

Surviving the Edges of Periphery: A Postcolonial Feminist critique of Muhammad Hanif's *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*

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ABSTRACT

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Pakistani postcolonial narratives have been discussing the oppression of the less privileged sections of people, including minorities, because of the predetermined power structure of society. The level of oppression gets aggravated in its severity and repercussions when the narrative is about a woman from a minority community in Pakistan. Mohammad Hanif's novel *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* highlights the portrayal of a female protagonist who faces life's challenges only because she is a woman from a Christian minority. Her struggle to survive meets utmost resistance from the patriarchal social setup. This problematizes the socio-political situation of women from minority communities and allocates them space for struggle only on the edges of the periphery of social hierarchy in postcolonial states like Pakistan. It necessitates that the text of the novel may be explored to assess the status of doubly colonized oppressed women of minority communities and the consequent resistance put up by them. The study employs a postcolonial lens to examine the life of such women and to determine the extent of consequent oppression and suffering as portrayed by Hanif in his novel. The study finds out that women of minority status in postcolonial states like Pakistan are mostly oppressed and are seldom included in the regular stream of life.

Keywords: Marginalization, Oppression, Third World Women, Minorities in Periphery, Allocation of Third Space

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This paper aims to highlight the efforts of women from a formerly colonized third world country (Pakistan) and investigates how they face difficult circumstances, wait, compete, and ultimately emerge victorious and find a space for themselves. Mohanty (2003), while discussing Third-World women and Feminism without borders, prefers to count more on the efforts of the women to succeed in the third world instead of gauging the oppression on them. According to Mohanty: “Rather than assuming an enforced commonality of oppression, solidarity foregrounds communities of people who have chosen to work and fight together” (p. 7). Foregrounding this point from Mohanty, this research intends to explore a third space as theorized by Bhabha, which comes into existence when a marginalized group struggles and finds a space to exist in this world. Bhabha emphasizes the location of marginalized subjects as the ‘Third space’ which is crucial in the life narratives of the marginalized. Roberts (2011) suggests that “Dissent operates in a Third space...space where oppressed and oppressor are both able to come together in the mirror of each other...” (qtd. in Kumari & Vohra, 2021, p. 69-70). The encounter of the oppressed and the oppressor in the ‘Third Space’ provides an understanding that oppression is due to the dominance of the oppressor and so the oppressed begins using the ‘Third space’ as a space of resistance. When seen through this angle, even success in the third space is not without oppression. So, the struggle and resistance of Third World women, especially the marginalized women, is not without oppression because as soon as the resistance begins, the immediate outcome is the oppression from the sections being resisted.

It is appropriate to understand the Third World before understanding the status of Third world women. The Third World is not only a physical but more a mental space where many live in imagined spaces, for example, in fictional narratives. On the other hand, some think that the Third World is only a geographical space that can be determined with borders and determined lines. The Third World can be understood in terms of underdeveloped and developed worlds. The third world is a space where people, especially women, are mostly underprivileged and must make a constant struggle to survive. Alice Bhatti is one such woman who is doubly colonized, resisting, and making her space exist. She is from a Christian minority community and is already marginalized and forced to inhabit the edges of the periphery. She is further pushed backward when she struggles to succeed and survive in the third space proposed by society for her. She is equipped with the tools of education and a well-trained mind, which help her fight against the odds of society. Her education and skills help her earn a livelihood and independence, but the same patriarchal tendencies come her way, and she gets killed at the hands of her husband. All her powers of being bold, robust, independent, resilient, and dexterity fail to save her life.

This paper analyzes her struggle through the eyes of both Mohanty and Bhabha's understanding of the Third space created for the women of the Third World. The analysis of Alice's character portrayal in the novel by Hanif unravels the characteristics of the women in the 'Third space'. It is argued that even this 'Third space' is endangered and can be annihilated if one is a woman from a minority group. The argument is developed first by situating Alice as a third-world woman and then by exploring her struggle in the third space, which is evidently to face the challenges posed by the dominant sections of society to marginalize her as a doubly colonized woman.

Third world women in postcolonial literature

Wood (2001) suggests that listening to the previously silenced people is necessary but listening to these "in postcolonial contexts is certainly more vexed a process than critics envision it to be and may be impossible in the way that they mean" (p. 430). This difficulty pointed out by Wood is further clarified when she uses Mohanty to discuss the heterogeneity of Third World women in terms of their region, culture, class, and ethnicity, who otherwise are portrayed as a homogenous group because "much of the literature on women and development discursively colonize[s] the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the Third World and thereby produces the image of an 'average Third World woman'" (p. 430). The Third World woman is therefore portrayed as ignorant, poor, irrational, and sexually oppressed. This situation titles third-world women as the 'Other.'

The initiative of voicing the third-world woman by the postcolonial writers helps us to replace the image of the 'Other' with a somewhat more powerful image, which has always been surviving on the edges though. The third-world woman seems to be close to the earth, self-aware, self-critical, nurturer of culture, her community, and her family, blending into one image that she is the authentic third-world heroine because she resists the oppression and struggles to survive. It is even more significant that listening to the previously silenced voices gains direct access to the heart and soul of these women. But then, Wood (2001) points out, if a third-world woman chooses to speak, it is equally problematic, as that speech is limited. And all this limitedness, silence, and permission of speech are linked to the power the elite wield on the poor through which they inculcate and internalize among the masses that they must remain satisfied in their lot without question because fate created them thus. This allows a particular type of social hegemony to the powerful because "very often, the underprivileged classes are made to believe that class division is a divine phenomenon and to act against God's will is sinful. Besides, there are many scriptural references where the poor are promised compensation for their worldly sufferings" (Nazakat et al, 2018, p.116). But this hegemonic control is not

without consequences. It extends to discriminatory attitudes toward the underprivileged, the minority, and women, allocating them the status of the less potent and voiceless. The portrayal of Alice by Hanif is of a woman who is underprivileged and discriminated against because of her social status but she keeps on constantly waging her struggle to resist social oppression. She is sent to prison without the commission of any crime. But she takes this oppression as an opportunity and learns many arts which could be helpful to fight against social oppression.

After her acquittal, she joins a missionary hospital where she discovers herself as a part of the oppression of the larger group because of the malpractices and corruption done almost at every level of society. Khalid has pointed out two significant dimensions of the novel: first, the book is the story of the four characters; Teddy, Alice, Joseph, and Noor, who are suppressed and live meager life because of their being Christian minority; and secondly, the same society is capable of influencing the love-hate relationship between Teddy and Alice. They are lovers and happily married, but the social setup collectively works against them. Not only is the connection torn apart, but love also turns into hate, and ultimately, both lives are ruined (Khalid, 2021, para 3 & 8). Their domestic peace is compromised because of the religiously inspired extremist violence. Passionate religious differences are tolerable but once converted to violence, they destroy societies (Siddiqui, 2022, para 2) and the possibility of human rights in such societies. Alice, as a member of the oppressed group, must fall a victim to religious violence and extremism.

Kalharo (2014), while discussing the availability of human rights for women, in such a situation, claims that women in many third-world countries are not likely to achieve any level of human rights because of the absence of balance between the religious and the secular forces working in these countries. Even modernity would succeed only partially in ensuring and guaranteeing women's rights because only a specific population would benefit from modernity and development, and mainstream women would remain at the same low level of freedom. Kalharo further stresses the point that human rights, especially women's rights may not become a reality in Third World countries because "modern secular states and religious ideologies both use women to further their agenda, and thus women may be included into national discourse but are never made an active part of it" (p. 8).

Alice, in this novel, is also portrayed as a minority woman with some miraculous power, like curing the dead or saving the unsolvable. Similarly, her death is too taken by the writer in the same sense that she assumes a saintly role at the time of her death. These two fictional roles of Alice convey the message of doing miracles if she was given the opportunity. While in the absence of any opportunity, she can only sacrifice to assume a saintly role. The only opportunity left for Alice is

to struggle and put up resistance to claim a space between the privileged and the unprivileged ones. According to Gul (qtd. in Kalhoro, 2014), she figures an ideal woman as neither confined nor discouraged by the adverse circumstances around her. She moves ahead, fights her way, and finally stands triumphant. But all her struggle and resistance land her only into a 'Third space' between the binaries of secular and religious, modern and conservative, and progressive and traditional. Bhabha defines this as a "deeply negating experience, oppressive and exclusionary," which encourages one to move beyond the "polarities of power and prejudice" into a formative space. This space allows not only for the "creator of the third space to detach temporarily from already existing parameters and examine them with newer eyes," (Struzik, 2015, p. 85) but also establishes an authority that demands to be noticed apart from the categories of culture.

The existence of Alice in the Third space remains constantly under threat because of her being a woman. Sehgal (2012) refers to the sexual version of Alice. Everyone would love to take his share in groping her, but she comes out to be a stronger woman who falls in love with a bodybuilder cum police tout and marries him. "Alice marries the bodybuilder, and together, they form one of modern fiction's most unlikely and—for a time — truly contented pairs" (Sehgal, 2012, para. 11). But again, the socio-cultural status assigned by society jeopardizes her existence referred by Sehgal.

Minorities and the socio-political setup

Minorities in the countries like Pakistan mostly occupy a periphery position in the socio-political setup. The peripheral existence is stressed through multiple codes of conduct and the popularization of slogans. Hanif points out this situation in his novel *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* by manipulating the social codes employed to reflect the hatred and demanding attitude of the majority of society. While Alice appears in the interview and gets gradually hopeless about her success in a job, she reminds us of the saying of her father's experiences when she smells the clothes and uniforms of the people around her. Her father Joseph Bhatti had put it, "These Muslas will make you clean their shit and then complain that you stink" (Hanif, 2010, p. 5). This attitude of the majority community to a woman of the minority community is because she is a woman from a minority working-class community, and the society has harbored a poor conception of them traditionally by regarding them as untouchables of the Muslim society, like the character of Bhakha in the novel *Untouchables* by Anand (1935), who is employed to sweep the streets and to clean the shit of the people but is shunned as untouchable. As a woman, Alice receives similar disgust from her own community also.

The writer partially blames the Christians also because they are not ready enough to change their lot and show reluctance if an opportunity for improvement

comes their way. According to Hanif, this has been a formal acceptance by the Christian community members for the hegemonized control exercised on them by the majority community. Be a woman or a man, upward mobility in life has been almost nonexistent. The situation has been even worse for women of minority communities. Most of them are content with their lot except a few who would get educated, like Alice, and think of moving forward for better control of their lives. This passive attitude makes them suffer from intra-community discrimination also. This is the concept that the tailor Dalhousie, in the story of the novel, marks in his behavioral lines with different people differently. According to the writer, “when he sees people like Alice Bhatti walk into his shop, he doesn’t hold his nose, he doesn’t send her off to any of his half-dozen students bent over their Singers, he adjusts his glasses and greets her with a smile so bright it could light up the farther corners of French Colony” (p. 75). The social setup and class consciousness are visible in these lines, which further damages the personality and thinking of Alice like girls who are marginalized in several ways in which their community guidelines are also responsible.

This attitude of society becomes significantly hypocritical when touching a woman becomes significant. Alice is a Christian, so drinking from any cup she has used is thought obnoxious, but the same men would love to feel her body wherever and when they can. This attitude of men she hates most but is unable to control. In her view, she “can live with being an untouchable, but she desperately hopes for the only privilege that comes with being one that people won’t touch her without her explicit permission” (p. 77). She has to face this sexually perverted attitude everywhere, and she would be ridiculed if she does not show her complicity. Once, she must kick an older man because he starts to show her his penis while she is checking his heart’s health. The old man threatens her of cutting her body and throwing her to the dogs. All such incidents continue to happen even when she cares much about her walking and talking styles in public. She would not even look directly into the eyes of the people and would not eat in public to save herself from the assumed attraction she might generate.

Similarly, Alice, a daughter of a minority man, has learned to keep silent and speak only when necessary. She knows well that every success and happiness of her life is littered with some insult or a “ritual of humiliation” (Hanif, 2010, p. 47). It doubles up the threats and inconveniences accompanied by the attitude of men who think a weak woman is easy prey for their sexual satisfaction, especially when the woman is a minority as well. Alice is considered a plaything and sexual object by many, especially the one with big money and muscle. In the elite class ward of the hospital, Alice is attacked by the perverted young man lodging in a hospital room because of his mother’s illness there. He forces Alice for sexual gratification only because he has a gun, money, and attitude that he can move any woman into

sex. This thinking comes across Alice all along, but with the passage of time, she has learned that all is not right when one is a minority and a woman in Pakistan. While working in her hospital, Alice is caught up in a situation when she is alone on her duty in a room to check on a female patient. But inside the room, the so-called powerful are playing. As soon as they see a pretty girl nurse, one of them intends to exploit her sexually. He forces her on the force of his firearms for oral sex without thinking that his mother is about to die and that she needs care from the same girl. Even the elder brother of Alice's attacker, present inside the room, does not stop him. Such is the attitude of the elite and powerful class towards women, especially women from minority communities.

When Alice finds no escape from the problematic situation beyond her control, she, being bold enough and well-trained in being rough when the time requires, cuts the sensitive body part of her attacker and teaches him a lesson. Here Alice's behavior is that of a woman who, after being poorly treated only because she is a minority and a woman, can turn her weakness into strength and creates enough courage to teach abusive men a lesson. As Hanif writes: "It never ceases to amaze her that men, even those on death watch, all think the same thing" (p. 49). She declares her understanding of the world when she says: "You think that a woman, any woman who wears a uniform, is just waiting for you to show up, and she'll take it off" (p. 58). The social setup takes her as easy prey and a vulnerable being. On the other hand, she had a full view of herself that she must defend herself.

The behavior of the young man in the hospital room with Alice in the story of the novel is reflective of the attitude of the powerful patriarchs who would enforce their will with power and force available to them by virtue of the social structures in the society. The incident becomes a symbolic generalization of all men in a patriarchal social structure. The resistance and reaction put up by Alice are the reflections of the struggle a woman must make to survive in such a society. Side by side, it is also reflective that modern educated women of postcolonial societies, like Pakistan, are not ready to accept the social dictates enforced upon them and have a developed understanding to resist and defend themselves against brutality and savagery of the people around them. Therefore, Alice is a role model of a new woman in Pakistani society who would wage struggle and resistance to survive even when the patriarchal attitude has taught her that she is subservient to men and must have no voice against the will of man. The same holds good about her status as a minority woman in the Third World where the women have been unable to reap the full privileges of feminism and must struggle to secure their rights as citizens in most of the states of South Asia.

The same is repeated when she goes to a police station to record her witness and is arrested and beaten. Only after the high-ups from her hospital intervene, she is shifted to a women-only police station. Being a woman and a

Christian, Alice carries little value as a person, making her vulnerable to violence. So, when she is taken to police custody for recording a statement, she is detained to get the statement of their choice, for which “they beat her up there as well but let her sleep for a few hours every night” (Hanif, 2010, p. 140). The relatives of the deceased have paid their surgery fees upfront to the famous surgeon. They spend a little bit more money on the police, and a manslaughter case is registered against the Sacred. The renowned surgeon pays half his surgery fees to a famous lawyer and gets a pre-arrest bail. The police invite Alice Bhatti to the police station for an informal chat to ascertain the facts of the case, as they tell her. She feels happy to be a witness against the surgeon, but after arriving at the police station, she finds out that she is not a witness but the main accused. The Sacred nursing school has decided to eliminate its most troublesome student. Without any warning, she finds herself in the police lock-up. Dr. Pereira is told about it only after the case had been registered. After much running around and convincing Reverend Philip to help by showing newspaper clippings from the Catholic Courier, which describe Alice as a ‘soldier of Yassoo,’ Dr. Pereira gets her shifted to a women-only police station.

Alice faces similar social criticism in the case of her marriage when her lover manages to marry her on a submarine with the help of his friends. She is labeled a rebel and religious converter who would not follow the routine. All her strength does not let her escape from the image society generally accords to women in Pakistan. When she gets married, many people doubt her, and the question of her conversion from Christianity to Islam keeps lurking in the air. On the one hand, she faces criticism from her own community, who would not allow her the marriage of her choice. Her community would love to excommunicate her without finding the truth of the rumors about her conversion. On the other hand, Alice must face her husband's doubts about her fidelity when he fails to locate her. His suspicions about his wife's fidelity make Alice the object of his revenge and hatred. Her marriage is not taken seriously. People and family question her again, but she refuses to get nervous and repeats that she has her view of life. But the people, in general, are dissatisfied and exclaim: "What kind of wedding is this where the only evidence is a box of cheap sweets? They are probably living in sin. People touch their ears and sigh as they imagine the sinful things that Alice and Teddy are doing in private and hiding behind a few boxes of sweets (p. 122). But equally important is the boldness with which Alice fights against such odds.

Resilience and fortitude

She gathers this strength from the continuous flow of cruelties and injustices she had to undergo during her childhood and adolescence. She learns the art of dealing with difficult life and is ready to stare directly into the face of difficulties. Another of her bold steps, though with fear, is to look for her husband

in the police building, where she could get lost. But she attempts to find her husband's whereabouts, though she is terrified because of the style and repute of the police in her country. All the way, she is thinking about what she would say. She plans to say, "Do you have an officer called Teddy Butt who works here? I am his wife. Do you have a prisoner called Teddy Butt here? I am his wife. I am married to someone who doesn't really work here, but he does work for some people who work in this place" (p. 172). Even in a place where her sole purpose is to find her husband, she is forced to think that she is the body and a woman to be stared at and considered a sex object.

To her horror, she witnesses a terrorist scene happening right in front of her, but she does not give up her search for her husband. Her husband is in that same building a few moments ago and had gotten a bottle of solid acid from his boss to be used on Alice because he believes Alice has been unfaithful to him and that he would satisfy his revenge just by doing so. This is the role of fate and chance; as in Hardy's novels, one is looking for love, and the other is looking for hate, and fate is letting them reconcile where love and hate would both get satisfied. Such is the fate of Alice Bhatti as a human being and as a woman in her society. She is a woman who would go to any lengths for her love, but her husband thinks her only a woman who could be unfaithful to him and is readily willing to act revengefully against her without any investigation or a chance of listening to her. He, therefore, acts individually as per his psychology of a patriarchal society; he proceeds to believe that his woman is from a poor minority class, and so could be surely faithless to him. Such is the treatment that a woman would receive at a man's hands in south Asian societies.

Alice is a Third World woman and represents the struggle waged by these women who are mostly doubly colonized, because of being a woman in a patriarchal setup where she and her voice are colonized and, hence, marginalized. Alice struggles against these odds, but her struggle makes her exist in the 'Third space' only. Alice gets educated even when she is put in prison and becomes a professional nurse, which is not taken as creditable. She is considered a woman only, who, according to the patriarchal males of the society, exists to be exploited. The minority status of Alice and her father makes their life further difficult because "Alice and Joseph Bhatti, despite being official citizens, face discrimination in social, religious, cultural, and professional setups. Alice is kept marginalized right from her childhood, but she remains headstrong in her struggle against the social categorization" (Ashraf, 2017, p. 106). As suggested by Mohanty, Alice, as a Third World woman, struggles to live everyday life and keeps on fighting for her right to survive as a woman, like all third-world women. She marries Teddy in her attempt to succeed socially but miserably fails because of Teddy's mindset. In his frustration, he makes a murderous attempt at Alice by throwing acid at her. At the end of the

story, the only space of survival is found in religious spiritualism because her community finds solace in declaring the death of Alice for a cause and so accord her the status of Lady, as the title of the novel suggests.

Hanif builds a picture of the patriarchal attitude of society towards women in general, especially working women because it necessitates contact with other male members of society. Working women in postcolonial societies are generally not considered reasonable and noble by the traditional patriarchal setup and, therefore, mostly fall victim to the prejudiced patriarchal power. Hanif is probably emphasizing that if the working woman is from a minority community, she is even more vulnerable because of the weakness associated with her socio-political status. The author highlights that this issue has repercussions and undermines the socio-political situation of women, predominantly minority working women in the countries like Pakistan, especially the societies that are already riddled with marginalizing caste and class systems. Hanif, a Pakistani postcolonial writer, suggests that these issues have been further strengthened because the legacies of colonialism keep on stressing themselves. The marginalization of women and especially working women from minority communities are predominantly vulnerable.

Hanif, like many other literary voices, speaks loudly about the marginalization of women belonging to minority communities. This research concludes that the modern age of education, enlightenment, and rapid scientific progress has been able to alleviate the mental agonies of marginalized minorities in south Asia only partially. Furthermore, our work-based prejudices and the value system keep suppressing minority communities, especially women. So, women like Alice Bhatti are twice marginalized because of being women from the minority. The same double marginalization forces them to survive only at the socio-political margins of postcolonial societies. As such, this research is significant because it focuses on the fact that instead of making their life difficult, we must endeavor to recognize valuable individuals as benefactors of humanity.

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