



MONSTROSITY AS SOCIAL CRITIQUE: READING CORRUPTION AND POWER IN HANIF'S OUR LADY OF ALICE BHATTI

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Abstract

The paper reviews Our Lady of Alice Bhatti (2011) by Mohammed Hanif in the context of monstrosity as social critique in the postcolonial literature. It uses the Monster Theory by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (1996), and the idea of the monstrous feminine by Barbara Creed (1993) to discuss the grotesque signifier and monster metaphors as a means of revealing the corruption and decay of institutions and patriarchal oppression in Pakistani society today. The paper claims that monstrosity is not simply a metaphor but a critical paradigm which uncovers structural violence within the facets of normal systems, including healthcare, policing, and religious hierarchies. It shows how grotesque realism upsets the hegemonic discourses of authority and normativity through a qualitative textual analysis and close reading and how Hanif satirizes corruption as a systemic state and not an exception in the postcolonial setting. The article also constructs Alice Bhatti as a representation of the monstrous feminine, whose marginalized identity of being a Christian woman undermines the deeply held patriarchal and religious regulations. The paper prefigures the intersection of gender, class, and religion by demonstrating the way in which monstrosity is a place of resistance and agency. Finally, it adds to postcolonial and feminist discourse, as it places monstrosity as an instrument of critique as well as a means of analysis, and the potential of South Asian fiction to challenge institutional injustice and rethink the ways to resist.

Keywords: *monstrosity, postcolonial literature, Pakistani fiction, grotesque, feminism, Muhammad Hanif*

Introduction

The character of the monster has been historically used as a symbolic repository of cultural anxieties and reflects concerns about morality, social order, and authority in an institution. Throughout literary traditions, monstrosity is presented as the negation, oppression or construction of deviance within a society. Paradoxically, monsters often appear in the time of crisis and can be seen as the tensions that can be found in social, political, and ideological structures. They indicate edges of what is acceptable and what is not, the unsteadiness of such concepts as normal and abnormal, self and other. Within post-colonial contexts, the monster is a particularly powerful metaphor that reveals contradictions within the order systems as well as deconstructs the dominant ideology in the attempt to paint itself as consistent and valid (Cohen, 1996). It is in this critical and theoretical context, that the work of Mohammed Hanif, specifically *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* (2011) may be fruitfully studied.

The novel is set in Karachi, depicted as an institutionally dysfunctional city, socio-economic inequality and religious conflict. But in the novel Karachi is more than a literal place; it is like a symbolic terrain wherein conflicting modes of power come into confrontation and crash on each other. With the help of grotesque realism and stinging satire, Hanif builds up a narrative space that reveals high levels of corruption within the hospital, law enforcement and bureaucratic frameworks. Instead, these institutions, which are supposed to ensure order, dispense justice and care are depicted as exploitative, inefficient and in many cases violently insensitive to human misery. This constant application of grotesque images turns the real world with its simple things into a distorted yet familiar world populated by its inhabitants where the corruption is not an extraordinary phenomenon but a regular part of this world and the power seems to be weak, arbitrary and often ridiculous.

This inversion is not merely a stylistic device of Hanif in the narrative but it shows an underlying epistemological crisis. The novel also provides the reader with a challenge to the core of assumptions as to what an institution is and what it does in the society. There is a blurred

boundary between order and disorder, legitimacy and illegitimacy, which get more obscured as the story progresses. The satire by Hanif shatters the popular perception that any institution will always work to safeguard and benefit its citizens. Rather, the novel reveals a world where institutions are hard at work instead of mitigating hierarchies of power and exclusion, and instead, they reproduce them. In this meaning, monstrosity is not an external or aberrant object, but rather the character of institutional objects as such.

The main character of this story is Alice Bhatti, a Christian nurse whose marginalized identity exposes her to gendered, social, and religious oppression. Being a religious minority in a society dominated by Muslims, Alice is at an awkward social status where she is exposed to discrimination, exploitation, and violence. The fact that she is a nurse further positions her within an institutional structure, which is immensely undermined by corruption and neglect. However, Alice is not just a passive victim; rather, her description demonstrates a multifaceted bargaining with power, in which resistance is embedded in everyday survival strategies. It is important to note that her resistance is usually not blunt, because it is manifested in refusing, adapting, and presented-self tactics rather than confronting.

The life of Alice highlights how the subjects of marginalization are forced to continuously re-calibrate their actions based on the surveillance, expectations of other members of society, and violence. Her attentiveness to such dynamics can be seen in the way she carefully regulates her language, body, and movement and this is a testimony of a heightened awareness of the dangers of visibility in a hostile setting. In this respect, the character of Alice echoes theoretical arguments about the monstrous feminine (Creed, 1993) where the female bodies are established as a location of cultural apprehension and yet have a chance to upset and provoke mainstream ethical principles. Instead of making her powerless, her marginality is her critical standpoint where one can question and challenge institutional norms.

In addition, the fact that Alice is a Christian further intensifies her marginalization as she is perceived as an outsider in the national and religious context. Religious difference is then a functioning mechanism of exclusion, which re-establishes division between dominant and marginalized. However, it is the same status as the other which helps Alice reveal the contradictions towards which dominant stories of identity and belonging are based. The inclusion of her in the novel throws light on how concepts of national unity and social structure are formed on the basis of exclusion and alienation.

At the same time, the analysis of institutions in the novel contributes to the argument that monstrosity is produced within society. The level of corruption, inefficiency and violence are the structural conditions of everyday life rather than exceptions. In this light, the monstrosity becomes diffused, horizontally enshrined in systems, as opposed to being focused on any single character. The hospital, the police force and the bureaucratic institutions are all places where monstrosity is exercised via the daily practice of neglect, exploitation and control. The conceptualization does not conform to a long-standing view of the monster as an extreme being but, rather, indicates that monstrosity is systemic and widespread.

Grotesque images are essential in expressing this criticism. Through the physical and social distortions that are overstated, Hanif attracts attention to the latent violence which frames institutional life. The grotesque breaks traditional sense of reality, as it challenges the reader to face the absurdity and violence that tend to be normalized in society. It is a narrative method which, at the same time, exposes and judges the instruments of power that exist in postcolonial situations.

This article will present a view that monstrosity in *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* is a social criticism that both reveals corruption, patriarchy and institutional violence but in the process, transforms resistance. Combining Monster Theory and the notion of the monstrous feminine (Cohen, 1996; Creed, 1993) and postcolonial theoretical approaches, the study shows how Hanif is

changing the grotesque representation into the critical approach to power and marginalization. In the end, the novel demonstrates that monstrosity is not just a mirror of the anxieties of the society but a structural phenomenon that perpetuates and exposes power structures of the society and reveals new possibilities of opposition and redefinition in the book of the modern South Asia.

Research Questions

1. How does monstrosity function as a tool of social critique in *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*?
2. In what ways do grotesque realism and satire expose institutional corruption in the novel?
3. How does the character of Alice Bhatti represent the concept of monstrous feminine?
4. How does the novel depict the intersection of gender, class, and religion in shaping marginalization and resistance?

Literature Review

The conceptual analysis of *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* has focused on the novel's satirical critique of institutional structures, and how it precisely reflects the marginalized identities. Researchers have noted that Hanif prefigures the aspect of structural inequality as reflected in the aspect of labour exploitation, poverty and discrimination based on religion. Specifically, the sacred heart hospital in the novel has been largely viewed as a kind of microcosm of a larger social malfunction, an overlapping of hierarchical systems of classes and gender, to create a systematic vulnerability. The hospital is not only a physical location of the treatment activity but also a symbolic location where the institutional negligence, the bureaucracy of inefficiency, and social prejudice meet. These readings place the novel squarely in a tradition of postcolonial criticism that reveals institutional failure as a staple state of the modern world.

Besides socio-political criticism, theoretical perspectives have been applied to the novel to help understand how it uses grotesque imagery and narrative irony. Among others, one useful approach is Monster Theory (Cohen, 1996). The Monster Theory views monsters as cultural texts (Cohen, 1996) fulfilling the collective fears, anxieties, and contradictions. The monster within this framework is never fully external or alien but rather a part of the cultural discourse and embodies the values and tensions of the society that creates it. Monstrosity then, can be seen as a tool of boundary making, defining the differences between what is normal and what is not, what is human and what is nonhuman, as well as what is acceptable or deviant. More importantly, these limits are not set in stone; they are volatile and the character of the monster reveals their artificial and provisional character (Cohen, 1996). This view can be used to interpret even institutional corruption as a sort of monstrosity in the everyday life of Hanif, in the context of the novel.

Developing this theoretical background, the feminist scholarship brings a new aspect into the picture with the idea of the monstrous feminine presented by Barbara Creed (1993). This model concentrates on the gendered production of monstrosity, especially how female bodies are portrayed as a locus of threat, excess or abjection in cultural discourses. Instead of merely validating the confinements of patriarchy, though, the monstrous feminine is also about the potential to reverse the meanings of such visualizations. The monstrous feminine subverts patriarchal categories by exposing the fears on which gender norms are constructed, creating chances to resist. This point of view in *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* seems to be especially applicable to the role of the protagonist who, due to her marginalized and resistance identity that does not begin and end as expected of a feminist, a religious subject, and even as a person, cannot be seen as normal.

In this analysis, postcolonial theory also adds its perspective by putting monstrosity in its historical and political context in colonial and postcolonial governments. Grotesque

representation usually becomes the means of expressing the absurdity of modern postcolonial South Asian authoritative tradition where the institutional form is incompatible with violence and corruption which permeate all aspects of the society. Researchers have claimed that the instability of state power and the pettiness of the structures proclaiming legitimacy and embedding inequality can often be seen through these representations. In this context monstrosity is a means of designating the structural anomalies and ambiguity of morals that defines postcolonial societies.

Collectively composed, such critical approaches define monstrosity as an effective analysis tool with which to understand the novel by Hanif. This article, by synthesizing the perspectives of Monster Theory, feminist criticism and postcolonial studies, contributes to the existing literature by showing how *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* employs grotesque imagery as both a cause and effect of social dysfunction, as well as critiquing the power structures it claims to be perpetrating.

Methodology

The research design of this study is qualitative and is conducted through the textual analysis of *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* (2011) by Mohammed Hanif. Close reading is a conventional technique in literary criticism that enables line-by-line analysis of textual components (language and imagery, techniques of storytelling and figurative patterns). Such a method helps the researcher uncover the constructive process of meaning creation in the text and the use of literary devices to reflect the wider social and ideological issues. This approach is especially suitable to the present study because much emphasis becomes put on the interpretive richness and relies little on empirical generalization, which is necessary to comprehend monstrosity as a theme and analysis tool.

Analysis is supported by a comprehensive theoretical framework, which encompasses Monster Theory and the idea of monstrous feminine (Cohen, 1996; Creed, 1993) as well as postcolonial views. These structures are used complementary to analyze various aspects of the text. Monster Theory gives the theoretical premise to understand institutional corruption and social disorder as the manifestations of monstrosity in the culture (Cohen, 1996). The feminist theory enables one to consider the gendered power relations especially when it comes to the representation of Alice Bhatti as a marginalized female subject (Creed, 1993). Postcolonial theory situates these representations in the socio-political realities of modern Pakistan, which emphasize the institutional structures in order to perpetuate inequality.

The method of analysis consists of identifying and deciphering important narrative instances of the foregrounding of institutional power, especially in hospital and law enforcement environments. They are considered through these instances to see how grotesque images and narrative techniques disorient traditional conceptions of authority and the ordinary. Besides, the paper examines construction of characters with a close focus to Alice Bhatti, as a way of understanding how agency of an individual can interact with systemic power and how these elements lead to the overall critique of social structures in the novel.

Discussion

The image of the social world presented in the novel is that institutional corruption is not extraordinary but ordinary. Such normalization is not posed as a passive background activity but actively built up and maintained by the everyday practices inherent in institutional structures. Hospital provides the place of central focus in which this normalization of dysfunction is the most obvious. This is merely a site of accumulate suffering, but rather, it is a location of systematic organization, control and invisibility of suffering. Instead of being a healing place, it functions as a framework of forgetting where human suffering is transferable into bureaucratic carelessness. The patients become cases and not individuals and primary care

turns into control of administration. This change shows that institutional rationality can be deprived of any form of ethical responsibility and turn into a system that serves to ensure order at the cost of human dignity.

This contradiction manifests itself in the Sacred Heart Hospital in a very vivid way. It is both an object of therapy and an object of dysfunction, where the hope of care exists alongside the fact of neglect. This duality is not by chance but is the makeup of the institution itself. The area of medical authority, which is supposed to be a kind of care, gets involved in the power and exclusion hierarchy, strengthening social inequalities, instead of reducing them. Internal dynamics in the hospital are indicative of larger shifts of stratification, wherein access to care relies upon class, gender and religious identity and defines the value attached to various bodies. Both the nurses and the patients are open to disciplinary structures that emphasize control rather than kindness, making caregiving a tightly controlled and, at times, a dehumanizing form of work. In this regard, the hospital is developed as a micro-level of the extended social dysfunction bringing to light the reproduction of systemic inequality by institutional structures in the name of rational organization.

Frequently grotesque imagery serves to sharpen this commentary by focusing on corporeal fragility and the rotting of systems not just as aesthetic effects or techniques but also as epistemologies that seek to reveal violence as disguised. The hospital is portrayed as congested, inefficient and impersonal and these descriptions go beyond providing ambiance; they show how institutional systems generate and contain suffering in a manner that normalizes its existence. The grotesque here is a way of seeing, a way of exhibiting invisible types of violence. The narrative plays with the normalcy of the reader, by exaggerating physical and emotional degradation. It provokes an awareness of the violence inherent in the seemingly commonplace practices. This exploitation of grotesque correlates with the theoretical conceptualizations of monstrosity (Cohen, 1996) as an expression of cultural contradictions, as the borders of care and harm, of healing and neglecting become more and more unpredictable.

A second place of institutional monstrosity is law enforcement, which amplifies the overall criticism of authority in the novel. The violence of the police is shown as a matter-of-course and not an exception, which implies that brutality is not an alternative to the rules-of-institution, but a prime element of how power functions. The borderline between perpetrator and protector is crossed, showing the vulnerability of institutional legitimacy. Jurisdiction has ceased to be linked with righteousness and has turned into pressure and command with the use of power being paid with its continuation. Such depiction defies traditional ideas of law enforcement as a stabilizing force and focuses it as a tool employed to enforce and reproduce social hierarchies. The culture of normalization of violence is also reinforced with textual evidence that prefigures its embeddedness. The way Hanif presents misogyny as a customary act in society, “Now she has lived long enough to know that cutting up women is a sport older than cricket but just as popular and equally full of obscure rituals and intricate rules that everyone seems to know except her” (Hanif, 2011, p.95). This is not just a statement about violence but it puts violence in a cultural context that supports and justifies it. In the analogy with violence against women to a sport, the narrative accentuates its routinization and social normalization, showing just how deeply rooted these practices may be in daily life. This image is consistent with the theoretical views that recognize monstrosity, not as an external aberration but as a structural position generated by social systems.

Equally, the absurdity of institutions is captured through procedural indifference moments which indicate dehumanizing logic of bureaucracy. Routinization of trauma in institutions is illustrated in the teaching, “Go to Accidents. And no need to be shy, they get plenty of this sort of thing on their night shift... And stop screaming” (Hanif, 2011, p.89). This scene underscores how the discourse of bureaucracy tends to diminish and trivialize the sufferings of people and

makes it a normal occurrence that can only be dealt with by standardized responses and not through compassion. The informal atmosphere of the teaching is an element of a larger institutional culture where pain is depersonalized and normalized, which, again, narrows down to supporting the argument that systems of efficiency more than care.

The characterization of Alice Bhatti offers a critical response to these institutional formations, thus a way of looking at power dynamics in the workplace, but in a manner that reveals and challenges this power dynamic. Living at the center of various marginalities, she experiences a realm of inequality and violence and the fact that she is the subject of two types of marginalization: a Christian woman and a woman in general puts her in a situation of immense vulnerability. But her frailty is no passivity. Her opposition is enacted rather in mundane acts of negotiation and adaptation that enable her to maneuver through systems of oppression whilst retaining some form of agency. This kind of resistance is non-aggressive yet immensely important since it messes with the passive compliance that commonly comes along with marginalization.

An important text that explains the way she has fashioned herself also exemplifies this negotiation, in which she makes an attempt to keep a nondescript exterior; to learn the sideways glance over her shoulder and not to look at people, but to use English to refer to medical terms... She never eats in view... Such prolonged self-control shows that one must regularly adapt to surveillance and social control in order to survive in oppressive systems. The actions Alice displays point to an acute sense of danger of visibility, especially to marginalized women, whose bodies are not only controlled and disciplined but also subject to scrutiny. The way she is selective about her linguistic, bodily, and spatial practices shows how much power works by some of the most insidious control systems, which not only construct institutional forms but also define individual subjectivities.

The monstrous feminine can be applied as a helpful concept in explaining the role of Alice in the story. Social exclusion is a signature of her body and her identity, but this exclusion is taken up as a place where criticism is created. Instead of being entirely subdued by institutional authority, she undermines it by creating discontinuity, resistance, breaking the rule of law that is aiming at controlling her life. Her resistance is not framed to be a heroic approach in the traditional meaning of this term but rather a survival, which reveals institutional power constraints. By doing so, her figure symbolizes the duality of the monstrosity as a social anxiety product and a possible point of resisting.

The role of satire in the critical function of the novel is significant, as it is a narrative technique that reveals hypocrisy between the official speech and the real life. The story uses exaggeration of bureaucracy and institutional nonsense to show the irrationality of systems which paint themselves as rational. Humor can serve as a weapon of power subversion and the text can bash power without necessarily facing it with pure irony. This satirical style is based on larger postcolonial literary traditions, in which inconsistency of colonialism and postcolonial rule is revealed through the irony and exaggeration.

The monstrosity in the novel is more fluid and speaks across different institutions, individuals and systems. It is not bound to single bodies but dispersed across social structures and this shows the systemic nature of corruption. This fluidity disrupts the classical concept of the monster being an individual entity and anticipates that monstrosity is also within the fabric of normality. Here monstrosity is a manner of addressing the structural conditions and not the individual deviations and the degree to which power is functioning through normal practices of exclusion and control.

The novel ends up urging the reader to re-read the concept of normalcy and monstrosity in their interactions by bringing into light the instability of these two concepts. What is ordinary turns out to be very unstable and what is being considered monstrous is a reflection of systemic

violence. Such dislocation upsets systems of morality and leaves the processes by which power functions visible and results in a reassessment of what values shape social and structural frameworks. Placing monstrosity in the context of the normal world, the story unveils the degree to which corruption and violence are inherent in systems that purport to be the instruments of order and justice.

By doing so, Our Lady of Alice Bhatti outlines a very potent commentary on the issue of institutional power, as it illustrates how monstrosity can be used as the embodiment of the socially anxious, and as a form of bringing to light systemic unfairness. Grotesque imagery, satire, and complicated characterization make the novel not just a reflection of all contradictions in the postcolonial society, but also a challenge to the readers to face the frameworks that perpetuate these contradictions. By focusing on the theme of dysfunction and individual opposition in institutes, the novel reformulates monstrosity as an omnipresent and transformative power, which could expose the dynamics of power that are hidden and provide new avenues of critique and resistance.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that monstrosity in Our Lady of Alice Bhatti (Hanif, 2011) serves as a critical frame of interpreting corruption, institutional breakdown, and social disparity in a postcolonial situation. The analysis has revealed how Hanif invents monstrosity not only as a symbolic tool but also as a structure that permeates the fabric of daily existence by employing the theoretical lenses of the Monster Theory and even the monstrous feminine definition (Cohen, 1996; Creed, 1993) and postcolonial studies. Monstrosity is both representation and critique because it exposes disparities within the institutions that purport to be legitimate and engage in systemic violence.

The results underpin the importance of grotesque representation as a literary technique to reveal concealed power dynamics. Instead of being deemed as aesthetic excess, grotesque imagery can be understood to be a form of political and ethical hermeneutic whereby normalized practices of violence and exclusion are made visible. The novel indicates that institutional power is so normalized by making dysfunctional practices normal that corruption, carelessness, and inequality become embedded in common practices. Resistance in this regard need not be blatant rebellion but in the form of recognition, negotiation and subtle forms of resistance within oppressive systems. Moreover, the paper also adds to the discussions in postcolonial and feminist literary studies by showing that monstrosity can be a fruitful conceptual paradigm underpinning modern social structures. The article emphasizes the necessity to analyze the ways in which subordinated identities traverse and disrupt the power frameworks by preempting the cross-sections of gender, class, and religion. Further studies can use this analytical model to apply to other South Asian literary works, and examine the mediation of grotesque representation and experiences of marginality, agency and resistance in complex socio-political contexts.

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