

Tracing the Subaltern in *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*— A PoCo-Feminist Critique

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Abstract— *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* is a novel authored by Mohammed Hanif that discusses the underdog status of minorities, especially Christians in Pakistan. It examines how untouchables (Choohras, the janitors) in Christian community are subject to oppression from those within their group but also those outside their group, i.e., Muslims. What makes it worse is the oppression of the women from this class who are considered untouchables when it comes to equal opportunities in life and socialization but fit for interaction when taken as objects to satisfy the libido of those from out-group. This research is an attempt to study how they are exploited by those outside their community and deprived of their identity, in an attempt to silence their voices. Gayatri Spivak's essay *Can the Subaltern Speak* is used as the theoretical framework to analyze this novel. This research is a qualitative research based on textual arguments.



Keywords— *Christian, Identity, Marginalization, Oppression, Subaltern, Women.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Our Lady of Alice Bhatti is a novel by Mohammed Hanif. The genre of this work is cultural fiction, and it was first published in 2011 by Jonathan Cape. This novel lays bare the fabric of contemporary Pakistani society which has got freedom from white colonial masters but has set foundations of its new colonial rule. The modern colonizers are not from some far-flung lands but belong to the same land. The tools that they use to exploit the natives are religion, ethnicity, social status, financial status, etc. Thus, social background can land a person either in riches or a hell-like situation where there is no escape, as seen in the case of the protagonist of the novel.

The story of this novel revolves around the leading character, Alice Bhatti, who is born in a working-class Christian household. Her father, Joseph Bhatti, works as a janitor for the regional municipal corporation and provides part time social services as a spiritual healer, treating stomach ulcers for free. She loses her mother in a sexual assault at her employer's residence. This assault is disguised as

her accidental slipping from stairs and the murder is covered to save the influential culprits. This shows the first incident in the novel of how working-class women become an easy prey to sexual predators roaming free in the Pakistani society. This dystopia is a realistic depiction of the dilemma that Pakistani society faces today due to rampant misogyny and religious fundamentalism.

Alice's life in French colony, the slum where untouchables live in Karachi, is not that good either. Their living conditions are pitiable, and they hardly manage to live from hand to mouth. Despite miserable life and status of untouchables, the women from Christian working class, Choohras, are sexually fantasized and abused by men from different classes. Being physically assaulted, groped, verbally abused are matters of routine life. This shows the bigotry and hypocrisy of those living in the contemporary Pakistani society. Like the rest of Hanif's novels, *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*, and *Red Birds*, this novel gives a perfect overview of the society under consideration.

This novel bluntly shows how women, especially those from minority communities, are subject to violence and persecution. This sad state of minority communities, especially Christian women is well depicted in the life of Alice Bhatti, who ultimately loses her life to this social injustice. This study is an attempt to look into this matter and identify the reasons behind persecution of women. It also takes into consideration what are social causes of this injustice and what incites men to do this injustice to women.

Though there are different theories that can help with the analysis of this novel, Gayatri Spivak's essay, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, is the most appropriate work that can help analyze the situation depicted in *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*. This theory fits best in the analysis of the novel because of the identification of the characters in specific theoretical domain, i.e., subaltern. Fluid terms like women, Christian, minority, working class, etc. can be best classed under this category and be easily analyzed for specific purposes. This theory can be best used to trace the itinerary of a subaltern and the reasons that make a character/person a subaltern. This work conforms well to the situations described in the aforementioned essay and can shed light on this novel from a cultural perspective.

Purpose and Scope of the Research

The population of religious minority persons living in Pakistan (called *non-Muslims*) is in millions who form about 3.72% of the total population according to the census done in 1998 (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics and Minority Rights Group Intl.). This percentage is questioned by different groups, and many claim that the stats 'have been' forged for different reasons. Christians comprise the leading community in this group who make 1.59% of the total percentage of religious minorities in Pakistan.

Despite the fact that 1.59% makes millions in a population whose total strength is 134.8 million (1998 census), Christians are not given their due rights and sidelined when it comes to equal opportunities in life. What makes it more shocking is the results of census held in 2017 which showed fall in the Christian population to 1.27% (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics) while Pakistan's total population rose to 207.8 million.

There is need for a study to know the reasons of why there is a fall seen in the population of minorities. Though being a fictional narrative, Mohammed Hanif's *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* makes an attempt to dig deeper into this problem, looking into how minorities are persecuted and denied equal rights. The focus of this novel is not only the Christian population in general, but also the situation of Christian women in particular, who are subject to oppression on daily basis. The protagonist of the novel Alice Bhatti loses her mother in a sexual assault at her

employer's house. This leaves Alice in a situation where there is none to protect her from the ills that are rampant in the Pakistani society.

Being able to graduate from a nursing school, Alice is able to find a job in a Catholic missionary hospital, Sacred Heart Hospital for All Ailments. But before that she has been to borstal for an 'offence' to protect herself from religious persecution. This continues throughout her life and the mortal point comes when she resists sexual advances from an influential family brat in the Sacred Heart Hospital. Her ending is tragic because of her resistance to give in to the oppressive forces. The previous studies done in this regard show how she was subjected to oppression, i.e., sexual, social, and political, and how she tried to resist it.

This study will make an attempt to show how she is being subjected to oppression by the new masters, making her a subaltern. Her subalternity will be discussed from two perspectives, viz. being a Christian, and being a woman. In either case, she encounters oppression and ill treatment.

Theoretical Framework

Gayatri C. Spivak's essay, *Can the Subaltern Speak*, provides the theoretical framework for the analysis of this novel. This theory provides an apt rubric for the oppressed classes in post-colonial societies where reorientations of those in corridors of power have led to new master (oppressor) and oppressed classes. The oppressed classes are either based on their ethnicity, gender, or religious background. There are theories that can help identify these oppressed classes based on socio-economic status, gender, or some other factor, but what makes it easy for a researcher to identify these fluid categories is Gayatri Spivak's theory of Subaltern, which is a modified form of the concept coined by Antonio Gramsci.

Identity being a fluid term makes it difficult for a researcher to fit their work under a specific rubric. This theory is about how the oppressed are deprived of identity in the post-colonial societies. What makes it broad and all-embracing for oppressed from different classes is the acceptance of women, minorities, socially marginalized, etc. Spivak is of the view that the subaltern are silenced, and their voices are not given due importance which they deserve. She cites examples from different western authors who have investigated other cultures but from a distance and a feeling of superiority. The very first instance that she quotes in her essay is that of the legal prohibition of the rite of 'sati' which was seen from a 'universal' perspective, that she believes is not the right framework used.

Spivak is of the view that knowledge is a commodity and thus can never be innocent. So, acceptance of the concept of subaltern from the western perspective is not the

right step, instead the colonial project needs to be sabotaged by following ways that doesn't benefit the empire. She is of the view that studies shouldn't be white men speaking to white men about brown people. If this happens, it is the silencing of the subaltern. This cultural conquest includes the 'institutionalization' of the subaltern narrative which is straitjacketed for various purposes.

It is not only in the social life but in the political discourse that women have been marginalized and silenced. The only way to listen to these voices is through consideration of them as 'native informants' whose silence and fade speaks of the horrible treatment they encounter in their lives.

There is not a clear definition given for the subaltern, but it is described in bits and pieces of how a subaltern can be. Determining the subaltern in South Asian society is a daunting task but it can be done through some basic features that identify them. Spivak's theory of subaltern in *Can the Subaltern Speak* is much helpful in this regard.

Research Objectives

The main objective of this research is to show the marginalization of the subaltern, viz women, Christians, in the mentioned novel. This research will highlight how these subalterns encounter inhuman treatment and why their voices are not heard. It will also look into detail the method, manner, and ultimate goal of this marginalization. The main focus will be the protagonist and her miserable journey of life and the abuses that she comes across as a subaltern while those in second and third tier will also be touched to show the relevance of their status as subaltern and their ultimate end.

Literature Review

Our Lady of Alice Bhatti is considered a work of immense consequence. It has touched the very roots of causes for discrimination of the marginalized people. There are various aspects of viewing this work of fiction which in fact describes the sorry state of affairs in Pakistan. It lays bare the frail fabric of Pakistani society which is based on the misogyny, oppression, promotion of elitism, and other vices that rust a society. Despite the fact that these problems are rooted in the society, few are daring enough to recognize them while others blame it on the reasons that are either non-existent or logically invalid.

Parul Sehgal, a literary critic, has called this novel an "Interpreter of Maladies" because of the novel's exposition of the main ailments from which Pakistani society suffers. Sehgal calls this novel "a blistering broadside on the socially sanctioned butchery of women and girls in Pakistan." She writes further in her review written for *The New York Times* about this novel calling it a work of "comic

genius." It is because of not only the violence that women are subjected to but also the author's skill to guise as a moralist, who in real is a torturer of women. The only thing that Hanif takes as a serious task is torturing female characters while the rest continues as a "fair game." Here she compares Mohammed Hanif to Flannery O'Connor and Muriel Spark. She calls it a "deadly serious work" which fits the definition of anarchy. In short, she even muses about Sacred Heart Hospital's possibility as a "parable for Pakistan."

Our Lady of Alice Bhatti is a novel rich in meanings. It is for this reason that it can be interpreted from different perspectives. These include analysis from Marxist perspective, Magic Realist perspective, Feminist perspective, Subaltern perspective etc. Yasir Ahmed in his study considers this novel from the Marxist perspective. He has taken the socio-economic problems as the roots cause of the ills that make the marginalized characters' life miserable. This study makes an attempt to know how lack of resources places Alice Bhatti and other marginalized characters in a miserable situation. He studies class conflict and bourgeois manipulation and exploitation of the proletariat. This study shows that there are two clearly identifiable classes based on the economic status in the mentioned novel. The oppressive class uses all possible measures to deprive the oppressed class of the fundamental human rights and needs. It is a detailed study of the marginalization of the oppressed class which attempts to know about the tools of oppression used by the hegemonic structure.

Another trend in the critical study of *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* is that from the Magic Realism perspective. Saadia Qamar and Aamer Shaheen in their study "Magic Realism as a Tool for Empowerment of Women in Mohammed Hanif's *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*" discuss this technique's use of this novel to show the empowerment of women in the novel. According to the two researchers the writer has employed the tool of magic realism to promote the agenda of feminism. Hanif has borrowed this technique from the Latin American writers to show Alice as an ambitious and strong character. According to the researchers magic realism has been employed to show the spiritual journey of Alice. She has the ability to know about the death of a person from their face and this shows her supernatural ability. Also, the death of the newborn baby and finally Alice's death are the instants that shows the Magic Realist touches in this work. According to the researchers these techniques used in this novel are for the strengthening the female characters. The world of fantasy not only shows the oppressive treatment to which women are subjected but also the perseverance of the main character, i.e., Alice Bhatti.

Abroo Nazar has critiqued this novel from the subaltern and marginalization perspective. She in her paper, “Silencing of Subaltern in Our Lady of Alice Bhatti,” talks about how subaltern are silenced in Pakistani society. Abroo Nazar shows how women are subjected to violence in form of social, religious, and cultural oppression. These people are stereotyped by the people from the elite class which shows how they are considered mere numbers or bodies instead of human beings. Nazar is of the view that these people are helpless and have to live a meek life because of inability to resist the oppression. This research has attempted to show the subaltern are silenced due to their weakness and lacking the fundamental rights in the society where they live. They are disempowered and thus ultimately silenced. This work has attempted to show that the subaltern lack the ability to express themselves. Alice, the main character of the novel, is a prime example of subaltern in this work.

Mubashar Altaf and Kaiser Shahzad in their work “A Subaltern’s Quest for Identity and Respect: A Gramscian Study of *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*” show that how Alice tries her best to get respect in a society where she is a considered subaltern. She is subject to institutionalized oppression where she finds no respite. She is dealt like a subaltern by people from all categories of the elite class. Some of them consider her a tool for the satisfaction of their libido while others consider her a slave. Living in this society is devoid of respect and the fundamental human right of respect. According to Altaf and Shahzad she is in quest for identity and respect in many manners. She is a woman in a misogynistic society and a Christian in a Muslim majority country. This worsens her situation and she is unable to get the respect that she deserves as a human. This quest leads to her ultimate death.

II. ALICE: A SUBALTERN AND THE VERACITY OF THIS FACT

Subaltern is a term used for the marginalized people who are deemed outcast of their society. It is because of their outcast status that they are not given equal rights and discriminated based on who and what they are. There can be different reasons for being deemed a subaltern, either it might be because of a person’s (or group’s) social class, gender, or some other reason that they are considered inferior. Though the concept of subaltern is often presented a simple subject, it cannot be put plainly. The complexity of the concept of subaltern is seen in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s groundbreaking essay, *Can the Subaltern Speak*. For the reason of slipperiness and fluidity of the concept of subaltern, the arguments of a person/character’s being subaltern are justified using bits and pieces instead of a

clearly put definition from Spivak. Spivak writes in her essay: “But one must nevertheless insist that the colonized subaltern subject is irretrievably heterogenous.” (Spivak, 38) This means that limiting the subaltern to a specific domain, class, or gender would be a mistake. It is for this reason that Alice should be considered for being subaltern and this essay explores this fact.

Oxford Dictionary of Critical Theory defines ‘Subaltern’ as:

“A term conceived by the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, who because he was in prison and his writings subject to censorship, used it as a code word for any class of people (but especially peasants and workers) subject to the “hegemony” of another more powerful class.” (Buchanan, 423)

Spivak’s essay, as the mainstay for the researcher’s study provides an idea of what a subaltern can be. She has done this by citing different examples from India under British Raj and the academic works of western writers like Deleuze, Derrida, Foucault, etc. This chapter substantiates the argument of Alice’s (the main character in the novel) being a subaltern using textual evidence from works of different Subaltern theorists and the novel. The term subaltern in the mentioned novel is an exhibition of Alice’s subaltern status in particular as well as the portrayal of her fellow subaltern characters in general in the Pakistani society.

The concept of subaltern can be traced back to Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci who gave an idea of the concept of subaltern in his work *Notes on Italian History* which was later published collectively in *Prison Notebooks*. Gramsci took this concept from the works of Karl Marx, and later this concept was developed by theorists like Spivak, Ranjit Guha, Edward Said, and the group of Indian scholars interested in subaltern studies named “The Subaltern Collective.”

Antonio Gramsci’s description of subaltern is a primitive form of this concept which has later been developed by other scholars. El Habib Louai in his comparative paper on different subaltern scholars has put Gramsci’s definition of subaltern as follows.

“The subaltern classes refer fundamentally in Gramsci’s words to any “low rank” person or group of people in a particular society suffering under hegemonic domination of a ruling elite class that denies them the basic rights of participation in the making of local history and culture as

active individuals of the same nation.”
(Louai, 5)

Gramsci comes up with a simple description of subaltern in his work *Prison Notebooks*, which is given as follows.

“The subaltern classes by definition, are not unified and cannot unite until they are able to become a “State”: their history, therefore, is intertwined with that of civil society, and thereby with the history of States and groups of States” (Gramsci, 1971).

Other features that define a subaltern in Gramscian work are belonging to peasant or lower class, low financial and social status, and oppression by the dominant class. His concept of subaltern is mainly related to the oppression of working or peasant class by the members of Benito Mussolini’s National Fascist Party. The subaltern in Gramsci’s works refers to a “low rank” person or a group that suffers under the yoke of a hegemonic power or a group of people.

If Alice’s character is analyzed using the same definition, then we come to know that she conforms to the concept of subaltern. Whether this comparison is done using her social background, religious affiliation, or her financial status. All these contribute to her underdog status, where she faces resentment from those in the higher classes of society. She belongs to Christian community in a Muslim majority country of Pakistan. Despite high claims of equality and social privileges, non-Muslims face backlash in different walks of life. From separation of residential areas to being shunned in workplaces, and considered untouchables in public spaces, Christians in this novel face complete social discrimination. She is not only Christian but also a woman in a misogynistic society and has poor financial background. This adds to her miseries, and she faces all the problems that a subaltern can face.

Alice belongs to the same class, and being a member of the Christian community, she resides in French Colony. This colony is a slum for Christians in Karachi with bare minimum fundamental requirements of life are fulfilled. This colony if compared to the state of the oppressed class in Gramsci’s work shows evident oppression and its inmates are subject to oppressive behavior of the dominant class. As mentioned at several instances in the novel, Christians from French Colony have no opportunity to serve at any place other than Municipal Corporation. Also, the municipal corporation doesn’t allocate them positions other than janitors. Most people outside French Colony think that it is a place inhabited by janitors. As “Alice Bhatti knows that people think that everyone in French Colony is a janitor

and works for the corporation. But she refuses to be drawn into this discussion. It never goes anywhere” (Hanif, 106).

The same holds true about the females of their class. They have no other opportunity save working as maids or nurses in hospitals. In both places they work in unfavorable situations, where they are subject to sexual and domestic violence. As seen in the case of Alice, it is clearly evident that she is a subaltern. This can be justified from various perspectives using Gramscian concept of the subaltern. Fitting Alice into the rubric of Gramscian subaltern seems a bit tricky but this becomes easy if characteristics for both are compared. So, if the members of Christian community ‘unite,’ as said in Gramscian description, they can overcome their subaltern status. The same can be held true about the Christians of French Colony who if get united can change their subaltern status but unfortunately it doesn’t happen. Gramscian subalternity is defined by resistance as well, as “No matter how heterogeneous the subaltern groups may be, there is a constantly unchanging character which defines them: that is, the notion of resistance to the imposed domination of the elite class” (Louai, 6). So, Alice resists her status of subaltern time and again. Though this strife doesn’t prove fruitful, it shows her perseverance to break the chains of being a subaltern and her resultant marginalized status.

El Habib Louai puts the characteristics of Gramscian subaltern in their analysis very aptly, as:

“This distinct difference between the elite and the subaltern is evident when we conceived it through the notion of political mobilization. The elite political mobilization is fulfilled through appropriation of or adjustment to the British parliamentary institutions and laws whereas the subaltern political mobilization is founded on classical forms of social organization such as: blood relationships and kinship, territoriality, traditional and tribal affiliations where popular mobilization take the form of peasant insurgencies and regional demon-strations. No matter how heterogeneous the subaltern groups may be, there is a constantly unchanging character which defines them: that is, the notion of resistance to the imposed domination of the elite class.” (Louai, 6)(Ilhaam)

Based on the above-mentioned characteristics, we can see that Alice as a subaltern is part of resistance and political mobilization. This happens when she is student at the

nursing school and comes in direct conflict with Muslim students. She tries to mobilize fellow Christian students, but this attempt fails, and she faces disciplinary action. It is because of her low social status that she is punished for the mistake committed by a senior surgeon. She is sentenced to fourteen months in jail for death of a patient who died to the carelessness of the surgeon. In short, she does her best to change her status by political efforts, resistance to the elite and dominant classes, and trying different affiliations but none of these work to change her status. In contrast, if Alice and her underling group is compared to the group of Muslim girls, they have a strong backing. They are supported by their political/religious brethren in boy's colleges. As, "It seemed the poster girls had poster brothers in other colleges who had guns" (Hanif, 233). Gayatri Spivak is mainly interested in two things about a subaltern whether they can "speak," or be "heard." There are some characteristic features that define a subaltern in Spivak's *Can the Subaltern Speak*. These characteristics include being the "indigenous dispossessed in colonial societies," "ability to make their decisions," "achieving agency," etc. Spivak talks in detail about the Western scholars who talk about these subaltern, but this is of no use because they "reproduce" the hegemonic structures." She concludes her essay by stating that the subaltern are finally disposed and thus can't "speak." Subaltern is also defined by "marginalization" and "oppression" in Spivak's work. She puts forward the idea that the poor don't have any voice in the society, and they are not often faithfully represented by those having the power to say. These include religious leaders, educators, officials, and Western scholars.

If Alice is compared to the characteristics of a subaltern put forward by Spivak, we find a lot of similarities between the two. The main example of the subaltern cited in Spivak's work is that of Rani Gulari. She is a woman from Bengal who commits suicide after being foiled in a failed attempt to attack British officials in colonial India. Her aim is to free her motherland from the colonizers who have come to this land usurping the rights of its inmates. If we compare Alice to Gulari, we don't find an explicit political struggle, but we come to know that her struggle resembles that of Gulari. She is an apt example of "double marginalization" mentioned in Spivak's work. Gulari commits suicide and this way she wants to be "retrieved" through her body. She dies and this signifies her struggle. In comparison, Alice doesn't embrace death intentionally, but her struggle is an evident example of resistance against oppression.

If Alice's marginalization is studied, we come to know that she doesn't have opportunity to have a dignified living. When it comes to the opportunities for job and equal status in society, she is denied that but when it comes to her

gender, everyone is ready to exploit her. This can be seen in the instances from novel when her commuting experience is described. "But the same people who wouldn't drink from a tap that she has touched have no problem casually poking their elbows into her breast or contorting their own bodies to rub against her heathen bottom" (Hanif, 130). Spivak considers subaltern to be the "slave" in the "master-slave relationship." She has taken this concept from Ranajit Guha's *Subaltern Studies*. She agrees to Guha that the subaltern cannot write their history, as "Guha sees his definition of 'the people' within the master-slave dialectic—their text articulates the difficult task of rewriting its own conditions of impossibility as the conditions of its possibility" (Spivak, 39). At another point she writes about the subaltern as "...the people or subaltern—which is itself defined as the difference from elite" (Spivak, 39). So, if Alice is considered from the perspective of difference from elite, she can be without any doubt put under the rubric of subaltern. If we look at her personal history, she has all the traits of belonging to the class that is different from elite. She comes from a class that is there to serve the elite in every possible manner. It not only works physically for the elite and serves as a commodity but is also used for the satisfaction of the libidinal desires of the elite. This is evident from how she is dealt in this hospital, in buses and also when she is commuting back and forth from her workplace. She can't write her history or has the power to be represented legally or in historical documents. All that is there to represent her is the versions of stories that are hearsay and fabricated anecdotes. There is no story that considers her own version of an event.

Gender plays main role in the determination of subaltern role. As Spivak writes in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* "The pattern of domination is here determined mainly by gender rather than class"(Spivak, 39). This further substantiates the fact that Alice is a subaltern based on her gender, her class, her financial status, the community she belongs to. If this had not been the case, and she belonged to a different group (the elite class), then she might not have been a subaltern. "Lewd gestures, whispered suggestions, uninvited hands on her bottom are all part of Alice Bhatti's daily existence" (Hanif, 17), Her subaltern status is strengthened by her class. If we compare this to another character in the novel, that is mentioned for a single instance, i.e. Hannah Massey, who is a bishop's daughter, we come to know that she is truly a subaltern. Hannah Massey belongs to a wealthy and influential family and for this reason she is enjoying her life abroad. She has a thriving business and happy life while Alice faces every possible problem in Karachi. If Alice had the same financial privileges, then she would also have no exposure to this discriminatory treatment.

A subaltern is not merely considered a subaltern based on what traits they have of a subaltern. Rather this is more determined by what situations they face due to their roots. The marginalization runs deep in the whole society. It is for this reason that the Christians of French Colony pretend to be Muslims to ensure that they don't face discrimination because of their identity. "They remind her of those people in French Colony who give their children these names in the hope that they'll pass as Muslas" (Hanif, 241). This way they don't only face threatened but are also forced to adopt the identity of the dominant class and shed their own. This deprivation of identity and still being dealt like untouchable is a dilemma that they face everywhere in the society that has declared them outcast.

As Spivak considers a subaltern marginalized, unable to speak, and have no history of their own, we come to know that Alice faces the same problems. She doesn't even have the freedom to take her personal decisions, and if she takes any, she is ridiculed for it. Some of these include her decision to marry Teddy Butt, taking refuge at sister Hina Alvi's residence, resistance against being used to satisfy the libido of Qaz's male attendants in VIP room of Sacred Hospital, etc. Her history is distorted and there are myriads of rumors spread about her. This doesn't even stop after her death. Thus her story remains ambiguous, and she dies the death of a subaltern. Rosalind C. Morris writes in *Reflections on the History of an Idea – Can the Subaltern Speak?* "Subalternity is less an identity than what we might call a predicament, but this is true in very odd sense. For, in Spivak's definition, it is the structured place from which the capacity to access power is radically obstructed." (Morris, 8). So, we can conclude that Alice is a subaltern who not only lives the life of a subaltern, but her death is also a perfect example of a subaltern.

III. TREATMENT OF WOMEN IN PAKISTANI SOCIETY: A STUDY OF NOVEL'S FIRST TIER CHARACTER

Misogyny runs deep in the roots of Pakistani society. It is not the result of some short-term incidents and their after-effects, rather it is resultant from the patriarchal setup of this society. Misogyny has been depicted in detail in Hanif's novel where many instances show how women are treated by men and how morally corrupt this society is. There is a clear depiction of the power relationship between men and women. Men have power and they abuse it, and the treatment of women like second-class citizens is a common practice amongst men. Women are considered a commodity for procreation, and not given status higher than personal property. Rosalind C. Morris writes in the introduction about subaltern in *Reflection on the History of*

an Idea – Can the Subaltern Speak? "The "woman" as Spivak tells us, inevitably is doubly in shadow" (Morris, 2).

The first-tier character in this novel is Alice Joseph Bhatti, a nurse who is resident of French Colony. She is born to an outcast (choohra) father, Joseph Bhatti, who is a janitor at Karachi Municipal Corporation. She has been through unspeakable horrors due to her parents' social status. They are not only financially weak but also have no considerable position in their own colony. It is due to their low income that she is malnourished, and their family isn't able to eat well. She is a subaltern not for a single reason but there are different reasons for it. One of these reasons is her gender. It is because of her gender that she receives discriminatory treatment. As Spivak writes about gender's role in her essay "The pattern of domination is here determined mainly by gender rather than class. The subordinated gender following the dominant within the challenge of nationalism while remaining caught within gender oppression is not an unknown story." Alice's life from birth till death is the prime example of miseries due to her gender. It is her gender that makes her life troublesome from the very beginning. It is because of her feminine body that she is ridiculed by those in her school, church, and other public places. Later this body adds to her trouble because men try to harass her. Men stare at her, grope her, and try to satisfy their libido. This bothers her in interviews, as happens in her interview at Sacred Hospital for All Ailments where one of the interview panel members stares at her body parts and makes obscene comments. "Postnatal care?" His eyes are level with Alice Bhatti's breasts. "Inverted nipples. How do you deal with them? Should you deal with them Have you any personal experiences to share? Ortho sir roles his tongue around his gums as if there might be nipples stuck between his teeth." (Hanif, 17). This is the first instance of the lewd gestures and talk in Sacred Hospital for All Ailments and this continues till the end. She is even harassed at the 'Charya Ward' which is ward for those suffering from mental illness. The inmates of this ward react in an odd manner when she enters there. One of the inmates drops his trousers, some of them begin to shout. "Surprise them," he whispers. "Reveal yourself." (Hanif, 48) This is the reaction of one of the men in the mental illnesses ward. They hold her and then lift her up in the air. Charya Ward seems like a miniature representation of the society she lives in. The difference between the two is that in one the inmates are called mentally ill, while in the other they are considered fit and healthy.

"The agency was always male, the woman was always the victim" (Spivak, 57). In this society Alice always suffers at hands of men. There are few exceptions to it, but the majority is there to torment her. She doesn't even feel safe when she is waiting for bus, there she pretends that someone

is coming to pick her. She takes careful steps to ensure that no one misconstrues her gait. In short, she is in miserable condition due to men. Men see her as a tool for pleasure instead of a living human being and this makes it difficult for her. Her body speaks of the different events that she underwent. There are scars of cigarettes on her body that her communist boyfriend doctor left. She believed him to be someone sincere to her, but he only craved her body. This makes her believe that her body (gender) has been the reason of miseries for her.

The final misery, which ultimately leads to her death, comes when she is assigned VIP ward for night-shift duty. This is where the attendants of the patient, Qaz, try to abuse Alice and she takes pragmatic skill to prevent the man from abusing her. She tries to slash his phallus, also symbolic of trying to challenge men's power, and this leads to events that end in form of her miserable death. She is murdered by her own husband, Teddy Butt, for money. These men are from an influential family and hire Teddy to murder her. He does this by throwing a dangerous poison on her body and this proves fatal.

"The subaltern as a female cannot be heard or read" (Spivak, 63). Thus, Alice, despite taking steps to make others hear what happened to her is silenced. She is silenced so that the society doesn't come to know about what happened in the VIP ward. She loses her life to the fulfillment of the desire of revenge of the influential family. What worsens Alice's fate is the stories that are narrated after her death. Some call her saint and others equate her to an angel who has been taken to heavens by some divine creatures. This helps hide the story that what happened to her and who was the culprit. The crime is covered in an organized manner.

IV. CONCLUSION

Our Lady of Alice Bhatti lays bare the fabric of Pakistani society and the inherent set of injustices done to the marginalized people in the Pakistani society. The special consideration in this study is the first-tier character like Alice—who is the main character. Despite the fact that there is no specific definition available for subaltern which straitjackets them—which is rather fortunate because there might have been possibility of skipping a subaltern due to non-conformity to a specific part of it— she has been studied using Gayatri Spivak's essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?*. Following the features of a subaltern mentioned in Spivak's work, we come to know that this character conforms to the features that defines a subaltern.

Keeping in view the life and death of this character it can be confirmed that her miseries are mainly due to her gender, religion, financial conditions, etc. She faces abnormal situations throughout her life and this has been

depicted well in the novel. Her life since her early childhood has been a perfect example of a subaltern and the same is the case with her family.

Alice's miseries as a subaltern don't come to halt after death of her mother. They continue during her educational and professional career. Her subaltern status is manifested throughout the novel. It is like a festering wound that reminds her of the pain time and again. She tries to get rid of it by battling those who have inflicted it by dividing the society into elite and subaltern. Unfortunately, all her attempts go in vain and there is no change in her subaltern status except the bad memories of the struggle to gain an equal status. She is targeted for her religious affiliation and expression of it during her nursing school days and there is no end to it.

Her body is an example of a battlefield where the politics of subaltern and marginalization operated. This struggle doesn't end in assaults like the typical of subalterns, rather it continues. She is jailed for an offence for which she was not solely responsible, still she is held as the main accused and sentenced to fourteen months in jail. It is her subaltern status that doesn't let her lead a normal life. She faces problems in her professional life due to her gender and faith. The misogyny rampant in Pakistani society and her faith lead to her ultimate death. A patient's relatives try to abuse her and this led to her death at hands of her husband Teddy Butt. He is paid for this job and he carries out it using some poison.

Miseries of a subaltern are not only harassment at the hands of the oppressor class but also the recurrent reminders of the fact that they are not normal and equal citizens. It is a mental torture that continues and is expressed in different forms. The reason behind it is the belief of women being a commodity or a property that must be owned by men. It is for this reason that women face physical and verbal abuse not only at hands of their family members, relatives, but also from those who are not related to them by any means. It is his foul language like using term 'slutsville' for the Sacred Heart Hospital, and undue intervention that shows that men regardless of their education or social background consider it a right to abuse women. Alice resists to this other abuses in an undaunted manner but it is of no use. Ultimately, there is no place for a subaltern in the mentioned society.

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