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**RESEARCH PAPER****Analysis of the themes of women, work, and poverty in *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* by Muhammad Hanif**

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**ABSTRACT**

The study focuses on the themes of women, work and poverty presented in *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* by Muhammad Hanif and to highlight how these factors define the life of the protagonist as well as the experience of women in the modern day Pakistan. Alice Bhatti a young female nurse of lower class and Christian faith presents the dilemma of women who suffer from discriminant policies, gender abuse, and poverty. In this research, the study of gender, class, work and their impact in the lives of women in a novel has been analyzed qualitatively as it explores the features of the social world that hinders their freedoms and opportunities. The findings show the problems of woman in low-wage employment as poverty and poor education are depicted as factors that affects the position of women in a patriarchal society. The study recommends to explore the character and story of Alice through the lens of intertextuality so that a new perspective of the gender issue can be traced.

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**KEYWORDS** Class Distinction, Gender Oppression, Our Lady of Alice Bhatti

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**Introduction**

The themes of gender, work and poverty have been focused in literature for socio-economic troubles of oppressed gender. These can be seen in *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* by Muhammad Hanif through the character of the protagonist, Alice Bhatti, a resilient, young nurse who struggles as a Christian female of the low minority and low background in modern Pakistan. Presenting Alice's life, the novel categorizes her problems in terms of how systemic racism, patriarchy, and economic hardship contribute to her condition and reiterates her dilemma in a patriarchal society.

The main character of the Novel is Alice Bhatti and by reading her story one can clearly see how prevalent injustice is and how one has to endure it all. Alice, a nurse, is a woman struggling in a corrupt and dysfunctional hospital, which reflects her life outside that setting too as she is mistreated because of her sex, social class, or religion. In addressing the issues of women, work and poverty, *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* presents a commentary on the society that seeks to exclude certain strata of the population from ever being a part of the elite. Because of the satire and black humor in Hanif's work, the story is told in a way that lets readers think about the oppression of women in Pakistan in a deeper level. The main features of this novel, its rhetoric of satire and irony, provoke thoughtful questions regarding women's employment as a potential source of their liberation but at the same time the never ending power of poverty.

## Literature Review

In connection to the novel *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*, Ashraf (2014) highlights how Hanif develops his protagonist, Alice Bhatti, a low-caste girl from a minority community, to depict the dynamics of power. Alice, whose presence is often considered invisible due to her social standing, uses her religious knowledge to heal her patients. Through Alice, Hanif creates a world where religious coexistence is possible. Ashraf further notes that members of marginalized communities, such as Alice, are often subjected to harassment, even by individuals from slightly higher social classes. Alice's treatment at the hands of an attendant, who uses a gun to assert his dominance, exemplifies her helplessness. However, the recitation of religious verses by Alice's father, Joseph Bhatti, reflects the tolerance and respect for all religions within the novel. Ashraf concludes that *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* represents a beacon of hope amid national, cultural, and physical insecurities. Hanif's depiction of social realities, particularly from a female perspective, has gathered attention from many critics, with his work reinforcing feminist themes. Atif (2016) argues that Hanif acknowledges the critical role of women in society, while also lamenting the fact that they are not given the respect they deserve. He points out that patriarchal society creates binary oppositions that cast women as inferior to men. In *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*, Hanif addresses the harsh realities of Pakistani society in a bold manner. He depicts the psychological struggles of women through his female characters. For instance, Alice Bhatti takes numerous precautions outside her home, including careful attention to her dress, gait, and manners. The novel reveals numerous challenges women face in both their professional and personal lives.

Maimoona Khan (2016) explores similar themes and argues that Alice Bhatti inhabits a world filled with confused ideals and ambiguous relationships. Alice suffers from low self-esteem and are depicted as outsiders, even in her own desires. Khan contends that the post-Derridean world no longer provides individuals with a sense of security (Young, 2003). Alice's life, according to Khan, represents a struggle, but she ultimately becomes a victim of Freudian melancholia. Mukherjee and Rath (2015) critically examine the representation of the female body in *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*. They argue that Alice's body serves as a battleground, subjected to severe and violent repercussions. Mukherjee and Rath explore how the female body plays a crucial role in understanding the intersection of gender and religion. She is regarded by many as the "Holy Spirit" (Hanif, p. 272), as her prayers are considered lifesaving. However, Alice's desire to transcend the limitations imposed by society, caste, and her physical body is cut short by her untimely death. Her death symbolizes the ultimate fate of marginalized individuals who struggle under the weight of caste, religion, and gendered expectations. Nazar (2016) explores the silencing of subaltern women in *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*, focusing on the character of Alice Bhatti. Nazar argues that women in postcolonial societies are systematically disempowered. Drawing on Gayatri Spivak's theory of the subaltern, which emphasizes the marginalization, oppression, and silencing of certain groups, Nazar highlights how Hanif portrays Alice's marginalization on the basis of her caste, gender, and religion. Despite her resilience, Alice is repeatedly humiliated, exploited, and mistreated.

## Methodology

The method followed in this research is qualitative and descriptive and is aimed at describing the text of the novel. This paper focuses on the critical evaluation of the novel *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* in connection to the themes of women, work and poverty and their implications for the society in Pakistan. The primary source of the study is the novel while the secondary sources are articles, chapters or critiques from books that may include the

novel or issues relevant to Pakistan socio cultural setting. The analysis is thematic since the textual data is divided into themes including gender oppression, economic marginalization, job discrimination. Thematic analysis is used to analyze how these themes are constructed in the novel and how they contribute to the broader critique of sociopolitical structures in Pakistan.

## Results and Discussion

The main focus of the analysis is money, work and poverty in the context of Muhammad Hanif's *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*. These themes are crucial to the study of socio-economic issues affecting the disadvantaged groups especially women in Pakistan. The researchers have presented the social and economic realities of Pakistan where the protagonist Alice Bhatti struggles to survive and thrive despite the odds set against her by the exploitative system. This paper focuses on how the novel portrays the fight for economic existence, the use of labor force, and the general experience of poverty that is evident in a society where individuals live in the lowest level in the society.

### Economic Survival and Money as the Core Preoccupation

In *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*, the issues of economic survival are present as the motives behind the actions of several characters, particularly Alice. The lack of money and the concern about the lack of funds, are two major themes in her life. Hanif portrays this desperation at the initial parts of the novel when Alice is searching a job at the Sacred Heart Hospital. According to the novel, she just needs the job to survive. This shows that economic necessity and not individualist drive determines Alice's actions. This is because Hanif uses money in the novel to represent the real-life challenges people in the poverty bracket go through. The concept of money, or the lack thereof, is a recurring motif in the novel, this is money that is unavailable to those such as Alice, who is not only of low class, but also of the different religion. The economic vulnerability that constitutes Alice's existence reflects the structural discrimination in Pakistani society where the prospects of social mobility are scarce.

### Exploitation and Devaluation of Work

Work in the novel is linked with the oppression that people such as Alice has to go through to survive. Although Alice deserves better pay given the fact that she is professional and an active worker, her labor is always downplayed. By using the place of Sacred Heart Hospital, Hanif shows his audience that working class people are exploited in the society. The institution that is meant to improve the quality of the poor's lives ends up turning the hospital into a place that continues to neglect the poor. The fact is that Alice is a domestic worker, whose work is considered worthless due to her low social status.

However, Hanif also questions the attitude of people in society that the work of the less privileged communities especially women is worthless. A nurse's job is a stressful one, both physically and mentally, and all of Alice's efforts are not seen as valuable by the authorities. Low wages and no employment security are unconstructive for her and show the women's exploitation in the workforce particularly those belonging to the religious minority. This exploitation is further worsened by the fact that Alice has no other option other than to endure these conditions since the other options available are even worst when it comes to issues of economic challenge.

### Poverty and Social Exclusion

*Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* presents poverty as a pervasive force defining the lives of all the characters who are depicted as living in underprivileged conditions. Hanif describes poverty as not only the absence of money but also social isolation. Alice's poverty becomes part of her Christianity and womanhood, which exposes her to economic oppression and socially injustices. The novel paints her as a woman who however struggles hard but is powerless to the whims of a society that was fashioned in such a way that people in her category will always be confined to the fringes. The novel also shows how the lack of money leads to despair and lack of opportunities. Joseph Bhatti, Alice's father in this portrayal, is poor and works as a janitor who is also an exorcist. His multiple low paying jobs are an indication of how far the poor have to stretch in order to survive. Hanif portrays the impossibility of such attempts in the case of Joseph Bhatti. In such representations, Hanif unfavourably comments on how poverty is not only the consequence of personal inadequacies but also is sustained by corrupt practices. The main idea of the novel is that the hierarchy of power is specifically built to enslave the poor and keep them as beneficiaries of the system that is beneficial only to the rich.

### Conclusion

Analyzing *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*, it is possible to understand how Muhammad Hanif employs the concepts of money, work, and poverty to comment on the social and economic issues of the suffering communities in Pakistan. Alice's endeavor of earning a livelihood, exploitation at the workplace, living in poverty and continued poverty in the novel can be seen as the exploration of the structural violence that characterizes Pakistani society. With the help of satirical and ironic techniques, Hanif describes the existence of the poor, who are deprived of work and a decent life, and shows the corruption that dominates the society. Thus, *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* transcends the simple narrative of an individual's triumph over adversity and turns into a protest against social injustice.

### Recommendations

The study recommends to explore the character and story of Alice in the selected novel through the theoretical perspectives of intertextuality so that the issues of the gender relations can be traced.

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