

# NARRATIVE INEQUALITY AS A CRITIQUE OF SOCIAL INJUSTICE IN *OUR LADY OF ALICE* **BHATTI: A MARXIST ANALYSIS**

<sup>1</sup>Sidra Fardous, <sup>2</sup>Prof. Dr. Muhammad Shahbaz Arif,  
<sup>3</sup>Mazhar Hayat, <sup>4</sup>Saira Akhtar

## **Abstract**

The proposed study explores narrative inequality and social injustice in M. Hanif's *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* in Marxist perspective. Mohammed Hanif has successfully incorporated the sorry state of low-caste Christians in a highly corrupt locale, where these miserable people are even considered inferior to 'cockroaches'. This disjointed narrative presents poor and exploited people of 'French Colony' in comparison to the institutionalized bureaucracy of 'Sacred Heart Hospital' in Karachi. Social incoherence and class oppression on the expense of down-trodden creatures of French Colony actually maintain the mainstream of the novel in the form of incoherent structure of the narrative. All the major characters suffer at the hand of minor characters which are representative of hegemonic capitalism. The parasitic nature of high-ups of the society actually deforms the social fabric while the others have to suffer for their material or personal gains. This inequality in social set up finds a way to narrative inequality through naturalistic social perception of the novelist. The objective of the research is to highlight all those malfunctioning social factors which directly result in disruption of the narrative structure finding their way through the insightful expression of the writer. Theoretical framework of this research is based on key concepts of Karl Marx and his theory of Marxism. The so-called natural and unjustified finale of the narrative leads the researcher to this conclusion that our social structure is in a dire need of its reconstruction for the development of a healthy society.

**Keywords:** Class oppression, hegemonic Capitalism, Marxism, Narrative inequality.

## **Introduction**

*Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* is a fantastic description of class disparity in Pakistani society. The most evident description of class inequality is about the strenuous struggle of the protagonist of the novel, Alice, fighting against the hegemonic class in the society. Alice is the representative of lower-class. The narrative is a mess up of all the odd situations and events which the protagonist and the people close to her face in their life. Alice possesses an indomitable courage to face all hardships. All the social rules, imposed in the interest of ruling class,

---

<sup>1</sup> Department of English, Government College University, Faisalabad, Pakistan

<sup>2</sup> Professor, Department of English, Government College University, Faisalabad, Pakistan

<sup>3</sup> Assistant Professor of English, Government Postgraduate College, Samanabad, Faisalabad, Pakistan

<sup>4</sup> Lecturer in English, Government College University, Faisalabad, Pakistan

form class oppression while defiance to this oppression forms the key events of this particular novel. Hanif portrays these events in a very naturalistic way in *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*. From these events our social structure is quite evident which is the basis of Marxist theory. Karl Marx is the founder of this theory. Most of Marx's theoretical works are related to social set up, hegemonic capitalism, class disparity, political influence and social structure. Marx emphasized that present social set up must be developed into a classless structure. All these ideas are the key concepts of Marxist theory.

Our social structure mainly consists of two classes: the bourgeoisie and the proletariats. Both the classes depend on one another in their social concerns. At the same time both classes are antagonistic to each other due to the social exploitation of working class at the hands of capitalistic class. This inequality of social structure disrupts the social coherence which eventually leads to social disturbance.

Hanif has described the story of his novel with the same unruly tone, in a disjointed structure. As the novel is the true depiction of society on the basis of its exploitation, that is why it is accumulated in the form of disjointed and incoherent plot structure. This structure helps in expressing the mental state of author on observing pathetic condition of lower-class mass in a highly corrupt and capitalistic society.

#### **Literature Review**

Many acclaimed researchers and authors have inked their views and criticism on this novel. This section deals with the views and criticism which have been made upon the novel *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*. All those angles will be closely observed in which the critics have already seen this novel.

Hanif's novel, on its own terms, is a Chekhovian study in withheld judgment. Recent history has made it a scorching indictment of a society's moral collapse. Row (2012), in his review "Caste in Doubt" wrote that *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* is a political narrative, in fact her (Alice's) longing of human dignity is also political, but this is never an anthropological discourse about the survival tactics used by Christians in principally Islamic locale.

Hanif approaches even touchy subjects with an irreverence that makes them palatable. Brady (2012) reviewed in *The Boston Globe* about *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* that it's a narrative, fearless to investigate the

inconsistencies of today's Pakistan with a cynical ironic bent. Hanif employs a humorous attitude throughout the book which may appear inappropriate with the miserable reality of life in a misogynistic society for women like the protagonist. At the same time it is never declining.

Robin Yassin-Kassab (2011), in his review about *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*, "A Sparkling, Witty Tale Reflects the Sad State of Pakistan", said that Pakistan's brightest English-language voice has chosen to view his country through the eyes of a (lapsed) Christian – the eponymous Alice Bhatti. He also said that *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* is a book like life, a comedy for those who think a tragedy for those who feel.

Moreover, this love story is the story of caste and the religion, the novel's greatest obsession is the cruelty and rough treatment of women and their miserable lives in Pakistan. In Pakistani society men are treacherous but still they enjoy greater importance. In her review "A Young Nurse Battles with Adversity in a Corrupt Karachi Hospital in Mohammed Hanif's Portrait of a Nation in Bedlam", Albinia (2011) has said that this narrative is full of bitter extracts that vote novelist's own resentment. Hanif sketches a sympathetic and miserable picture of a nation in chaos in this daring, adamant narrative.

Hanif has a masterly way with words and phrases that lend urgency and emotion to the hyper-chaotic world that Alice inhabits. In *Indian Express*, Bobb (2011), in his review "Alice in Karachi" opined that the principal subject matter, however, is very much convincing, how the past get closer to the future and no way out. Hanif presents us a narrative that is a very accurate divider between wisdom and insanity, brutality and religion, love and desire, death and life.

Inequality of narrative structure and social structure regarding *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* had not been discussed earlier, so we are going to analyse text keeping in mind inequality among people in Pakistani society through Marx' ideology with the help of following research questions.

### **Research Questions**

This research intends to explore the following questions:

1. How does the narrative and social structure inequality tend to present a spokesman of under-class against capitalist system in Pakistani society?

2. How does narrative structural incoherence lead the reader to naturalistic social depression and tend him to derive his own conclusion?

### ***Research Methodology***

To find out the answers of the above-mentioned research questions the qualitative research is used which is interpretive and descriptive in its spirit. It delves deep into exploratory study of the class disparity to comprehend the social injustice through the intentional actions of characters. These actions form the said unequal structure of the novel, *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*. It also observes how the characters are created, metamorphosed and transformed into the social situations for the augmentation of a deeper comprehension of the quotations of the social phenomena in its particular anthropological context. The philosophical assumptions underlying this research come from the interpretive tradition. This implies a subjective epistemology and the ontological belief that reality is socially constructed.

Data analysis involves the close analysis of the novel from the lense of Marxism. Key concepts of Karl Marx: class disparity, social injustice, hegemonic capitalism and exploitation have been employed for this study. From a hermeneutic perspective, the researchers are constructing a reality with their interpretations of *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* by Mohammed Hanif provided by the subject of research. Keeping in view the background of this reality and application of said theory (Marxism) the researchers reach to the above-mentioned conclusion or findings.

### ***Analysis and Interpretation***

The researchers are concerned to have an analysis of Hanif's *Our lady of Alice Bhatti* on these grounds: Narrative Inequality, Class Oppression and Hegemonic Capitalism. Characters and situations have been studied under microscopic view of Marxism. Textual references prove the validity of existing social disorder which leads to social injustice.

### ***Narrative Structure***

The novel is an unruly narrative somehow amusing, a romantic and enchanting account, and a bitter representation of Pakistan's biggest city, Karachi. Basic intelligence resides in writer's insightful consideration that what make the underprivileged remarkable are not their severe and sticky situations but how they devise methods to tackle them. The writer

has excavated his own homeland's apparently incomprehensible information to expose and convey to English readers its hilarious extraction.

*Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* lacks the fastidious plotting and narrative neatness of *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*. It is a loose, lopping creature, less anxious about being a novel, more interested in telling a ripping story. Sehgal (2012) opined in "Interpreter of Maladies" about Mohammed Hanif's narrative that it is a nifty, evil small narrative of humorous brilliance. Like Joseph Heller, Hanif focuses in a manner of terror and comedy attached at the core. Exposed of the funny side and magical realist particular upshots, the catholic nurse (Alice) and her relations are a scorching onslaught on the generally endorsed massacre of lower-class in Pakistani society. The novel is an unruly piece of art; the under discussion issues are local as well as worldwide, concerned about all of us.

*Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* is a humorous story with the special quality of buoyancy with precision, at the same time it's profound than it first comes out. This very daintily composed narrative shines and gleams but in no way boasts of writer's excellent talent. All chapters have been composed with the propinquity of the present age; they revolve around in time without, for a moment, losing their consistency. Furthermore, the writing style achieves the status of versification off and on. Writer's actual concern is to make the others conceive about the issue of the insanity of a community where large part has come to rely on rhythms of authority and indignity.

Hanif's sparring mockery extends to cover many sections of life in Pakistan, and because of this, the novel tends to come across as a series of linked set pieces rather than a fully-integrated whole. Sipahimalani (2011), in his review of this novel, "Book Review: Our Lady of Alice Bhatti" opined that this narrative goes round the trials and tribulations of its protagonist, a junior nurse at a hospital in Karachi. The heroin of the novel is the combination of being a high-spirited lady with very soft feelings. Alice belongs to the Dalit (low-caste) non-Muslim's society, and the writer handles numerous punches against religious faith of all types, at the same time against so-called caste and class segregation, in the pages of the book.

Hanif's subject demands a more careful navigation of its faultiness. What lets the novel down is a disorienting loose structure. In it we are walked back and forth in time to piece together the progression of Alice and Teddy's relationship. Moreover large gaps appear between one step and the other. Hanif's compelling characters travel on curiously thin ice; if we are speaking of episodes, it must be said that the book might work better if read as discrete set pieces. The end, with its perverse sense of finality, constitutes an act of violence in itself. Without giving away the details, the reader may only say that it can colour the whole novel in retrospect. While reading this novel until the last part the reader comes to comprehend that the dexterous skewering of a social disorder may have been writer's target from the very beginning. Mukherjee (2011) calls the novel a surreptitious book. It is mainly because there are no characters that take part in as stereotype. The novel is at the same time populated with triple-dimensional characters, which exist with their imperfections and what life imposes at them, manage answers to unusual circumstances.

Hanif tends to be very much similar to Arundhati Roy while dealing with all the embellishing techniques in his narrative. At times, his similes and metaphors are breath taking and put one in mind of contemporary South Asian writing's second great debut (the first being *Midnight's Children*), Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Like her he resorts to a fairly liberal use of strategic capitalisation, italicisation and unexpected juxtaposition. The analogies, the metaphors, writer has used, made the reader hook to the story till the end. Mohammed Hanif is definitely the best at characterization and dark humour. The cover page review says it all, a deft, evil little novel of comic genius.

### ***Class Oppression***

Class oppression, which is also referred to as 'classism', can be defined as prejudice and discrimination based on social class. It includes systems that are meant to benefit upper classes at the expense of lower classes. Hanif's novel evokes a city where an underprivileged underclass has no alternative but to continue to earn their daily bread. The novel transcends not only location but all social contexts of class, culture and ethnicity. Life in Hanif's Karachi is a grim enterprise, and Alice's Choohra Christian world provides a canvas onto which he lashes misery after misery. Hanif canvasses a territory where oppression is the

norm. Alice has to face the hatred of the people because she is sweeper's daughter and her father washes and cleans the shit from the streets. Her presence is disliked and even it is felt that she smells but when someone wants to fulfil his sexual desires, she can be forgiven for her crime of being born in a sweeper's house. It's very early when Joseph Bhatti, her father warns her about the cruel reality of this outside world. Joseph Bhatti expresses his inner grief in these words that "These Muslas will make you to clean their shit and then complain that you stink . . . And our own brothers at the Sacred? They will educate you and then ask you why you stink" (p. 01). Weir (2007), in *Class in America: An Encyclopaedia*, stated that the oppressed person/group—usually the lower class and poor—is viewed as less worthy intellectually, socially, and economically. Classism is usually linked to power.

This class oppression exists in its severe form even in the atmosphere of the hospital and in the attitudes of its staff also. She has to face this humiliation in many remarks of her seniors. She was degraded with this sort of words: "Have you cleaned the floor, Alice? Why have you not cleaned the floor? Who do you think will clean that blood on the floor, Alice? Your father?" (Hanif, 2011, p. 2). Shoemaker (2009), in *Theories of Delinquency: An Examination of Explanations of Delinquent Behaviour*, explained that the pressures among the *lower class* are generated from middle- and upper-class attempts to control workers which sometimes lead them to be contemptuous about their employers.

Joseph wants to give a realization to her daughter about the cold behaviour of the society. So he tries to give a few fatherly advices to his daughter so that she may not feel disappointed at her rejection by the society. Alice has just come out of Borstal after 14 month punishment. During Alice's absence her father used to do work at Dr. Preriera's house. The same disgust and coldness was present in the behaviour of these people. Joseph Bhatti remembered that time in these words, ". . . 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" (Hanif, 2011, p. 75). Nwaneri (2013), in *We Are at War: Book One: Origin and Progress of Our War*, opined, "This type of discrimination is most serious in the Islamic countries where Christians are often persecuted" (p. 335).

Joseph Bhatti feels much disappointed at the narrow-mindedness and cold behaviour of high ups in the society. He thinks that the other people must acknowledge their importance, as poverty and richness are part and parcel of any society. They must be given equal rights and respect in society. Joseph Bhatti describes the social evil of class oppression in such words, “Chooohras were here before everything. Chooohras were here before the Sacred was built . . . And when all of this finished, Chooohras will be still here . . . and cockroaches too”(Hanif, 2011, p. 77).Dirlik (1991), in *Anarchism in the Chinese Revolution*, has said, “Such was the case with class oppression, where one class deprived another of its humanity, or with gender” (p. 217). Oppression also comes in serious forms of discrimination: Alice is the main accused in a murder she didn’t commit.

### ***Hegemonic Capitalism***

The initial, theoretic application of cultural domination was as a Marxist analysis of economic class (base and superstructure), which Antonio Gramsci developed to comprehend social class; hence, cultural hegemony proposes that the prevailing cultural norms of a society, which are imposed by the ruling class (bourgeois cultural hegemony), must not be perceived as natural and inevitable, but must be recognized as artificial social constructs (institutions, practices, beliefs, etc) that must be investigated to discover their philosophic roots as instruments of social-class domination. Such praxis of knowledge is indispensable for the intellectual and political liberation of the proletariat, so that workers and peasants, the people of town and country, can create their own working-class culture, which specifically addresses their social and economic needs as social classes.

In the same way capitalistic society sets the norms of the society for its lower-classes to follow. Alice Bhatti and all other characters in this novel are caught up in the whirls of circumstances and the society is not ready to give them any room to maneuver according to their own wishes. They have to face so many situations which are thoroughly discouraging for them. But still they are very much determined to survive in a capitalist society. Alice, the most exploited, tries to prove her honesty to her job and to be in good book of her seniors, she even visits Charya Ward (The Centre for Mental and Psychological Diseases) to take notes



about her patients during her duty and to give them a dose of medicine. No one, not even doctors visit that Ward.

Sister Hina Alvi said about the patients of that Ward; “These Boys in Charya Ward are suffering from what everybody suffers from: life” (Hanif, 2011, p. 42). Life means the same to those patients as it is meant to Alice. They are all victims of this capitalist system. Briar (2004), in *Working For Women?: Gendered Work And Welfare Policies In Twentieth Century*, opined, “Problems have arisen partly because of Marxist and Marxist-Feminist analyses of capitalism itself: the system is assumed to be gender blind, which makes it difficult to explain systematic discrimination against women” (p. 126).

Hanif, very artistically through a capitalistic perspective, calls the society nuthouse. HinaAlvi, while talking to Alice, points out the darkest aspect of this capitalist system. She says, “People can be greedy. . . Just remember it’s called a nut house and there is a reason for that . . . the whole country is a nut house” (Hanif, 2011, p. 42). Meyers (2014), in *Feminist Social Thought: A Reader*, explained, “We can only start from where we are beings who have been created in a cruelly racist and capitalist society that has shaped our bodies and our minds” (p. 399).

Hanif depicts that the rules of Capitalist Hegemonic System are very much similar to the rules of Charya Ward in the Sacred Heart Hospital. It is populated with lunatics in the same way our society consists of capitalists. These people are very much indifferent from the lot of other human beings who are suffering on their stake. As Sister HinaAlvi says to Alice, “I don’t know if you have done any psycare, but there is only one rule you need to remember: you have to tell them that everything is normal” (Hanif, 2011, p. 43). Storkey (1985), in *What's Right with Feminism*, said, “The capitalist system has harshly exploited vulnerable workers, especially women workers in low paid jobs” (p.86). The poor are always forced to do their jobs in every type of circumstances which are provided to them.

When Alice was cradled out of Charya Ward in the bony arms of Teddy Butt she was trying to get rid of her rescuer and at the same time she was shouting, “I still need to give them lithium sulphate” (Hanif, 2012, p. 53). She was head to shoulder ready to perform her job in a responsible manner. In fact, in doing all that she endangered her own life too. Teddy Butt finds Alice very light weight in his arms. She kicks him

and screams. She wants to get rid of all that but in vain. Her light weightedness and resistance show the insignificance of a poor female worker against this powerful capitalist system. Shannon (2010), in *Political Sociology: Oppression, Resistance, and the State*, stated that women's oppression is coming from the dual systems of capitalism and patriarchy.

### **Conclusions**

The study proves that *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* incorporates a Marxist strain in its disjointed and unruly structure. Mohammed Hanif has successfully employed the so-called naturalistic division of the society (class system) in episodic structure of the narrative. Unjustified finale of the narrative is very much similar to social injustice.

In spite of the tragic end, Hanif presents a vivid picture of a society that has discovered the coping mechanisms to deal with the disintegration reality. The chaos of the Sacred reflects the existential chaos of modern cities. So, underlying this book is anger towards a society that is brutal on every level - with its women, with its poor, with its minorities, even within the family. Violence is the subtext, but again without really hitting you in the face. It's always around but it's normal. *Our Lady of Bhatti* is a dark commentary on the way we live and the way we die. It is also a story about how life just carries on.

### **References**

- Albinia, A. (2011, October 7). A young nurse battles with adversity in a corrupt Karachi hospital in Mohammed Hanif's portrait of a nation in bedlam [Review of the book *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*]. *Financial Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/1caaf178eb8811e0a57600144feab49a>.
- Bobb, D. (2011, September 3). Alice in Karachi [Review of the book *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*]. *Indian Express*. Retrieved from <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/alice-in-karachi/840867/>
- Brandy, M. P. (2012, June 13). Our lady of Alice Bhatti | Mohammed Hanif [Review of the book *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*]. *The Boston Globe*. Retrieved from <http://www.michaelpatrickbrady.com/blog/our-lady-of-alice-bhatti-mohammed-hanif-review/>

- Briar, C. (2004). *Working for women?: Gendered work and welfare policies in twentieth century*. London: Routledge.
- Dirlik, A. (1991). *Anarchism in the Chinese revolution*. Oxford: University of California Press.
- Hanif, M. (2011). *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*. India: Random House Publishers.
- Meyers, D.T. (2014). *Feminist social thought: A reader*. New York: Routledge.
- Mukherjee, N. (2011, October 10). Battered Lives [Review of the book *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*]. *Time Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2095612,00.html#ixzz2cKYGQbFN>
- Nwaneri, V. C. (2013). *We are at war: Book one: Origin and progress of our war*. Bloomington: Author House.
- Row, J. (2012, April 30). Caste in doubt [Review of the book *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*]. *Book Forum*. Retrieved from [http://www.bookforum.com/inprint/019\\_01/9166](http://www.bookforum.com/inprint/019_01/9166)
- Sehgal, P. (2012, June 15). Interpreter of maladies [Review of the book *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*]. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/17/books/review/our-lady-of-alice-bhatti-by-mohammed-hanif.html?pagewanted=all>
- Shannon, D. (2010). *Political sociology: Oppression, resistance, and the state*. New Dehli: Pine Forge Press.
- Shoemaker, D. J. (2009). *Theories of delinquency: An examination of explanations of delinquent behaviour*. New Zealand: Oxford University Press.
- Siegel, L. (2009). *Introduction to criminal justice*. USA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning.
- Sipahimalani, S. (2011, November 20). Book Review: *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* [Review of the book *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*]. *DNA India*. Retrieved from <http://www.dnaindia.com/lifestyle/1614935/review-book-review-our-lady-of-alice-bhatti>
- Storkey, E. (1985). *What's right with feminism*. London: Holy Trinity Church.
- Weir, R. E. (2007). *Class in America: An encyclopaedia*. USA: Greenwood Press.

Yassin-Kassab, R. (2011, October 7). A sparkling, witty tale reflects the sad state of Pakistan [Review of the book *Our Lady* of Alice Bhatti]. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/oct/07/alice-bhatti-mohammed-hanif-review>