



RESEARCH PAPER

Margins, Ruptures, Lacunae: Minority Identity Development in Joseph Bhatti and Alice Bhatti in Muhammad Hanif's *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*

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ABSTRACT

The paper studies Muhammad Hanif's (1964-) second novel *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* (2012) from a minority identity development perspective. In this regard, the identity development of Alice Bhatti and her father Joseph Bhatti has been compared by bringing into discussion the nature of their ruptures and lacunae as minority individuals. For this purpose, the minority identity development model of Atkinson, Morten and Sue (1998) has been employed as a theoretical framework. The choices of both the characters as intergenerational minority characters are analyzed to throw light on the dis/integration process of minority individuals belonging to a religion different from the majority's. Alice is at the resolution stage when she chooses to marry a Muslim man, in search of a stable core. However, she is ensnared by her bad fortune. On the other hand, it is her father Joseph Bhatti, who becomes a representative of resilience as he does not get tired of seeking justice for her. He achieves the level of integrative awareness, the last stage of the minority identity model by appealing to the Vatican. The study also recommends future research on the novel as a critique of the contemporary political situation of the world through making a comparison of the national centre-periphery and global centre-periphery representations by focusing on the need to uphold the rights of minorities anywhere in the world.

KEYWORDS Identity, Intergenerational, Lacuna, Margins, Minority, Pakistan, Religion, Ruptures

Introduction

Our Lady of Alice Bhatti (2011), a novel written by Muhammad Hanif, delineates the predicament of Pakistani Christians. As a minority religious group, the ethnic identity of the characters of the novel impacts their self-esteem. Other than being a minority religious community, self-esteem is also dependent on one's occupation and economic status in a society. The protagonist of the novel, Alice Bhatti, is a junior nurse working at Sacred Heart Hospital in Karachi. She is the daughter of Joseph Bhatti who cleans up sewers. Therefore, he is labelled as Choohra based on his profession. In this way, Mohammed Hanif highlights the class segregation that exists in Pakistan, particularly with reference to the minorities that are Christian in religion. Therefore, the maltreatment that has been presented in the novel can be called ethnic maltreatment. The maltreatment results in low-self-esteem which, in turn, shapes their notion of identity. Studies have shown that positive group identity is related to higher self-esteem (Brown, 2000; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) particularly in case of ethnic identity (Phinney, 1990).

While many studies have solely focused on the minority identity of Alice Bhatti as the protagonist of the novel, this study compares the character of Alice Bhatti with her father Joseph Bhatti by tracing the multiple facets of their identity development. For this purpose, the minority identity model proposed by Atkinson et al. (1998) has been employed as a theoretical framework. Atkinson et al. (1998) proposed a five stages racial and cultural identity model which served as a primary model for all racial identity theories. The five stages include conformity, dissonance, resistance and immersion, introspection and awareness. For this study, Atkinson et al.'s model has been adapted to study the minority identity development of the characters Joseph Bhatti and Alice Bhatti, both of which, I contend, are the protagonists of the novel. How Joseph and Alice understand and imbibe their minority culture and are able to define their identities in the backdrop of the dominant majority and its culture is problematized in this study.

Literature Review

The novel has been critiqued mostly from Alice Bhatti's perspective while some studies also discuss the novel from Christian minorities perspective. Alice Bhatti's victimization has been discussed from multiple perspectives including Marxist viewpoint, sexual crimes, patriarchal dominance and postcolonial minorities. The following paragraphs sum up the existing research on the novel.

Feminist Criticism

Alice Bhatti is subjugated by the dominant norms and despite her efforts to confront them, she is eventually killed brutally (Mirza, 2014). It is her minority background that subjugates her in postcolonial Pakistan (Ahmad & Nasir, 2022). Exclusion and displacement as a minority woman is a common phenomenon and Alice also faces the same predicament. It is the patriarchal system that paves way for oppressive practices for women in Pakistan, curtailing their access to multiple roles that may render freedom to them (Afzaal et al., 2021). Nazar (2016), however, studies the novel from the perspective of stagnating stereotypical portrayal of women in Pakistani literature. They are mostly depicted victimized by socio-cultural and religious norms of the society. This sort of representation further silences Pakistani women.

Marxist Criticism

The novel also highlights capitalistic exploitation of the minorities, however, Alice resists poverty and patriarchy both in a capitalist society but is ultimately vanquished by the powerful system (Altaf & Shahzad, 2019). Another study compares Marxist aspects as presented by Hanif's *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* and Roy's *God of Small Things* (Asghar et al., 2020). Both the novels depict the lower class struggling against the upper class. Similarly, in the Pakistani and Indian societies, women are equally marginalized by the dominant patriarchal structures. Nazakat et al. (2018) also critiques the novel from a Marxist point of view. They find it a class struggle between the proletariat and the capitalists. They also attribute religious and gender discrimination to economic inequalities. Such differences are created by the capitalist elite to continue ruling over the lower classes. Similarly, Ahmad (2019) considers hegemonic tactics a cause of socioeconomic segregation which is depicted through the case of Alice Bhatti in the novel.

Intersectional Criticism

The intersectionality of patriarchal norms and class system results in triple marginalization of women (Siraj et al., 2021). Employing Spivak's argument, Siraj et al.

(2021) find women in Pakistan better than the West but still devoid of fundamental empowerment. The sexual assault itself has socio-cultural and political connotations (Paul & Rai, 2018). The spiritual aspect highlights similarities between Islam and Christianity. However, the spiritual spark could not save Alice from the sexual assault, conveying that a woman's body is her weakness (Paul & Rai, 2018).

While there are critiques on the novel from multifarious perspectives, no study compares the main characters from the minority identity development perspective. This determines thematic gap in the research on the novel and the study is an attempt to bridge that gap.

Material and Methods

Atkinson et al. (1998) proposed a five stages racial and cultural identity model which served as a primary model for all racial identity theories. For this study Atkinson et al.'s model has been adapted to study the minority identity development of Joseph Bhatti and Alice Bhatti.

The model conceptualizes the basic progressions an individual goes through when defining his or her racial identity. The model was presented first in 1979, then its versions appeared in 1989, 1993 and 1998. This model became a forerunner of all upcoming identity models. Mentioned below are the five stages of the model:

Conformity: At this stage, the individual identifies with the majority culture by developing awareness of the majority culture and has little inkling to explore one's own culture and background.

Dissonance: This stage takes place with an encounter with the dominant culture, and it stirs something inside which leads to a wish to explore one's roots and culture as an ethnic group with uniqueness.

Resistance and Immersion: This stage develops a sense of resistance in the individual and as a result the individual starts moving away from the dominant culture, getting closer to one's ethnic culture and traditions. In this way, one tries to define one's identity by imbibing one's originality and roots.

Introspection: At this stage, the individual once again interacts with the dominant culture but with a redefined identity i.e., one's original identity. However, one is not overawed by the dominant culture and would like to survive along them rather than by being them.

Synergistic Articulation and Awareness: This is a resolute stage of minority identity development wherein the individual fares well both with one's culture and the dominant culture.

Although most of the studies employ this method for immigrant minorities, for this study, I have adapted the model for Christian minorities who are not immigrants to Pakistan but have been residing on the land since long. However, it is the minority status that results in identity crisis creating ruptures and lacunae because of marginality which are worth exploring. Through the help of this model the psychological development of the characters is traced in the process of individuation in the face of a majority that marginalizes the minority. How Joseph and Alice understand and imbibe their minority culture and are able to define their identities in the backdrop of the dominant majority and its culture is problematized. Thus, the study unearths how both the characters navigate

their sense of self by imbibing their religious, ethnic and racial traits in the wake of discriminatory social attitudes that impact their identity.

Results and Discussion

This study employs the minority identity model proposed by Atkinson et al. (1998) to study the minority identity development of the characters Joseph Bhatti and Alice Bhatti. The model conceptualizes the basic progression an individual goes through when defining his/her racial identity through five stages i.e. conformity, dissonance, resistance and immersion, introspection and awareness. Both Joseph and Alice belong to different generations and genders, therefore, their identity development as shown in the novel takes different avenues. It is noteworthy that these stages are not linear, however, are discussed one by one:

Conformity

At the conformity stage, the individual identifies with the majority culture by developing awareness of the majority culture and has little inkling to explore one's own culture and background. As Joseph Bhatti's ancestors were forced to do cleaning for a lifetime, the ability to work for drains has become an instinct with him. He is used to work the way his ancestors used to do instinctually. Therefore, questioning the nature of his job does not even occur to him. We find him at the conformity stage at the beginning. He is a conformist because he has imbibed his forefathers' culture of being a Choohra in the society he and his forefathers had been residing since long. Joseph Bhatti is the son of the soil or as he says he is the soil, but he still is discriminated against in the land that he has been purifying for a long time. However, he, unlike Alice Bhatti, does not have any subversive tremors inside him and conforms to whatever treatment he gets in his land.

Mohammad Hanif also highlights the issue that Choohras converted to Christianity whether Protestant or Catholic not because they considered Christ as the savior but because they hoped that the conversion would make them get rid of the untouchable cast that they were labeled with (Bilal, 2022). However, in the case of Joseph Bhatti, he not only combines aspects of Protestantism and Catholicism but also domesticates some elements of Islam too because he had been living in this society for long. "Reverend Philip suspects him of being a closet Musla. What kind of Catholic goes around curing stomach ailments by reciting verses from the Quran and lighting candles? (Hanif, 2011, p.28)." This religious acceptance shows accommodation on his part but not due to any fear of the majority, rather as a choice for survival.

The conformity of Joseph Bhatti is evident from the fact that he does not feel any shame in admitting that he is a Choohra as he says, "yes I am Joseph Bhatti Choohra (p.51)". While the word *Masih* when associated with other Christians' names may render some respect, Joseph Bhatti never tried to add this word to his name because he is satisfied with his lot. This is primarily because he considers himself part of the land and takes pride in his job. However, it does not mean that the marginality has not created any ruptures in him. As he is a retired old man, he has developed an acceptance which we do not see in Alice Bhatti.

Alice, on the other hand, belongs to the new generation that has more awareness and exposure. Therefore, conformity is not part of her personality. Even Noor, while helping her, knows that she is a kind of a person "...who'll return a favour by saying 'fuck you too.' He also knows that her fatal flaw is not her family background, but her total inability to say simple things like 'excuse me' and 'thank you' (p.15)." However, Alice faces

too much to become a victim of ruptures and lacunae. First of all, she has been brought up in extreme poverty as Hanif sketches, "In these households, even empty stomachs gurgle Yassoo be praised. (p.53)." Secondly, she is never at home with her identification as a daughter of a Choorah. Even at Borstal jail, when someone asks her what her father does, she says that he works in the Municipal Corporation. Revealing his Choorah identity would be too much for her. This somehow impacts her relationship with her father too. Even when her father expects her to look back at him in the court, with an expression of gratitude that he managed a lawyer for her, she does not do any such thing. Alice bears the burden of being the daughter of a Choohra which instills a frustration that may not let her stay at peace all the time.

Unlike Joseph, Alice is not at ease with her background, which also instills fears in her. This is highlighted in the very beginning of the novel when she is introduced to the readers in her job interview. She is sitting on the edge of her chair, and she is feeling giddy with a fear looming large at the back of her mind. She feels as if she would fall off the seat and end up sprawled on the ground which would bring a lot of disrespect to her. Therefore, in an unconscious reflex, she tries to secure her position by moving back in the chair and the squeaky sound which it produces again further enhances her fear. She is also nervous to the extent that she puts the file, which contains nothing but her job application, in her lap and then clasps it against her chest. Her unease is a total contrast to the character of Joseph Bhatti who is at peace with the nature of his work.

Dissonance

The dissonance stage takes place with an encounter with the dominant culture, and it stirs something inside which leads to a wish to explore one's roots and culture as an ethnic group with uniqueness. Overall, it refers to a hurt that makes one look back to one's sense of belonging. Joseph Bhatti's dissonance is shown through his interaction with the fellow Christians who have earned better status in the society. It is Dr. Pereira who helps him get rid of opium, but he is insistent because: "If I am going to be called a bhangi all my life, I might as well have some bhang (p. 30)." He tried to pay back Dr. Pereira for his favour for Alice Bhatti by working at his place, a very courteous gesture on his end, but had to face discrimination in return:

And they fed me in their Choohra dishes and then washed their hands as if I was spreading leprosy. They hovered around me at a distance thinking that if I touched something it would get contaminated. I'd rather clean up sewers. When I walk the streets, the streets belong to me. Have you noticed that when I walk the streets with my bamboo, they cross over to avoid my shadow? What are they scared of? Getting contaminated by their own refuse?" (p.30)

Hanif highlights a very important aspect that if Muslims had segregated dishes that might be based on religious discrimination; but if Christians segregate dishes from their fellow Christians, that is on the basis of class. His dishes are separated because he cleans gutters but that implies that he carries gutter filth with him all the time. This feeling of aversion as if he is spreading leprosy at the hands of his fellow Christians doubly hurts his self-respect because they should rather build a stronger community in face of the majority. Therefore, he rants against Dr. Pereira:

Look at him lecturing us; we are the children of this land, we have lived here for thousands of years and they are just Goan kachra that drifted here on the waves of the Arabian Sea. Now they'll teach us how to be Yassoo's children when they are embarrassed by the fact that we are supposed to be brothers in faith. They'll teach us good manners.

What are they? Our nannies? You know what they think? They think we are shit-cleaners. Yes, we are shit-cleaners, but what are they? Shit. (p.30)

Joseph Bhatti is upset with the fact that even fellow Christians call them Choohra while he has a history like the land he lives in. May be religion, in their case, is not a good source of unity. If people like Dr. Pereira consider him impure, they naturally invite retaliation through such acts. While Joseph Bhatti is not an aggressor, he can ease himself by sharing his heart with his daughter when she is back from jail and calls people like Pereira "Goan kachra" i.e., filth because they migrated to the place while Joseph Bhatti's ancestors stayed there forever. So, Joseph Bhatti utters questions about their fear of contamination by their own shit, "What are they scared of? Getting contaminated by their own refuse (p.30)?"

While Joseph is obsessed with the discrimination he faces at the hands of fellow Christians, Alice is lost in the flashbacks from the fourteen months spent in the Borstal jail. The fourteen months and its preceding episodes unleashed dissonance in her. She disagrees with her father because Dr. Pereira had helped her for bail. She also did not have much interest in the class discrimination her father was obsessed with. When her father upheld Choohras' ancestry in a dejected manner,

Choohras were here before everything. Choohras were here before the Sacred was built, before Yassoo was resurrected, before Muslas came on their horses, even before Hindus decided they were too exalted to clean up their own shit. And when all of this is finished, Choohras will still be here. (p.31)

She totally disagreed about any chances of exaltation in the status of Choohras; however, she remains silent because that was an art she learnt at the jail: "Yes, when everything is finished, Choohras will still be here. And cockroaches too (p.31)." The animal imagery is used by Hanif to depict how loathsome she feels when she is maltreated. She has a dislike for all those who were there in the interview panel at the Sacred Heart Hospital because of their lack of professionalism irrespective of the fact whether they were Muslims or Christians.

Resistance and Immersion

The resistance and immersion stage develops a sense of resistance in the individual, as a result of which, the individual starts moving away from the dominant culture getting closer to one's ethnic culture and traditions. In this way one tries to define one's identity by imbibing one's originality and roots. For this paper, this stage is studied from the perspective of standing by one's community and taking practical steps to resist exploitation.

Joseph Bhatti may not have any resistant streaks within him for the challenges he faced throughout his life but part of him is a father who loves his daughter. Therefore, it is for his daughter that he must leave no stone unturned when she is imprisoned. He must find a lawyer for the bail of his daughter. When he approaches the lawyer, S.M. Qadri, who "is sitting in his chair contemplating a full glass of milk. 'Stomach ulcers?' (p.27)," he sees an opportunity. As Joseph Bhatti needs the lawyer, he decides to cure his stomach ulcer. He lines up a candle, matchbox and glass tumbler on the table as if he is going to perform some magic on the lawyer. When Qadri asks him if it would hurt, he makes a deal:

“Not if you get my daughter Alice Bhatti out on bail. She is appearing in Session Court Four this afternoon. Cooked-up charges of assaulting and causing grievous bodily harm. Try and stay still, it might tickle a bit.” (p.27)

This confidence to make a deal is for the sake of his daughter. He lights a candle and places it on the lawyers’ table. Then he counts to ten, extinguishes the candle and places a glass jar on it. With his eyes shut, he recites Surah al-Asr which is a verse from the Quran. The lawyer is highly surprised when he finds him reciting verses from the Quran and wonders if it was even legal for a Choohra or a Christian to do so. However, Joseph wins him to be a lawyer for his daughter’s case although they lose the case. In this episode, he is shown to be resilient which he would be for any matter where his daughter is involved.

Although Joseph Bhatti is not shown to be a confronting character, he has an opinion which the novelist aptly manifests. For example, when he notices a calendar with a picture of a camel in a desert, he is critical of that because according to his knowledge there is not “a single camel in the Musla book, and yet they can’t seem to get them out of their minds (p.27).” In the succeeding lines Hanif shows his aversion towards Muslims and their God.

Alice is a pack of resistance through and through. She confronts a group of Muslim girls at the nursing school as they attack her, and she retaliates to her best which shows her resistance. At the same stage her father, who is not as hot-blooded as Alice, still shows resistance or defiance in the way that he is all the time protecting his daughter. His resistance is obvious when Alice is sent to jail through the machinations of the doctor that he puts allegations on. This is another stage of resistance by Alice but more than resistance, it is a stage where she is more vocal about honesty that the doctor's negligence led to the killing of the patient. Also, when she appears in front of the court, she has an aura of resistance:

The court clerk announces the State vs Alice Bhatti: Alice Bhatti hazir ho. Alice walks into the dock with her head held high, handcuffs clinking, staring purposefully at the judge as if saying: you? (p. 29)

When her father wishes her to look at him in gratitude, she instead looks back at the judge and spits. In short, Alice has an aura full of resistance for everyone who confronts her or tries to exploit her. However, this does not determine that Joseph Bhatti is a weak person. After all, Alice Bhatti is his reflection:

When Joseph Bhatti sees Alice at her bail hearing in the session court, he sees something of himself in her. Alice Bhatti carries her handcuffs lightly, as if she is wearing glass bangles. She treats the policewomen as if they were her personal bodyguards, and she looks at the judge as if to say, how can a man so fat, so ugly, wearing such a dandruff-covered black robe sit in judgement on her? (p. 28).

Not only does he see resemblance in his daughter but also, he is proud of her, “There, Joseph Bhatti tells himself with a certain pride. That’s my daughter (p.29).” This reflects that Joseph in his youth must be less poised as he is seen in his old age.

Alice’s resistance is also manifested when she confronts sexual gazes and attacks. Overall, she is a spirit of resistance but the difference between her and Joseph is that of age, generation and expression; Alice is vociferous, Joseph acquiescent.

Introspection

At introspection stage, the individual once again interacts with the dominant culture but with redefined identity i.e., one's original identity. However, one is not overawed by the dominant culture and would like to survive along them rather than by being them.

Alice, after her job at Sacred Heart Hospital, falls in love with Teddy Butt. She is no longer overawed by the dominant majority's representative Teddy and accepts his love with her original identity. They hold hands, whisper to each other, smile as if they have left all pain behind them. It is Noor, however, who can see that she is blind in love, when they walk out of the hospital hand in hand.

To have eyesight is to be blessed. Pretending to be blind when you have a perfect pair of eyes seems to him grotesque blasphemy. And to derive some kind of sexual pleasure from it is downright perverse. Noor wishes there was a government department where he could report this offence. Surely if there are laws against non-believers pretending to be Muslims, there should be a law against people with perfect eyes pretending to be blind. (p. 45)

Noor's observation predicts something ominous about this union as Alice has consciously married a man with the gun, which of course won't be without repercussions. However, she always dreamed of a home and took a bold decision, this time without fears: "By studying seven books in four years and marrying a semi-employed Musla, she is hoping to rise above the stench that is her daily bread (p.52)." That is what Dalhousie, the tailor of the French colony observes: "...a trainee nurse coming out of the household of Choohra Joseph Bhatti, whom even other Choohras consider untouchable, is a sign that the next generation is ready to move on (p.52)."

Alice goes through the introspection stage when she comes across Teddy Butt and falls in love with him oblivious of any consequences. She takes the leap of faith that she can change her fate, which is an important step towards her sense of identity. Joseph, on the other hand, never messed with the majority. This is evident when his wife is raped and killed but he manages to hide it and does not confront the rapist killer. However, in the case of his daughter, he fights through and through.

Synergistic Articulation and Awareness

Articulation and awareness is a resolute stage in minority identity development wherein the individual fares well both with one's culture and the dominant culture. Joseph Bhatti is already at peace with his occupation in a Muslim majority society, and even Alice's marriage with a Musla. Joseph has a synergistic awareness that Muslims are not better than them which is evident when he asks Alice to bring her husband to his house:

"You should have brought him with you," says Joseph Bhatti. "I know that whoever he is, he is not a Choohra. I hear he is a Butt. Probably fair-skinned, traces his ancestry to Central Asia via Kashmir. But just because they became Muslas doesn't mean that they are any better than us." (p.67)

Alice, however, achieves synergy by her final decision of getting married to Teddy Butt. She believes that she can marry a Muslim and retain her religious identity simultaneously. That is why Teddy's apartment is named Al-Aman by the novelist. However, this does not materialize as she is totally unaware of a fate that she is going to

be a victim of. The religious freedom after marriage is not really at work as reflected by Teddy's exploration of the poster of the Christ:

In the lower drawer he found a rolled-up poster. He took it out and unfolded it. It was a picture of Jesus Christ. He felt sudden panic, as if somebody had been hiding a stash of heroin in his apartment without his knowledge. (p. 104)

However, Alice's ill fate is based less on her religious identity and more on phallogocentric suspicion. Therefore, before seeing any fulfillment in his future life with Teddy, Alice becomes a victim of acid.

The novel, however, ends with Joseph Bhatti's letter to the Vatican seeking justice for his daughter. He is still resilient even after losing his wife and daughter, a lonely old man, a Christian Choorha, still with a lot of courage. His letter to the Vatican also reflects his peace with his religion, where he seeks resort for himself and his daughter who is described like Virgin Mary.

Conclusion

This study explored the minority identity development of the characters Joseph Bhatti and Alice Bhatti. While Joseph Bhatti conforms to his Choorha status in spite of ruptures, Alice grows up with lacunae because of the same status. She also grows up as a woman who has seen her mother dead at the age of twelve, raped and killed by a majority representative. In this way, her world view is dependent on her generation gap from Joseph Bhatti as well as her gender as a woman. The study concludes that both Alice and her father go through stages of identity development as described by Atkinson et al. (1998) in different manners. Joseph is an old man more inclined to conformity as well as patience and contentment. However, that does not mean that he could not show resistance. While he did not show resistance for himself, he is a father too and it was for his daughter that he became resilient. He had always been on the pursuit to protect her through managing lawyers, filing cases and writing a letter to the Vatican. Secondly, he is shown to be an old man in the novel and Alice has a young boiling blood. Also, he has the privilege to be a man in a patriarchal society, less harmed by men and Alice is a woman in a male-dominated society where even the women of the majority also face victimization. Therefore, Alice embraces death while confronting victimization and Joseph remains resilient in search of justice. The study concludes that both of them go through stages of conformity, dissonance, resistance, introspection and articulation although the boundaries of these stages blur and overlap in some instances in the novel.

The study also recommends future research on the novel as a critique of the contemporary political situation of the world through making a comparison of the national centre-periphery and global centre-periphery representations by focusing on the need to uphold the rights of minorities anywhere in the world. The study recommends studying the minority-majority dichotomy from a glocal perspective especially in globalization based international minority-majority anxieties based on race, religion and immigrant experience

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