

“An all-weather, all-terrain fighter”: Subaltern resistance, survival, and death in Mohammed Hanif’s *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*

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Abstract

Victor Li’s theory of necroidealism draws our attention to the tendency in literary works and writings by Subaltern Studies historians to romanticize the dead subaltern so that in death he or she emerges as an “exemplary, heroic symbol of resistance”. In these works, the “ambiguity of struggle” of the living subaltern contrasts sharply with the idealized heroism of his or her dead counterpart. The eponymous protagonist of Mohammed Hanif’s *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* is an untouchable, lower-class Christian woman in contemporary Pakistan who is determined to survive and surpass her subaltern status but dies a brutal death, following which her father makes a case for her canonization. This article is an in-depth analysis of the depiction of Alice’s multifaceted subalternity and the strategies of resistance that she deploys as well as an evaluation of the portrayal of her death to demonstrate that the novel unequivocally rejects an idealization of both subaltern life *and* death.

Keywords

Caste, class, death, gender, Mohammed Hanif, necroidealism, Pakistan, religion, resistance, subaltern, subalternity

The eponymous protagonist of Mohammed Hanif’s latest novel *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* (2011) is a lower-class, untouchable Christian woman in contemporary Pakistan. Despite her determined efforts to survive and escape her subalternity, she dies a brutal

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premature death following which her father Joseph makes a claim for her sainthood thereby inviting a reflection on whether Alice's demise is being romanticized not only within the narrative by Joseph, but also by the text. Indeed, literary works and writings by Subaltern Studies historians often do tend to romanticize the dead subaltern, or "necroidealise" as Victor Li calls it, so that he or she emerges as an "exemplary, heroic symbol of resistance" (2009: 276). It is in death that the "utopian promise of an alternative lifeworld finds its final affirmation and guarantee", necessitating a disjunction between the "ambiguity of struggle" of the living subaltern and the idealized heroism of his or her dead counterpart (Li, 2009: 275–6). In this article I will analyse the depiction of Alice's multilayered subalternity and the strategies of survival that she chooses to deploy, as well as the representation of her death, to demonstrate that Hanif's novel is an unequivocal rejection of the idealization/idolization of both the living *and* the dead subaltern.

The many subalternities of Alice Bhatti

Ranjit Guha (1982: vii) has defined the term "subaltern" as "a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society, whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender or any other way". Being a Catholic, the central character of Hanif's novel is "subordinated" by her minority religion in a Muslim-majority country where, as the author brings to the fore (and not without a touch of humour), religious intolerance is on the rise and free speech increasingly constrained. Alice's father observes, for instance, that there was a time in his life when he could have stood at a street corner and launched a tirade against camels (which evoke Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of Islam) to publicly decry their ugliness without fear of retribution but "these days you never know" (2011: 45).¹ Furthermore, Alice belongs to the "Choohra" or untouchable (Dalit) caste whose members are converts from Hinduism and who constitute 90 to 95 per cent of the Pakistani Christian community today (Koepping, 2011: 25). Hanif's novel is a vivid demonstration of how notions of untouchability and ritual pollution (having to do with the symbolic rather than physical impurity of the lowest castes) are alive in Pakistan, even when the official discourse insists that these are foreign, Hindu, and therefore unIslamic practices.² In reality, untouchable converts face discrimination not only from Muslims but also "upper-caste" Christians, thereby seriously complicating the idea of solidarity based on religious affiliation as a mode of resistance. No wonder then, that Alice "had always felt ambivalent about faith-based camaraderie", never buying into "we-are-all-His-sheep-type sentiments" (201).

Being a junior nurse, she is also at the bottom of the ladder in the medical profession and often has to endure the contempt of mostly male senior surgeons who are accustomed to treating nurses like "garbage bins in uniforms" (175). But Alice's biggest daily challenges are a consequence of her being a lower-class female in the bustling city of Karachi. She even comes to perceive her physical attractiveness as a "curse" since it makes her more vulnerable to unwanted male attention (94). She cannot afford a private vehicle and hence is deprived of the relative protection from sexual harassment that comes with it: Alice is compelled to walk in bazaars, travel in buses, and thus spends the greater part of her day in public spaces where prevails a culture of sexism and almost

“endemic misogyny” (East, 2011: n.p.). Indeed, “lewd gestures, whispered suggestions, uninvited hands on her bottom are all part of Alice Bhatti’s daily existence” (9). She is also aware of the double standards that characterize the treatment of untouchable women by upper-caste men: while deemed “impure” for purposes of social interaction, Choohra women are nonetheless touched, groped, and molested sexually by them. Thus, ironically, the sole advantage that could have possibly stemmed from her lower-caste, untouchable status is denied to Alice:

She can live with being an untouchable, but she desperately hopes for the only privilege that comes with being one. That people won’t touch her without her explicit permission. 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. (95)

Hanif’s novel forcefully demonstrates that untouchability brings no advantages to the subaltern woman and it is “always a curse, never a protection” (Mendelsohn and Vicziany, 1998: 11). As Mendelsohn and Vicziany (1998: 11) point out, “evidence from our own time” indicates that the sexual exploitation of untouchable women by high-caste men in India has been “habitual” rather than “merely occasional”: paradoxically the untouchable woman is “never so degraded” or “ritually polluted as to be sexually unapproachable”. I would argue that this habitual sexual exploitation of untouchable women by upper-caste men, whether in India or in Pakistan, also seems to suggest that the sexual act with an untouchable woman, forced or otherwise, is considered so unimportant, so socially inconsequential that it does not represent a challenge to, or violation of, the mores of ritual pollution. Unlike Alice’s father, who appears to celebrate his marginality (as we will see later in the article), this representation of untouchability in the text indicates that Hanif romanticizes neither the subaltern status of the Choochas nor the quotidian ordeal faced by them, especially as women.

Resisting and surviving subalternity

The novel highlights not only Alice’s consciousness of her socially constructed subalternity but also the strategies that she deploys to survive under hostile conditions. She understands that in a patriarchal society the notion of male honour and dignity is inextricably tied in with the woman’s body, resulting in it being commodified and making it particularly vulnerable to physical violence:

Suspicious husband, brother protecting his honour, father protecting his honour, jilted lover avenging his honour, feuding farmers settling their water disputes, moneylenders collecting their interest: most of life’s arguments, it seemed, got settled by doing various things to a woman’s body. A woman was something you could get as loose change in a deal made on a street corner. (96)

One of the ways in which Alice attempts to counter her vulnerability as a woman is to devise a “doctrine” (9), an extensive survival guide of sorts, to avoid becoming yet another victim in a city where not a day goes by when a woman is not “shot or hacked,

strangled or suffocated, poisoned or burnt, hanged or buried alive” (97). She is resolved not to become the sort of woman who becomes a victim of male violence and in a bid to avoid becoming *that* type of woman, she closely monitors her gait and her clothing so as to maintain “a nondescript exterior” (98). She “avoids eye contact”, “sidesteps even when she sees a boy half her age walking towards her” and perfects “no-touch” social interaction (99). She is particularly vigilant about her use of language, speaking in “practised, precise sentences so that she is not misunderstood”:

She chooses her words carefully, and if someone addresses her in Punjabi, she answers in Urdu, because an exchange in her mother tongue might be considered a promise of intimacy. She uses English for medical terms only, because she feels if she uses a word of English in her conversation she might be considered a bit forward. (98–9)

These extensive precautions which encompass every aspect of her being and conduct may indicate that Alice perceives violence against women, in one way or another, as stemming from the victim’s own behaviour or perhaps an inability of the victim to monitor her comportment and public persona. This in turn could suggest that Alice has internalized patriarchal stereotypes that hold women responsible for having “invited” rape and sexual violence by dressing or speaking “inappropriately” and hence absolve the male perpetrators of any blame:

Alice Bhatti has made her observations and thinks she has identified the type of woman who attracts the wrong kind of attention, who stumbles from one man who wants to slap her to another man who wants to chop off her nose to that final man, the last inevitable man, who wants to slash her throat.

And she doesn’t want to be that kind of woman. (97)

I would argue that in attributing these vicious crimes at least partially to the women’s behaviour, Alice is attempting to reclaim some semblance of control over her life. As the choice of vocabulary in the just-cited excerpt (“made her observations”, “identified the type”) seems to indicate, Alice adopts what she perceives to be an almost scientific approach to guarantee her safety. She is attempting to reassure herself that by excessive self-monitoring, she can avoid becoming a victim herself. More poignantly, it seems that Alice is trying to convince herself that these senseless acts of misogyny are not *completely* senseless, not *entirely* irrational, that they are at least *partially* provoked and thus, to an extent, can be predicted and prevented. This also indicates her refusal to become an embodiment of passive victimhood, which would preclude any resistance against the workings of a patriarchal society.

The razor blade that Alice carries in her coat pocket implies that she is aware that her precautions are far from foolproof and realizes that ultimately violence may be the only answer to sexual violence. The depiction of Alice’s body defies the conventional association between female subalternity and lack of strength; the novel also rejects recourse to violence as a masculinizing trait. If Alice’s body is an epitome of femininity with her tiny waist and generous cleavage, it is also:

a compact little war zone where competing warriors have trampled and left their marks. She has fought back often enough, with less calibrated viciousness, maybe, definitely never with a firearm, but she has never accepted a wound without trying to give one back. (174–5)

Indeed, Alice's modes of survival are both preventive and defensive. In one of the most dramatic episodes of the novel, while on duty in a private VIP ward and forced by a rich patient's relative to perform oral sex at gunpoint, Alice slashes the assailant's penis with the blade. We learn that Alice also resorted to violence as a student nurse when she was made into a convenient scapegoat for a senior surgeon's negligence and was arrested for medical malpractice. Upon being granted bail, she proceeded to the surgeon's clinic and physically attacked him with a marble vase. While Hanif's novel accentuates the constant threat of sexual and physical aggression that women face from men in a patriarchal society, it does not advance universal sisterhood as a source of redemption and escape. In fact, he highlights how in a world of co-existing hierarchies and oppressions, women can turn on each other. In what is described as the "bitch-eat-bitch" world of nursing school, when she is brutally assaulted for her vocal Christian beliefs by female Muslim students armed with hockey sticks, Alice does not hesitate from fighting back: unlike the other three Christian girls in the dormitory who offered "passive resistance", Alice "kicked the attackers in the shins, and bit a small chunk of flesh from a hand that tried to grab her throat. Then she produced a bicycle chain and padlock [...] and swung it in their faces" (172–4). Hanif's subaltern is a complex being who not only displays an unpredictable "free-floating" anger (21) but also a strong maternal instinct and compassion for her patients (79); her willingness to resort to violence serves as a testament to her determination to survive at all costs.

But if Alice is resolved to survive physically, she is also committed to finding ways of surpassing her economic and religious subaltern positioning. She is an ambitious young woman who understands the importance of having a career to gain some degree of financial security and unlike her father, seeks to flee her inherited class and neighbourhood. When Alice is imprisoned for 14 months following her attack on the surgeon, she does not lose sight of her career and in fact takes her final nursing exam while still in prison. Although Alice's father Joseph, a janitor, is well aware of the hypocrisy of the upper castes, he is also contemptuous of social mobility and distrusts well-to-do Christians who have attempted to escape their Choohra status: "These Muslas³ will make you clean their shit and then complain that you stink", he had said. "And our own brothers at the Sacred? They will educate you and then ask you why you stink" (1). He makes no attempt to better his positioning in society or to question it: not because he believes in his own "lowliness" and the supposed inherent superiority of the upper castes, but because he takes a certain pride in his profession and social standing as a distinctive, unique position:

Choohras were here before everything. Choohras were here before the Sacred was built, before Yassoo⁴ was resurrected, before Muslas came on their horses, even before Hindus decided they were too exalted to clean their own shit. And when all this is finished, Choohras will still be there. (52)

Alice refuses to indulge in, and in fact scoffs at, Joseph's brand of romanticization of subalternity. As she observes sarcastically: "Yes, when everything is finished, Choohras

will still be here. And cockroaches too" (52). In sharp contrast to her father, she is not willing to embrace her social marginality and fights it unceasingly in manifold ways.

Alice's sudden decision to get married to Teddy, a Muslim, appears also to be a survival strategy, but one that she is unwilling, at least initially, to see as such. She finds herself moved by Teddy's often comical attempts at courtship and her initial wariness gives way to "resigned" affection, if not love (84). When Alice first meets him, she is well aware that Teddy is not a catch. Working as a police tout, he is involved in a number of shady activities and, as Alice's colleague Sister Hina Alvi remarks, "You got hitched to the first piece of trash you came across" (132–3). She finds herself longing for the trappings of lower middle-class conjugal domesticity: "a hand pump, a stove, a charpoy or a little courtyard with a jasmine plant" (92). Alice also appears to accept cultural norms which define a woman's "real" home as necessarily the one that she shares with her husband. Moreover, she understands only too well that given her caste and class positioning, she is not likely to be "bombed with proposals" and sees her marriage with Teddy to be her only chance of experiencing domestic happiness and normalcy (92). Paradoxically then, if Alice is scornful of her father's penchant to romanticize, she is not completely devoid of it herself. In fact, as she makes her way to the neighbourhood tailor shop to order her wedding dress, she tries to banish from her mind the possibility that her acceptance of Teddy's proposal may be an ultimately "calculated" decision on her part, a means to an end rather than an end itself and her discomfort with this possibility hints at her yearning for romantic courtship and marriage, instead of a life dictated solely by the cold imperatives of survival:

She is relieved that everything has happened so suddenly; she hasn't had the time to examine her own motives, otherwise her love story would have turned into an anthropological treatise about the survival strategy employed by Catholics in predominantly Islamic societies. (92)

Later in the text she also confesses to her colleague her belief (or perhaps hope) that marriage would provide a shield from the dangers she faces as a woman, of which she becomes acutely aware following the assault in the private ward, even though she was able to physically retaliate and protect herself: "I always thought a proper job was the security I needed. But the incident in the VIP room [...] made me rethink" (133). It is interesting to note that the text does not provide us with an unequivocal answer as to whether or not Alice undergoes a religious conversion, and the shotgun interfaith wedding is a source of much gossip and speculation among the acquaintances of the couple. Laws pertaining to marriage and family in Pakistan, dictated by Islamic injunctions, allow Muslim men to marry a non-Muslim woman of a "revealed religion" (Judaism and Christianity), without requiring her to convert to Islam (Hodkinson, 1984: 112). However, according to Salma Sardar (2002: 44) since Islamic jurisprudence grants no inheritance rights to a non-Muslim woman married to a Muslim man and most schools of thought prescribe that, in the event of a divorce, the children must remain with the Muslim father, Pakistani Christian women marrying Muslim men often "choose" to convert to Islam. While Teddy sticks to one version of the events: claiming that Alice did indeed convert and choose the Muslim name "Aliya" for herself, Alice's versions "would keep changing depending on who her audience was" (88–9). She never admits to converting and yet in some versions she mentions reciting "half a Kalima",⁵ which invites jokes about her

having become “half a Muslim” (89). We also know that despite being a lapsed Catholic, she takes a poster of “Lord Yasso” with her to her marital flat. I would contend that the poster and the multiple versions of her wedding day that Alice feels compelled to spout are symptomatic of a latent unease about her marriage and its implications for her identity and sense of self. This unease soon becomes manifest with her pregnancy, making her apprehensive about the inevitable concessions that she would have to make in her marriage to a Muslim man in a country where the people of her faith are a minority. Despite her “longing” for motherhood, “the thought of naming the baby, bringing it up in Teddy’s world, fills her with a nameless dread” (181).

In the initial days of her marriage Alice does share genuine, if somewhat awkward, intimacy with Teddy, feeling free of cultural restrictions that condemn candour in male–female relationships: “She can’t remember if she has ever made such a direct demand to a man. Or to a woman. Marriage, she suddenly realises, is a liberation army on the march” (142). This sense of emancipation is extremely short-lived, however. Alice’s decision to leave Teddy coincides with the inception of her own pregnancy and the sudden awareness of its implications. It is worth pointing out that in rejecting Teddy as a suitable father, the novel does not give way to an idealization of single motherhood. Alice is acutely aware of the material challenges of raising a baby and the text does not gloss over pressing logistical issues such as “where will the money come from” and “who will take care of the baby when she is at work” (183). It is these critical questions that compel the realist in Alice to rethink her resolve to walk away from her unstable marriage and instead, she decides to share the news of his impending fatherhood with Teddy. If Alice’s marriage to Teddy was a hasty one and her motivation behind it ambiguous, this episode in the text, one of many, shows the subaltern as a thinking, analytical being who is capable of weighing her options rather than acting solely on impulse and emotion. But as we know, Alice never gets the opportunity to proceed with her plan. By the time she encounters her husband next, he has convinced himself that she is leaving him for another man. With Alice’s private ward assailant acting as his benefactor, he pours sulphuric acid on her. Indeed, the humorous yet disquieting depiction of Teddy and Alice’s first meeting, a satire of the conventional, Mills and Boon variety of romances, is already marked by a clear sense of foreboding and warns the reader of the dangers of perceiving romantic love as an escape from subalternity. Upon seeing the twelve patients in the psychiatric ward of the hospital closing in on Alice, Teddy scoops her in his arms and carries her to safety in the fashion of a knight in shining armour coming to the rescue of a damsel in distress. But the fiction of the heroic male saviour is exposed in the text by endowing Teddy with a comical, shrill voice and highlighting the sense of premonition that fills Alice as he lifts her: “Alice has a feeling that although she can fight and cajole those twelve loonies, this towering hulk with a funny voice is going to be her real nemesis” (35).

We learn from the epilogue that when Teddy approached his wife to attack her and unscrewed the acid bottle, all the while he was professing “his eternal love” for her (224). Pierre Bourdieu in *Masculine Domination* (2001: 119) wonders if love is

an exception, the only one, but of the first order of magnitude, to the law of masculine domination, a suspension of symbolic violence, or is it the supreme — because the most subtle, the most invisible — form of that violence?

One of the most moving scenes of the text describes Teddy offering Alice a simple gift of a damp, thorny sapling which brings unexpected tears to her eyes. While Hanif's novel does not dismiss outright the possible joys of heterosexual romantic love, it underscores the ultimate ineffectiveness of romance in fighting against patriarchal oppression. Moreover, if Bourdieu draws our attention to how heterosexual love can potentially signify the subtlest form of symbolic violence, "a gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims" (2001: 1), Hanif underscores the visible brutality that romantic passion may bring in its wake: "The whole business of love is a protection racket, like paying your weekly *bhatta*⁶ to your local hoodlum so that you are not mugged on your own street" (82). Indeed, the very notion of love is susceptible to becoming perverted in the context of patriarchy which turns women, particularly beautiful women, into "objects of exchange" (Chancer, 1998: 261). This proprietorial logic defines Teddy's violent attack on Alice: "I just want to make sure that if I can't have her, then nobody should be able to have her. Is it not fair?" (210). In throwing acid on Alice's face, Teddy is perhaps not necessarily seeking to kill her, but certainly to rob her of her beauty and her desirability to other men whom he sees as competition. An acid attack or acid throwing is a form of gendered violence that is alarmingly common in Pakistan and in a number of other countries; it is often used as "punishment against women who are seen to exercise autonomy or agency" (Bandyopadhyay and Khan, 2003: 67). Normally the woman's face, breasts, and sexual organs are targeted, indicating the extent to which such an attack is sexual in nature and that the main objective is to disfigure the woman so that "no one else would want her" (Bandyopadhyay and Khan, 2003: 67). Moreover, as Yasmeen Hassan (1998: 42) explains, this practice is rooted in "the dual conceptions of 'woman as property' and 'woman as honor', both of which dehumanize a woman and make it easier for the acid thrower to proceed with the act and for society to overlook it". In Hanif's novel the attack not only mutilates Alice but also kills her. The mundaneness of such a crime and the societal impunity that the culprits enjoy help us to understand why Joseph Bhatti makes no attempt to seek justice in a court of law for his daughter's murder.

Subaltern death, necroidealism and the magic of miracles

Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (2010: 117) points out that subaltern death "or the dead subaltern, poses questions about the manner of death but also about the meaning of death, a particular death, in a postmortem communication that traverses the boundary between the living and the dead". So what can we make of the subaltern's horrific death in a novel which, as we have seen above, appears to be explicitly committed to subaltern survival and resistance? Is Alice's death an example of what Victor Li has called "necroidealism" in the writings of Subaltern Studies historians and works of literary fiction where the death of a subaltern is a "precondition for a theory of subalternity" (2009: 280) and seems to provide "the occasion for a meditation on subalternity as a critical alternative to dominant regimes of power", making the dead subaltern into an emblem of heroic resistance? (2009: 276).

In English-language fiction by Indian and Pakistani writers⁷ the death of the female subaltern is a fairly common ending, with few texts allowing for a life after rape or illicit pregnancy. This death can be physical or social or indeed, both. For instance in Shashi

Deshpande's *The Binding Vine* (2001), Kalpana, a lower-class woman, is raped by her uncle and lies in a coma when the novel ends, with no chance of survival; Ayah's future after her brutal gang-rape in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man* (1988) can only be imagined in terms of her permanent departure from Pakistan; the maid Sudha in Brinda Charry's *The Hottest Day of the Year* (2001) commits suicide as she fears bringing dishonour upon her Brahmin family after becoming pregnant out of wedlock; or to give yet another example, the peasant girl Rani is savagely murdered by her stepfather when he discovers her illicit pregnancy in Moni Mohsin's *The End of Innocence* (2006). In Hanif's novel, on the contrary, there is almost a rejection of the supposed inevitability of the subaltern's social death. We see Alice constantly fighting against the spectre of societal stigma, sometimes using physical force. When impregnated by a male professor during her years as a student nurse, and upon his refusal to marry her, Alice undergoes a painful abortion. However, her impulse is not to feel guilty or to turn to self-loathing but rather to pick up the pieces and march forward.

Alice's physical beauty is repeatedly evoked in the narrative and so it is worth recalling that hers is a death that coincides with serious disfigurement. Indeed, Alice's stunning looks and figure, seen through a mostly predatory male gaze and hence perceived as a liability by her, nevertheless complicate her subaltern status. Lennard Davis (1987: 124) reminds us that a character's physical attractiveness in a work of fiction is part of a "system of meaning" and far from being neutral, is in fact "predicated on ideological considerations". While Alice is clearly at the lowest rung of numerous social hierarchies, her beauty sets her sharply apart from the ugliness that surrounds her and, coupled with her remarkable feistiness, it works to provoke the reader's admiration, rather than pity. We can recall, for instance, the contemptuous glance that she directs at the judge at her bail hearing as if to say, "how can a man so fat, so ugly, wearing such a dandruff-covered black robe sit in judgement on her?" (47). Is it then to preclude pity for the subaltern that she, disfigured and mutilated, cannot be allowed to survive the attack, and hence, ironically, must die to remain a survivor, a "fighter", a beautiful hero (174)? Referring to Velutha's murder in *The God of Small Things* (Roy, 1997/2009) and Fokir's death in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2005), Li writes that:

A logic of sacrifice underwrites those works in which the loss or death of subalterns leads in turn to the immortalization of the dead subaltern as representing the idea of resistance and utopian difference. Subalternity becomes a theory of martyrdom in which subalterns die so that the subaltern can emerge as an exemplary, heroic symbol of resistance. (2009: 282–3)

Li's observation about the "immortalization" of the subaltern is particularly relevant to our discussion given the supposed "miracle" surrounding Alice's death, which leads her father Joseph to write to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints at the Vatican, pleading for it to canonize her. Shifting between the poignant and the absurd, the letter catalogues the occurrence of a series of "miracles" to make a case for Alice's sainthood. Joseph mentions, for instance, the child that Alice is believed to have brought back to life: he is referring to a still-born infant who was declared dead in the delivery room by the head nurse but suddenly, following an angry, abusive tirade of a prayer offered by Alice, the baby started breathing again. Joseph also mentions an intravenous drip that is

said to have turned to milk and the skewed wooden cross at the entrance of the missionary hospital where Alice worked suddenly straightening itself and glowing amber (224). But the most convincing miracle, in his eyes, is the supposed apparition of the Virgin Mary which completely captivated his daughter's attention at the time of the attack. Are we then faced with a "necroidealist" logic working at two levels in the text: both the narrative, and within the narrative, Joseph's character, seeking to transform the dead subaltern into a symbol of "counter-hegemonic resistance and alterity" (Li, 2009: 280)?

It is difficult to deny that in seeking to have her recognized as a martyr Joseph is romanticizing Alice's death. The text, however, clearly refuses to idealize the dead subaltern: it does so not only by accentuating her desire to live, as discussed above, but also in its refusal to separate the living subaltern from the dead and in its rejection of "miracles" to combat subalternity. The miracles that her father evokes so passionately in his letter would have been dismissed as "nonsense" by Alice (169). Earlier in the text, when the "dead" baby comes back to life following her vitriolic "prayer" addressed to Jesus, it earns her the reputation of a miracle-worker at the hospital. Alice, however, has little patience for the "raising-the-dead" rumours (169). She reasons that the bizarre incident was in all probability a prosaic case of "a trapped bubble in a blood vessel, a lung slow to start, a heart still in shock" (170). When we meet Alice at the beginning of the text, she has already lost the almost fanatical religious zeal of her student years and instead now perceives faith as "the same old fear of death dressed in party clothes" (170). Once, upon finding a child's body in a sewer, her father is keen to read the event as a sign, which invites Alice's foul-mouthed contempt:

Sign of what? I think it's a sign that there is no place a woman can go and deliver a baby, that there is no place for her even when her water is breaking. It's a sign that nobody gives a fuck about signs. (50)

Alice rejects the idea of fantastical miracles: she yearns instead for mundane, concrete solutions, wondering when the lame can walk, "where will they go? How about real miracles, like the drains shall remain unclogged? Or the hungry shall be fed? Or our beloved French colony shall stop smelling like a sewer?" (115). Indeed, the magical realist episodes in the novel — Joseph's ability to cure stomach ailments by reciting a verse from the Qur'an, Alice being able to tell how a person is going to die merely by looking at them, and of course the strange apparition in the sky above the hospital building at the end of the text, to quote a few examples — seem to suggest, at least initially, that the text may be advancing "faith, wonders and miracles" as a counterpoint to the status quo and other hegemonic systems of knowledge (Hegerfeldt, 2005: 20). In the context of postcolonial literature, magic realism as a narrative mode is often considered to be endowed with the "energy of the margins" and thus to possess a natural affinity with subalternity (Delbaere, 1992: 74–104). It is seen to register "a discourse of plurality, of disagreement" (Faris, 2004: 144) and, as we have seen, in Hanif's text often multiple versions or explanations are given for the same event. Furthermore, according to Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (1995: 3) magic functions as "a cultural corrective, requiring readers to scrutinize accepted realistic conventions of causality, materiality, motivation". Tabish Khair (2001: 338) has criticized this suggestion arguing instead that the

magical realist mode may well be a choice of convenience rather than indicative of a radical stance that is committed to the subaltern viewpoint:

For one, it often helps the writer deny final authority to any extra-literary reality, while appropriating those aspects of that reality which are useful and accessible. It also enables the author to present his/her own 'fabulous' version of even those aspects of extra-literary reality that are appropriated.

In Hanif's novel however, the fabulous events are constantly questioned within the text and indeed often derided by the protagonist. When the "dead" baby's recovery is described as a miracle by those around her, Alice dismisses this version of the incident not only, as we saw earlier, because there may be a scientific explanation for it, but also because while the child survived, his unwed mother did not: "What kind of miracle is this anyway? He has raised the baby and taken the baby's mother. What kind of universe does He run? An exchange mart?" (170).

The text brings to the fore the limitation if not outright futility of "miracles": Joseph can only cure stomach ulcers and nothing else and her "magical" ability to tell how a person will die by simply looking at them does nothing to help Alice to avert her own death. Let us not forget also that Alice is unable to ward off Teddy's assault because she is mesmerized by the apparition in the sky — whatever it is "in reality". It is surely no coincidence that this "miracle" becomes the distraction that catches Alice completely off-guard, preventing her from resisting the attack. The use of magic realism in the text serves to heighten Hanif's satire of the rising religiosity in Pakistan, be it Muslim or Christian. It accentuates his rejection of magic *and* religion (the two categories, in fact, collapse into each other in the novel), as an adequate form of resistance to subaltern oppression. Thus, paradoxically, the magic realism in the novel retains its subversive power since it works to satirize the liberating role that magic/religion is construed to play in both understanding and countering social injustice. As a result, "extra-literary" reality, as Khair calls it, is reaffirmed rather than camouflaged or dismissed.

Moreover, Li's theory of necroidealism refers to texts where the death and "immortalization" of the subaltern serve to replace "the messiness and ambiguity of struggle with the reassurance of an aestheticized political ideal" (2009: 275). It also implies a disturbing separation between the living subaltern who "inserts himself or herself into a hegemonic way of life" in uncertain and ambiguous ways, and the dead subaltern who emerges as a frozen, "unwavering" emblem of subaltern defiance (2009: 280). As our discussion above shows, this is manifestly not the case in Hanif's novel. In *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* the subaltern's death and the events following it are as "messy", as unromantic as her life. If Joseph's outlandish case for his daughter's canonization can be seen as an example of necroidealism in that he is more preoccupied with the symbolic significance of Alice's death than the prosecution of the culprit, this necroidealism is not echoed or condoned by the text. In fact, Joseph's plea for Alice's sainthood serves to underscore the terrible failures of Pakistani society in general, and its criminal justice system in particular, to address gendered violence. Joseph's list of "miracles" and his attempt to have his daughter recognized as a martyr have the overwhelming effect of highlighting the terrifying mundaneness of these acid attacks; the fact that

Joseph does not even consider recourse to the legal system to bring his daughter's assailant to justice is a powerful reminder of the extent to which the perpetrators of such crimes can act with impunity, in particular when the victim is a working-class Catholic–Choorā woman. The contents of the letter suggest that Joseph believes there to be a greater likelihood of his daughter being recognized as a saint than her assailant being punished for his horrific crime in a court of law. His open letter addressed to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints is the epilogue of book, and while it is certainly intended to be a plea for her sainthood, the end of the letter, and hence the novel, take us to the beginning of the text which describes Alice's job interview at the Sacred Heart Hospital for All Ailments for a junior-nurse position. This poetic device has the effect of taking us back to, and emphasizing the importance of, Alice's life, her journey and her struggles rather than merely her death: "And since Sister Alice Bhatti's story can't be told without telling the story of her time at the Sacred, why not start the story when Alice Bhatti came to the Sacred, looking for a job" (231). Thus Hanif's novel does not reduce the dead subaltern to a simplified, idealized concept that is devoid of a "living referent" (Li, 2009: 275). In resolutely looping back to its beginning, the ending of the novel renders Alice's death inseparable from her life, making them both, rather than her demise alone, a "precondition" for our understanding of her subalternity (Li, 2009: 280).

In depicting the many strategies of resistance that Alice deploys, and in consciously demonstrating the limitations of faith and miracles to combat deep-rooted social injustice, *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* rejects martyrdom and immortalization, whether Christian or textual, as a desirable ideal. The subaltern in Hanif's novel is a complicated, contradictory being, the "mess" of whose murder echoes and is inseparable from the turmoil that marked her daily struggle thus ensuring that she does not become, either in life or in death, a convenient, simplified symbol of subaltern resistance.

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Notes

1. All subsequent references are to this edition of *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* and will be cited parenthetically in the text.
2. Haris Gazdar (2007: 86) explains that in Pakistan, "the denunciation of 'the evil caste system' is a standard hymn in the rightist intellectual's repertoire on India, Hindus and the Two-Nation Theory", a theory according to which, in the words of Jinnah, Hindus and Muslims belong to "two different religions, philosophies, social customs and literature" with different "concepts on life and of life" (quoted in Pande, 2011: 10).
3. Musla (Urdu slang): A derogatory term for "Muslim".
4. Yassoo or Yasu (Arabic/Urdu): Jesus.

5. Kalima (Arabic: utterance or word): there are six kalimas in Islam and the term “the Kalimah” is used as an abbreviation for either the “kalima at-tawhid” (“the testimony of Oneness”) or the “kalima-i-shahada” (the Islamic testimony of faith). See Farrar *et al.* 2012: xxiii.
6. Bhatta (Urdu): Protection money.
7. By “Indian” and “Pakistani” writers I am referring to authors born and based in the Indian sub continent as well as diasporic writers of Pakistani and Indian descent.

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