppressive customs of patriarchy in Pakistani society using the same theoretical approach but focusing on multiple characters. The difference between this research and my study is that I tend to combine the patriarchal, subaltern, and marginalized status of Alice as one singular entity and explore the psycho-social impact of all these oppressions on Alice's character while this research simply focuses on patriarchal oppressions of different women in the novel.

3. Research Methodology

By employing a postcolonial framework, utilizing a qualitative approach, including textual analysis and thematic analysis, this study navigates the subaltern identity and highlights the resistance of Alice in the face of brutal patriarchal Pakistani society. I have analyzed *Hanif's Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* from the perspective of Spivak (2003) by utilizing her concepts of subaltern and marginalization.

3.1. Theoretical Framework

Spivak is an influential personality in literary theory and postcolonial studies. She developed the concept of 'subaltern' and 'marginalization' through her engagement with postcolonial studies.

a) Subaltern: Spivak borrowed the term subaltern from Anthony Gramsci's Marxist theory which explains the power politics and power structures. She published her seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in 1988. According to her subaltern means those subjects who are "of inferior rank" (283). She problematizes the complexities of subaltern subjects and highlights the dynamics and risk of colonial authority.

b) Marginalization: Marginalization is a recurrent phenomenon in any society where two or more two different sets of people live, and there the powerful and resourceful try to push the weaker to the margins and exploit them. Spivak highlights in her essay how marginalized subjects are pushed to the peripheries by the dominant power structures and the voices have been hushed.

4. Textual Analysis of Our Lady of Alice Bhatti

In *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti,* he presented Pakistani society in a very realistic manner in which women are marginalized not only based on their gender but also because of their caste, religion, and social and economic status. This society cannot accept the females who are bold and want to live equally with the males, instead, they suppress them and treat them as something of less worth. Alice Bhatti the protagonist of the novel faces

multifaceted marginalization in the novel which is highlighted by the researcher in this paper.

4.1. Marginalization and Subaltern Due to Her Gender

As a woman, Alice sees other women and what is happening with them in the prevailing society. As a member of the women's circle, she passively experiences how women are used as a reward by men for solving a problem by damaging a woman's body. They are pushed to the margins where they are merely considered objects of certain phenomena like honour, duty, and ownership. This experience at the same time informs and enlightens her about her state in society as a woman and induces the thought in her that she must learn to fight these occurrences without giving up. In the hospital, no one takes her seriously as a respected member of the nursing department. All we find are men going to quench their lust by making advances on her. The patient and the doctors both try to take advantage of her without even considering her a human being. All they see is her as a device that has no value and would be dependent on them. The first instance is in the hospital with Doctor Pereira. In the opening of the novel, we see Alice Bhatti in a very vulnerable state during an interview with Dr. Pereira, which causes her to understand her genuine situation in the public eye. She is wryly treated in various manners about her name, family name, and expert capacities. In the interview, the doctor's attention catches her body parts, and we realize that he doesn't even see her as a respectable woman, and just thinks of her as an object that can be utilized only for pleasure.

"'Postnatal care?' His eyes are level with Alice Bhatti's breasts. 'Inverted nipples? How do you deal with them? Should you deal with them? Have you any personal experience to share?' Ortho Sir rolls his tongue around his gum as if there might be nipples stuck between his teeth."(9)

Alice feels especially wavered and strained in that circumstance. She expects to leave at the earliest opportunity however she needs to sit in that room. At that point, the second youngster comes near her and tries to molest her by making awkward advances toward her. Junior comes and stands near Alice, so close that his groin is for all intents and purposes in her face. The smell of sweet scent is overpowering to the point that she needs to hold her breath to prevent her from wheezing. She attempts to hold up. He nails her down with one hand and pulls out a gun from under his shirt, at that point remains there with a clear face as though he has overlooked what he intends to do. 'Suck,' he says in a soft tone, as though requesting another cut of cake, waving his gun towards his groin. (59)

Hanif reveals to us that Alice has encountered the condition of a lady who is being utilized and afterwards slaughtered by men. She likewise went along with numerous such

men throughout her life at the Borstal and the hospital. Her entire life has passed observing such incidences and meeting with such ladies who are in very vulnerable conditions and have a story to tell.

4.2. Marginalization Due to Social Status, Cast and Religion

Alice is living in a predominantly Muslim society where the hegemony of a single religion controls the dynamics practically. She lives in a colony that stinks, where people are down class, the people there are hungry pale, and lifeless. She grows up in a home without a mother. She belongs to a doubly marginalized class characterized by religion and then a low-paid sweeper. Her father is called untouchable by society for being a Choohra and a Christian. As Spivak refers to Marx in her essay by saying: "Marx's contention here is that the descriptive definition of class can be a differential one- it's cutting off and different from all other classes" (70).In a city like Karachi which is almost run by ethnic and class-oriented sensibilities, there the people like Alice's father who have no stake at all. The same goes with the post-murder scheme of her mother she was molested, raped, and then killed without any investigation attempts by the police and this all was solely because of the class and religion she belonged to.

Semantic marginalization of being called 'choorha' is an evident element in her cast and class marginalization. Choorha is a common derogatory term that is still very prevalent in common houses. People living in Indo-Pak use this term as a stigma and often ridicule people with this name. It shows how Alice is marginalized by the choice of words and the meaning that it carries. Such words automatically push one to the margins where they feel psychologically alienated from the status of the common masses. These types of words become impediments to the social journey and imagination of people who belong to this class.

4.3. Institutional and Legal Marginalization That Shows Her Subaltern

Alice like her mother faces marginalization within her profession and finds no legal support for herself. Her mother who works as a maid gets rapped and there is no legal work out on her case that she is not even considered a case. Such dehumanization happens to people of low class and minorities as Hanif shows us in his work. Alice faces the same fate differently, it happens to her in her profession when a surgeon traps her for the death of a patient which was due to his mistake. She is scapegoated for negligence which she had no part in, all she had was that she spoke against that and due to the influence of a doctor she is sent to jail. Here we see how she is shown as a subaltern suppressed by the dominant and powerful class [the doctor who symbolizes power and elite class].

Mohammed Hanif highlights in this novel that these males of society pay great respect to this profession. They call Alice 'Sister Alice' but they see her not even as a human, but instead as an object used for fulfilling desires. Thus, we find that Alice faces manifold marginalization; of caste, class, religion, and profession.

4.4. Her Strategies for Tackling Her Subaltern Status

Alice Bhatti counters the subaltern status bestowed on her by society, language, and men. Her best countering techniques are maturity, resilience, and truthfulness or sincerity. She is mature, not weaker or easily subordinated. Her difference is that she tries to combat the problems. She can cure people, the miraculous power which she got from God for saving people. She restores the baby's life which presents her as a healing woman. Muhammad Hanif makes her into a strong woman. He gives her the status of a saint.

She also had a fight with a Muslim nurse, who instead of appreciating her bravery punished her and told her that there is nothing like self-defence for females in this prevailing society. She also learned from her marital consequences that a male never wants a female as his equal. He always tries to suppress her and wants to take hold of her, and if a woman fights against such norms then, it hurts their ego, and the relationship between them turns to disaster.

She develops body language that helps her in getting out of unwanted trouble. She would not chew things in front of people and choose her words carefully. “When she walks she walks with slightly hurried steps as if she has an important but innocent appointment to keep. She avoids eye contact, she looks slightly over people‘s heads as if looking out for somebody ….”(98). Thus, through these techniques of bravery, courage, maturity, and truthful sincerity she tries to fight the subaltern status.

5.Conclusion

Alice Bhatti is a perfect example of a woman who suffers from many types of marginalization like religious, class, professional, and gender. As a female, she is always followed by men like hounds who try to reach out to her body. She is verbally and physically assaulted. In her profession, she becomes the target of the surgeon who cheats on her and sends her to jail for an act she had not committed. She is always expected to be someone who should remain voiceless, and obey the males silently. She belongs to a low class and lives in the slums of Karachi. Alice counters many attempts of subjugation by carefully arranging her life and mustering up enough courage to encounter the challengers who hit her. She responds to the doctor and tells him that she is not going to be influenced by him. She also cuts the patient's genitals when he forces her to suck him. She carefully

chooses to talk less equivocally and gives no sign of confusion to the male staff and patients in the hospital. Muhammad Hanif's novel is a good depiction of the life of a Pakistani minority working woman who has to keep herself safe from the evil eyes of males.

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