

MAGICAL REALISM AS A TOOL FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN OUR LADY OF ALICE BHATTI BY MOHAMMED HANIF

AAMER SHAHEEN¹, SADIA QAMAR² & MUHAMMAD HAFEEZ-UR-REHMAN³

^{1,2}Lecturer in English, Department of English, Government College University, Faisalabad, Pakistan

³BS(Hons) English Literature, Department of English, Government College University, Faisalabad, Pakistan

ABSTRACT

Mohammed Hanif, a comic genius, represents feminist agenda in his novel *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* by empowering his protagonist Alice Bhatti with the tool of magical realism. With a very strong interest in sprawling metropolis Karachi, he delineates the dilemma of hypocritically conservative Pakistani society where women are sexually harassed, shot or hacked, strangled or suffocated, poisoned or burnt and hanged or buried alive. But Mohammed Hanif's headstrong protagonist, Alice Joseph Bhatti, is fighting against Pakistan's misogynous patriarchy and religious majority. Hanif stands fast in advocating the role of Pakistani women who are conversant in patriarchal discourse. *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* foils the patriarchal hegemony by incorporating magical agency in Alice Bhatti to restore her feminine prestige and primacy in the real mundane phallogocentric world. The exploitation of the Christian Choorahs (Sweepers) in the novel is also the indication of Muslim intolerant attitude towards minorities of Pakistan. The objective of the research is to highlight the depth of Pakistani Literature in the broader realm of South Asian Literature which has recently gained more momentum with the start of a number of Literary Awards for this region. The research draws its Theoretical Framework from the general understanding of the feminist theory and magical realism. The contemporaneous nature of the research gives it a contemporaneous relevance and scope. Hanif has carved Alice Bhatti as a saint by the end of the novel with the help of magical realism. Therefore suggesting that Hanif's feminine characters achieve their place and control over society when they are dead.

KEYWORDS: Magical Realism, Women Empowerment, Patriarchy

INTRODUCTION

Alice Joseph Bhatti is one of the miraculous characters of Pakistani fiction in English. This is a journey of a French colony girl from Alice Joseph Bhatti to *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*. Hanif gives an uplift to his protagonist through different miracles in the narrative for example unbeatable courage of Christian girl, art of reading faces, her prayer that gives life to a dead baby and her exaltedness as a soldieress of Yassoo. Hanif borrows this technique of Magic Realism from the Latin American writers who employ this technique to make their literary works fascinating and alluring. Other female characters of Pakistani fiction in English are usually portrayed as the victims of patriarchal society like Bapsi Sidhwa's seducing female beauty Shanta. Nadeem Aslam's Christian female characters in 'Season of the Rainbirds' are under the grim clutches of Muslim majority and they are being tortured. But Hanif's Alice is portrayed as strong and ambitious Pakistani female character.

Research Objectives

In view of this parameter, the research objectives of this study are as follows

- To put the female protagonist under the microscopic view and investigate the mysterious things in the character.
- To open up the technique of Magic Realism which empowers women and counters the patriarchal discourse of Pakistani literature
- To unfold the mysteriousness of sainthood in the narrative.

Research Questions

This study will focus on the following research questions

- How does the novelist incorporate the technique of Magic Realism in his novel "Our Lady of Alice Bhatti"?
- Why does Mohammed Hanif over magnify his female protagonist Alice Joseph Bhatti in contrast with other female characters in the narrative?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study is narrative research and follows descriptive-cum-analytical method of research. The culled textual references are given as an evidence for strengthening argument of this research. The key concepts of Magic Realism, Women empowerment and Latin American tradition of Magic Realism are investigated in this research. The character analysis is an important ingredient of this research paper. Alice Joseph Bhatti is put under microscope for complete comprehension of the developmental phases of the protagonist. Relevant quotes and extracts have been taken from the reviews of the novel, critical articles and books.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review of this article can be given by naming some exponent literary critics and their ground breaking works which lay the conceptual background of Magic Realism which is key concept of this research. Maggie Ann Bowers' book *Magical Realism*, Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris's book "Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community", Raman Selden et al's *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, Rani Singh's essay on *Magical Realism* and Peter Berry's *Beginning theory* make the literature that is reviewed below.

The term magical realism was first used by Franz Roh in 1927. Roh was a German Historian and he never gave the definition of magical realism. The definition for magical realism listed in the *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms* is "a kind of modern fiction in which fabulous and fantastical events are included in a narrative that otherwise maintains the reliable tone of objective realist report". (Baldick, 1990, p. 146)

Rani Singh in her essay on "Magical Realism" declares it as a genre that challenges notions of the real by incorporating elements of the marvelous into everyday realities. The main potential of magical realism lies in revealing the power of language to construct identity and our perception of the world. It gives the voice to the marginalized and victimized people of the society. The feminist literature revises the role of the female through magical realism. ("Essay on Magical Realism", n.d., p.1)

Wendy B. Faris defines magical realism in *Ordinary Enchantments* in this way: “Magical realism combines realism and the fantastic so that the marvelous seems to grow organically within the ordinary, blurring the distinction between them”. (Faris, 2004, p.1)

Epistemology and ontology are the two filters of magic. In epistemology the magic is travelled through a person’s perception while in case of ontology the world around the person is magical on its own.

Maggie Ann Bowers gives one of the best guides for the genre of Magical Realism in her book “Magical Realism”. She points out these traits of a magical realist narrative:

“Not only must the narrator propose real and magical happenings with the same matter of fact in a recognizably realistic setting but the magical things must be accepted as a part of material reality, whether seen or unseen, they cannot be simply the imaginings of a single mind, whether under the influence of drugs or for the purpose of exploring the workings of the mind, imagining our features or for making a moral point.” (Bowers, 2004, p. 29)

ANALYSIS

Spiritual Journey of Alice Joseph Bhatti

Alice Joseph Bhatti surpasses the human boundaries and catches the status of a saint. Her romance with her religion from her childhood, her sacrifices as a reformer of untamed Muslim girls in nursing school, her courage to stand against the corrupt surgeons in the hospital, her bold and mature attitude towards males, her miracles in the maternity ward, and her devotion with her profession make Alice Joseph Bhatti of French Colony “Mother Teresa” of Pakistan. Muhammad Hanif attempts to empower Alice through all these spiritual traits. Our analysis will expose the formative developmental stages of this saintly figure. We will trace out “how does a common girl from French Colony of Choorahs get the prime status of saint with divine powers?” This colony is famous for its production of good sanitary professionals but it will give birth to a saint. How can a person get access to God with empty stomachs and multiple frustrations? This question is answered by Mohammed Hanif in this novel. He shapes this female character with the color of magical realism. In this way he magnifies and empowers Alice Bhatti, and a common girl becomes “Our Lady of Alice Bhatti”. The other women of French Colony are supposed to clean the shit of the big houses. This is their fate. But the case of Alice Joseph Bhatti is unusual. She is rising from this filth and becoming the shining jewel in this world of fiction created by Mohammed Hanif. Rising from filth is the metonym for Alice’s “brought up”. The chapter twelve of this novel represents the background and brought up of Alice Bhatti.

Miss Alice Belongs to a stinky colony of sprawling metropolis Karachi. The people of this colony are the shit-cleaner of this mega city Karachi. These Choorahs have been here in this territory from centuries, their fate is irreversible and their plight is same as it was before. Alice’s father Joseph Bhatti is described as untouchable Choorah among other Choorahs. The family where starvation is adored as God’s will, where daughter is not answerable to her father, where there is no mother at home, where father does not advise his daughter, where there is no one at home to ask her to cover her head; This is the family of Alice Joseph Bhatti. Her brought up is subjected to many lackings. She learns to live with all these lackings satisfactorily. She is fully satisfied and confident with what she has in her life. Neither she complains God nor does she finger towards any person for her plight. She always praises “Yassoo” and feels a strange divine spell around her.

Alice's mother, Margret Bhatti, died when she was twelve. Her mother's death was not natural death but a murder by bourgeoisie rapist. The notable thing about this character is that tragedies in life are making her stronger. This is a strange thing about this character. Normal human beings become weak when they encounter tragedies. But this is reverse in the case of Alice Bhatti. Her mother's death makes her mature. So we can say Alice Joseph Bhatti is a self-made lady. Her education map from primary school to nursing school is also a miracle. Giving education to a girl from French Colony is against the norm. Alice takes this challenge and fulfills it successfully. She loves Yassoo and it seems that she is having intimate access to Jesus Christ. Commonly girls of Alice's age betray her gender because of such circumstances. But Alice is sticking to her gender and religion. She is well aware of her moral values. Alice's mystic nature bestows her with full fledged social insight. She can read the faces, and can tell about the real faces of people. Alice reveals this secret to a ward boy Noor in these words:

“Ordinary people on the streets, I just know. I look at their face and then I see their dead face and I know how they will die.” (Hanif, 2011, p. 61)

Alice admission in nursing school, her war with intolerant Muslim girls, her visit to Borstal Jail, and her appearance in the judicial court are the magnificent incidents that not only make her courageous but revolutionary too. Mohammed Hanif delineates the prejudiced attitude of the Muslim society towards Christian minority. Alice is fighting against this system established by Muslims where Christians are treated as worthless specie. Joseph Bhatti describes the attitude of the Muslim society in these words:

“These Muslas will make you clean their shit and then complain that you stink.” (Hanif, 2011, p. 01)

In the nursing school, the Muslim girls gave Alice the title of “the Kafir den”. These girls protested against her with hockey sticks and a copy of the Quran. There were three Christian girls in the class. But it was Alice who faced all of them. She is Yassoo's soldieress and preacher, and is fighting against those girls. When this conflict between this Christian warrior and Muslim girls reach to its peak, then Doctor Pereira, Head of the Nursing School, took notice and remarked:

“Nurses might be doing God's work but they are not supposed to bring God into their work.” (ibid. 254)

But Alice made Yassoo's love her slogan for preaching in the streets of French Colony. She had faced a lot of physical tortures and these tortures are printed on her body like a moon shaped scar of bullet on her left cheek, a cut on her right eye brow, a bite on her shoulder and sign of cigarette torture on the side of her left breast. Nursing school girls' brothers gunned Alice. The narrator of this narrative comments on Alice in this manner:

“Her twenty-seven years old body is a compact little war zone where competing warriors have trampled and left their marks.” (ibid. 256)

She is still as much strong and energetic as she was before all these incidents. But these happenings in her life gave her more immunity and her stamina had increased. Throughout the narrative Mohammad Hanif attempts to magnify his female character. He makes her prominent by showing her ambitious, calm and spiritual nature. The visibility of her spiritual side becomes crystal clear in the last chapters of this novel. The unusual and exceptional signals of strange powers in her personality make her mysterious character in this world of fiction. Except God she does not fear from anyone, that's why she faces every setback with full courage.

Alice's stand against the famous surgeon sends her into the police lockup. She was invited in the police station for an informal chat about the death in the operation theatre. The patient died due to the negligence of a famous surgeon. During operation she was there in operation theatre. As a witness she went there to speak against the corrupt surgeon. But she was declared the main accused and the surgeon got the pre-arrest bail. Alice as soldieress of Yassoo determined to punish the main accused by herself. After getting bail, she herself became police and went straight to the clinic of that surgeon. This amazing and brave punishment is described by the narrator in this way:

"Before the famous surgeon could shout or press buzzer, she took a marble flowerpot from the windowsill and aimed at his head. He fainted at the first blow and thus was saved; suffering a broken nose and losing four front teeth from his imported Swiss dentures." (ibid. 266)

This was Alice's religious force which pushed her against the corruptors and defaulters. Her intimacy with God or her connection with God is described by the narrator in this way:

"You could not grow up in French Colony and not have God shoved down your throat, His (God) presence as pervasive as the stench from the open sewers. Now she believes in God like people in the weather." (ibid. 260)

After the war with the surgeon in the clinic she was sent to jail for twelve months. That was why Alice had to take her final exam from Borstal Jail. The jail's filthy atmosphere could not harm her because of the spiritual armor of this soldieress. Mohammad Hanif's heroine "Alice Joseph Bhatti" is brimmed with masculine boldness and headstrong qualities. It is hard to find such a character in the real Pakistani society. Mohammad Hanif gives Alice the masculine traits like maturity, courage and superb consciousness to equalize the both genders. Like so many other Pakistani women who are burnt alive, buried, hacked, raped and victimized Alice is not vulnerable or weak. The novelist distinguishes this female character from other characters in the text in this manner:

"Alice does not like to be like other women. She tries to maintain a nondescript exterior; she learns the sideways glance instead of looking at people directly. She speaks in practiced, precise sentences; so that she is not misunderstood....She avoids eye contact and she never eats in public." (ibid.145)

Raman Selden quotes the remarks of Robin Lakoff about masculine traits in females in the first edition of her book "A Readers Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory", and these remarks are given below:

"Robin Lakoff is of belief that women's language actuality is inferior, since it contains the patterns of weakness and uncertainty, focuses on the trivial, the frivolous, the unserious, and stresses personal emotions. Male utterances, she argues, is stronger and should be adopted if they wish to achieve social equality with men." (Selden, Widdowson, & Brooker, 1997, p. 121)

Mohammad Hanif's heroine is wearing this masculine language throughout this narrative. Her language is free from weakness, uncertainty, triviality and unseriousness. He empowers this lady by using such linguistic expressions in the narrative which advocate his feminist agenda too. Noor, who understands Alice's nature, comments on Alice many times in the text. He reveals her psychology in a comment in this way:

"Alice is the kind of person who will return a favor by saying fuck you too. Her fatal flaw is not her family background, but her total inability to say simple things like 'excuse me' and 'thank you'." (Hanif, 2011, p.32)

These expressions like ‘excuse me’ and ‘thank you’ show the weakness and frivolity of language. That’s why Alice is avoiding such sort of language. Now a question arises “From whom did she learn these attitudes and moral values?” Definitely schools and colleges do not teach these things. Such values are injected by an institute named home. But there is no one at home to spoon her with moral values. Yassoo whispers in her ears when she goes to Church for Sunday prayers. We can easily comment that she is under the shadow of Jesus Christ.

When Alice appears in the court before judge; she is erected and full of fire of Jesus’ love. She considers police women as her bodyguards. In the court proceedings her attitude towards the judge is as:

“She looks at the judge as if to say, how can a man so fat, so ugly, wearing such dandruff covered black robe sit in judgment on her?” (ibid. 69)

Alice Joseph Bhatti thrives into her practical life after leaving Borstal Jail. She gets the job of Replacement junior Nurse at the Sacred Heart Hospital for All Ailments. Her professional life as a nurse can be tagged as a life full of miracles and eye-opener incidents. Alice’s prayer which gives life to a dead baby in the maternity ward and cock sucking in the VIP room are among these incidents. Alice works in the hospital with full devotion. Sister Hina Alvi who is a senior nurse, assigns Alice the night duty of the VIP room where a bourgeoisie lady “Begum Qazalbash” is admitted. She is suffering from renal failure. After crossing the army of bodyguards she reaches the VIP room. She enters the room and examines the condition of the patient. The room is facilitated with all luxuries. Alice notices two young fat men sitting in the corner of the room. Perhaps they are Begum Qazalbash’s sons. One of them is staring at her. He gets up from his seat and offers Alice a piece of cake. After this offer he points a pistol on her head and forces her for blowjob. As already mentioned she is not a delicate woman who dances on the signals of men. But she is a player who fucks others. She will end this game as skillfully as she did good job in the clinic of surgeon. Alice slashes his cock and leaves the man crying in the room. She has too much positional to answer back the acts of victimization performed by men. This is the strongest thing about this character. Alice is an agent of this narrative who carries the feminist agenda. She answers the complaint of Sister HinaAlvi about the incident in these words:

HinaAlvi says: “This is real life. That thing that you slashed was a real cock.”

Alice replies: “And he was waving that real cock of his in my real face.” (ibid. 111)

Her straightforwardness shows the real beauty of this character. These traits in her personality make the readers love her. Alice Joseph Bhatti’s emergence as a saintly figure in this world of novel is proved with a number of miracles taking place in the novel. The first vivid example is the birth at the maternity ward. The dead baby caught life with Alice’s prayer. The baby was declared dead by senior nurse HinaAlvi. How does this miracle take place? The description is given below:

“She holds the baby’s palm in both her hands and starts to pray. She prays like she never prayed before, like nobody prayed before. She just conjures up her Lord Yassoo and gives it to Him. She holds him by his throat till he can’t breathe, she hangs from His robe...She accuses Him of being a deadbeat Lord leaving poor wretched girls to bring dead babies into this world.”(pp. 243-244)

The final moment of epiphany when Alice meets the Holy Spirit is described or narrated in these words:

“She hears a door creak behind her and she opens her teary eyes slowly. Before she can turn around she sees a little blood bubble pop out of the dead baby’s left nostril, then the toes on his right foot start twitching, as he is trying to walk in his death sleep.” (ibid. 244)

The hearing of door creak indicates the presence of Holy Spirit in the room. Indeed God answered the prayer of Alice Joseph Bhatti. Her cursive prayers in Latin and Punjabi bring the soul back in the baby’s body. Such extraordinary strange power in her prayer attests her as a prophet like figure. Her unusual powers are going to reveal now. She herself knows that she has done something monstrous. Alice is breaking the fundamental rule of nature through this miracle, thus she is surpassing the human boundaries. She is becoming another Alice. She is in transition from a common French Colony girl to our lady of Alice Bhatti. The birth of another Alice is witnessed in the chapter 22 of this novel. Hanif empowers Alice Joseph Bhatti by giving her the prophetic qualities and mysterious powers. The first person who eyed this whole incident was a ward sweeper; the narrator describes this in this manner:

“The sweeper will tell everyone that he felt the presence of the Holy Spirit. In reality he is down on his knees, he realizes that the dead baby came alive is a miracle.” (ibid. 272)

The news about this baby’s birth reaches people like wide spreading disease. The people come to see her during her day time duty. They kiss her hands but she does not let them kiss her feet. In her absence the patients also detect her presence in the Sacred Heart Hospital for All Ailments.

“She appears at people’s bedsides in the middle of the night when she is not even on duty, when she is not even in the hospital, when she is probably fast asleep in her bed.” (ibid. 277)

Joseph Bhatti’s open letter to the congregation for the causes of saints gives the conclusive statement about Alice sainthood. Instead of highlighting the suffrage of Pakistani women Mohammed Hanif pens totally different consequences of suffrage which are magnifying the personality of female character. By passing this text into the lens of magical realism Alice Joseph Bhatti appears to be a zoomed feisty character who is the embodiment of the Christian sainthood. Alice’s disturbed matrimonial life and her murder is presented quite differently by Mohammed Hanif. Alice’s death is ascending her to heaven. Her surprise marriage at sea with an estranged husband Junior Mr. Faisalabad-Teddy Butt is a failure. Hanif employs so many nefarious adjectives to define this gentleman called Teddy Butt. He declares him reformed rapist, killer and womanizer. The disturbed matrimonial life of the couple leads to the demonic and monstrous ending where Teddy Butt pours one liter Sulphuric acid on the face of Alice Joseph Bhatti. This painful incident gives her the ticket to heaven. She ascends to Heaven with Holy Mother and does not suffer from the pain of acid. In this way this murder is not disempowering the daughter of Joseph Bhatti. Commonly this sort of death is described in terms of fatal ending but in this case she is empowered. Most novelists delineate this sort of violence or victimization as the plight of women but Mohammed Hanif attempts to give superhuman status instead of subhuman position. Alice is celebrated as a saint in the letter of Joseph Bhatti in this way:

“My daughter did not suffer the pain that her estranged husband meant to cause her by pouring half a liter of Sulphuric acid on her angelic face. Instead she ascended to heaven with our Holy Mother.” (ibid. 329)

Some others instances of Magic Realism in the Novel

“An X-ray machine rolled through the corridors of Ortho ward came to stop on the edge of stairs, then extended its mechanical arm and started whizzing as if it was controlled by an invisible force and taking photographs for posterity.” (ibid. 329)

“An IV drip in the general ward turned to milk.” (ibid. 329)

“The medico-legal officer Dr. John Malick also witnessed the apparition and kneeled down and sang the praise of our Lord Yassoo and then of Our Holy Mother.” (ibid. 330)

“The sky was clear and there was no moon. Then above the roof people saw a silver throne hovering, held aloft by a flock of peacocks on which sat a likeness of our Holy Mother and also the Likeness of Alice Joseph Bhatti.” (ibid. 328)

Other female characters of the novel

Mohammed Hanif’s other female characters are also empowered in some way or other. The other female agents of this novel are Sister HinaAlvi, Zainab, Margret Bhatti and Begum Qazalbash. Zainab a poor aged lady is admitted in the hospital. She is the mother of Noor a ward boy. Zainab’s empowerment lies in the calm bed death in the hospital. She is not burnt, buried or hacked like millions of other Pakistani women. Zainab is bestowed with the grace of being a mother of a genius son who takes care of her more than his own life. Her life is divided into two phases, the first phase defines her life in Borstal Jail; the second phase gives the detailed account of her stay in hospital. This female character is empowered with the concept of motherhood. As a mother she is enjoying this status. Her son is always ready to serve her.

Another female character Begum Qazalbash is also introduced by Mohammed Hanif in his novel. She belongs to entirely different species. She belongs to an elite class and is enjoying the hegemony and prime status equal to men. She is a fat old woman with pink cheeks and silver grey hair; most of the people perceive her as a grand old lady. Because of renal failure she is admitted in the VIP room of the hospital where Fatima Jinnah was admitted for one night. Like most of the working class people she is not suffering from stomach or liver diseases that are caused by malnutrition. She is brought in the hospital with full protocol. An army of guards wearing black dresses is standing outside the room. Here we can easily comment that social status or monetary status is empowering this lady. The women with good wealth and property status are empowered in the society. With money they find every sort of freedom.

“Her name is Begum Qazalbash, but she likes to be addressed as Qaz. Convent education, a very self made lady in a family where even the sixth generation of men do not have to do anything to make a living.” (ibid. 82)

Alice’s mother Margaret Bhatti is also a minor character which is victimized in the novel. Margaret Bhatti was raped and murdered by a big house owner. She used to work in that big house.

CONCLUSIONS

Our descriptive analysis of Mohammad Hanif’s novel “Our Lady of Alice Bhatti” proves that Mohammed Hanif uses the tool of magical realism to empower the female characters of his novel especially the protagonist female character Alice Joseph Bhatti. One can unhesitatingly trace out the trend of Latin American Magical Realism in this discourse of “Our Lady of Alice Bhatti”. Hanif attempts to unveil the mysteries of sainthood in this narrative.

The culled textual references of the primary source are the solid proofs of this fantastical world made by Mohammed Hanif. Alice’s spiritual journey of self-revelation is full of miraculous and incredible references which

empower women in the narrative. This is the first discourse in Pakistani fiction that counters patriarchal discourses by giving voice to the voiceless, by boosting up the disempowered female characters. This research has tagged Mohammad Hanif as magic realist

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