

Marxist Analysis of Mohammed Hanif's *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*

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Abstract

In the novel "Our Lady of Alice Bhatti", the novelist depicts the worse and pitiable plight of the lower classes living on the edges of marginality. The story is narrated through the perspective of a young Christian nurse and her 'choorah' family. Her oppression may well be interpreted as an instance of a class struggle between the capitalist and the proletariat. The study contends that religious and gender discrimination is, in some ways, the by-product of an uneven economic system and hegemonic capitalistic power structures. Basic tenets of Marxist theory are employed as a theoretical framework to conduct the research in a systematic way. The study reveals that the ideologies of creed, caste and colour are very often used as capitalistic tools to divide human beings, especially the lower classes. It suggests that there is a dire need for educating the people on how to come together simply for what they actually are.

Key Words: Marxism, Ideology, Class, Hegemony, Socio-Economic Disparity

Introduction

Broadly speaking, Marxism is concerned with the issue of ideology in literature. Kerrey (2008) opines that ideology stands for socio-culturally established ideas, values and norms. It refers to all those beliefs, associations and practices which we have acquired through various agencies like religion, culture or political milieu. Ideology, therefore, is a social construct and not something ordained by the Divine. "It is largely unconscious, we follow it blindly, we rarely question, and this prevents us from changes. Marxists, therefore, argue that ideology creates blind spots in our vision. In a capitalist society, the worker is alienated from the products they work hard for" (p. 34). Although Marxism itself is an ideology but all ideologies are not repressive and undesirable, nor are all of them productive and desirable either. Undesirable ideologies serve as a stumbling block to human progress. They usually serve as tools of exploitation of a group and promote repressive political agendas. Such ideologies are presented as natural, as, for instance, thinking men to be biologically superior to women is a sexist ideology. Religion, race, gender, nationalism etc., are certain cultural constructs that are often internalized as natural and the resultant ideologies blind humans to acknowledge them as a social construction.

Marxism is a non-repressive ideology that attempts to make people constantly aware of all the ways in which they are the products of material/historical circumstances and of the repressive ideologies that serve to blind them to this fact in order to keep them subservient to the ruling power system. It provides "a fully worked-out theoretical basis for the struggle of the working class to attain a higher form of human society Socialism" (Berry, 2002, p.157). The upholders of Marxism attach key importance to material conditions or economic factor when it comes to the history of class struggle. Ideas, philosophies or cultural phenomena are largely conditional upon the material conditions. Paul and Hawthorn (2001) assert that Marxism has traditionally been an active and interventionist philosophy, not a spectatorial or passive one; in this way, it

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is also called anti-essentialist philosophy" (p. 185). Established by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, it focuses on the representation of social conflicts between capitalist and working classes. "The division of labour leads to the development of class society; in which the population of a society is divided into separate classes whose need and desires may be fundamentally at odds" (Booker, 1996, p.72). Marxism asserts that the socio-economic differences among people are far more significant than the differences on the basis of gender, religion, race or ethnicity. It is due to the fact that "class" is primarily related to human survival and basic needs. In fact, all the associations of caste, creed, gender, colour and alike come later, and they are conditional upon life and living. As Tyson (2006) remarks, "the real battle lines are drawn between the 'haves' and 'the have-nots, between the bourgeoisie – those who control the world's natural, economic and human resources – and the proletariat, the majority of the global population who live in substandard conditions and who have always performed the manual labour... that fills the coffers of the rich" (p.54).

Statement of the Problem

Oppressive ideologies like race, culture, religion, nationalism and alike may have oppressive overtones in certain contexts where they serve the ends of elitist power structures. Exploitative powers at the helm of economic affairs manipulate them in order to keep the masses from awareness at one hand and make them ignorant on the other. The social operation of these ideologies is underpinned by the crucial and most elementary classism, which draws a prominent line between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The novel understudy apparently paints a blatant picture of religious marginality, but this research aims to dig deeper to unearthing the dynamic interplay between the haves and have-not. As the text lends itself to Marxist analysis, an important research gap is likely to be bridged through this study which tends to go beyond the oppressive ideologies and foreground the bedrock of all kinds of discriminations.

Theoretical Framework

In accordance with the purpose of this research, three basic Marxist assumptions are selected as a framework for conducting the study. These assumptions include ideology, class and hegemony, the description of which follows in the ensuing lines.

Ideology is the ideas of ruling class that seeks to perpetuate the prevailing order of capitalism and their own privileged position. For Marx, ideology was false consciousness, a set of beliefs that obscured the truth of the economic basis of society and the violent operation that capitalism necessarily entails (Ikram, 2010, p.1). Louis Althusser views it as "a representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (Murfin and Ray, 1998, p.5). Goldstein Philip (2005) describes Louis's distinction of the state divided into ideological state apparatuses and repressive state apparatuses, the former referring to the apparatuses such as law, religion, political parties, media, family, church etc. and latter to the institutions such as courts, prisons, police, army and alike. "Ideological state apparatuses work as agents ensuring the ruling class unity" (p.27). Ideology entails a label or association that encourages people to see through a particular lens. It involves a relation through which people are enabled to make sense of the world and people around them. "This analysis of the functioning of ideology enables us to understand the ways in which social relations are reproduced through ideology's ability to shape, and indeed to perform the conscious desires and beliefs of individuals. This is the object world, constructing its reality in specific ways" (Tallack, 1987, p. 184).

Class is viewed as a large group of people sharing the same region, economic conditions, traditions and rites. Karl Marx makes a broader division whereby two classes are described: the capitalist and the proletariat. The former owns the means of production and has control over resources and the capital; the latter, on the other hand, owns nothing but their own labour. Marx harped on this sad reality that human history has always entailed a class struggle or the conflict between the oppressor and the oppressed, the exploiting and the exploited, and the ruling and the ruled. "This conflict repeats again and again, and it happens as thesis and antithesis until capitalism is overthrown by the workers and a socialist state is created,

which is synthesis where there will be no antithesis again (Day, 2001, p. 112). Further, class is determined not by the occupation but by the position one holds. For instance, two workers in a firm where one is a manager and the other is a clerk belong to two different classes. Marx stresses that the relationship between the two classes is not merely a matter of dominance and subordination, but it also involves exploitation and oppression. The labour of the workers is extracted by the ruling class. The working class is paid far meagre than how much they produce. As a result, the capitalists who own the means of production are able to use their surplus wealth as profit. Through these profits coming about as a result of the efforts and hard work of the working class, the ruling elite use them for luxury and leisure. Marx's notion of a classless society is an ideal concept since it is devoid of all kinds of exploitation and conflicts, so it's only imaginary. "Such type of society never existed in the past, nor we find it today. Then why and how Marx has this cherished dream in his mind? Because he has seen a pitiable lot of the working people in the initial stage of the Industrial Revolution, he was aspiring for a classless society" (Woods, 2010, p.4). Almost everywhere and at every age, the lower classes are mainly deprived of basic facilities; they suffer from economic oppression and have limited means to improve their conditions. The upper classes, on the contrary, are economically sound, socially privileged and politically influential. They wish to keep their luxurious status intact through the manipulation of certain ideologies, which often lead to creating what Marx referred to as "false consciousness".

"Hegemony is like an internalized form of social control which makes certain views seem natural or invisible so that they hardly seem like views at all, just the way things are" (Berry, 2002, p. 165). Hegemonic ideology blinds people to view a social phenomenon on realistic grounds. It renders social constructs as natural, allowing people to form an "all is well with the world" attitude. It adheres to the belief that the divide that exists between the rich and the poor is more natural, often God-ordained, than being entrenched in socio-economic or material conditions. "Even though the district workers are living under poor conditions and will not be able to rise in power, the government in charge will condition the subordinates to believe that their lives will improve so long as they follow the guidance and see the government as the protector for lives" (Tyson, 2006, p. 63). Hegemony is, in fact, a way those wielding power and authority control the mindset of their citizens and make them believe that their social position is what it is supposed to be. And there is no realization on their part that they are actually being controlled by their government. "Classism" is also a hegemonic ideology since it is based on the internalized belief that "people at the top of the social scale are naturally superior to those below them: those at the top are more intelligent, more responsible, more trustworthy, more ethical and so on" (Tyson, 2006, p.59). On the other hand, those who are at the bottom are considered unintelligent, lazy and irresponsible. It is therefore natural that the intelligent should be holding privileged positions. Very often, the underprivileged classes are made to believe that class division is a Divine phenomenon and to act against God's will is sinful. Besides, there are many scriptural references where the poor are promised compensation for their worldly sufferings. Marx rightly points that (religion) "helps to keep the faithful poor satisfied with their lot in life, or at least tolerant of it, much as a tranquillizer might do" (ibid).

Marxist Analysis of the Novel

The novel *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* is a Karachi-based story of a young Christian nurse Alice Bhatti. Through her perspective, the events underlying the worse socio-economic and social position of the lower classes, particularly the Christian sweepers, are narrated. The novel opens with the protagonist, just being out of jail, looking for a job. She gets a job at the Sacred Heart Hospital for all ailments, a seedy place overrun by homeless drug addicts. In the midst of surviving as a Christian in a Muslim-dominated world, Alice tries to help the endless stream of people lining the hospital's corridors in her inimitably pragmatic and warm-hearted manner. She also falls in love with Teddy Butt, a former bodybuilder who serves part-time for the corrupt, trigger-happy Gentleman's squad for the Karachi police. "Their unlikely pairing progresses into a strange love affair", writes Raza Rumi (2011) in his book review. Alice's father, in addition to being an expert

on clearing clogged drains, cures stomach ulcers by reciting verses from the Holy Quran, a lit candle balanced on the patient's tummy. Teddy's father was a physical education instructor, a strict disciplinarian, a man who would make his wife take off her earrings every morning and give them to him to carry to his school and bring it back, just to make sure no one kills her for her earrings when he is away. Then there is Noor, Senior sister HinaAlvi, Dr James Pereira and a few others, each of them as eccentric and interesting as the others. Alice undergoes many vicissitudes of fate until she breathes her last at the end of the novel. According to Rumi (2011), "The novel explores a variety of themes that colour Pakistan's social fabric, from criminality to corruption, from misogyny to religious extremes".

Hanif's novel paints a bleak picture of contemporary Pakistan teeming with social injustices and economic disparity. The lower classes are the targets of discrimination and oppression. They are part of a system that is meant to extend every kind of favour to the upper classes. The poor segment of society is crushed under the overwhelming pressure of how to make both ends meet. Against the backdrop of the life of a Christian nurse, the novel transcends the ideologies of caste, creed and colour and brings to limelight the economic struggle between the two classes. French colony provides a canvas onto which the novelist lashes misery after misery. Alice faces hatred and discriminatory attitude not because she is a Christian but because she is the daughter of a sweeper who cleans the shit from the streets. Joseph Bhatti expresses his inner grief in these words that "These Muslas will make you clean their shit and then complain that you stink . . . And our own brothers at the Sacred? They will educate you and then ask you why you stink" (Hanif, 2011, p. 01). Weir (2007), in *Class in America: An Encyclopaedia*, stated that the oppressed person/group—usually the lower class and poor—is viewed as less worthy intellectually, socially, and economically. The class disparity and the related oppression are clearly observable where Alice works. She feels degraded by the remarks of her seniors. "Have you cleaned the floor, Alice? Why have you not cleaned the floor? Who do you think will clean that blood on the floor, Alice? Your father?" (Hanif, 2011, p. 2). Derogatory language and lewd gestures are the prevalent norms and the underclass face them most frequently. Alice Bhatti and her clan suffer oppression not because they are Christians but because they are from the lower class. This is evidenced in Joseph's work experience at Dr. Preriera's household. The latter was Christian himself but of upper class. Joseph Bhatti remembered that time in these words, ". . . they fed me in their Choohra dishes and then washed their hands as if I was spreading leprosy. They hovered around me at a distance thinking that if I touched something it would get contaminated" (Hanif, 2011, p.75). In fact, Joseph Bhatti feels the pangs of social disparity and the indifferent attitude of the upper class much profoundly. He is deeply grieved at the degradation and humiliation of his clan for poverty. He refers to class oppression as: "Choohras were here before everything. Choohras were here before the Sacred was built . . . And when all of this finished, Choohras will be still here . . . and cockroaches too" (ibid, p. 77). The capitalists are usually bent on extracting the last drop of blood out of the exploited masses. They seem wholly in control of their bodies and labour. The mis(use) of poor's bodies either for monetary benefits or for personal gratification clearly indicates the upper class' monopoly. This class oppression finds a grim expression in the novelist's description of Alice's encounter with Sir Ortho: "His eyes are level with Alice Bhatti's breasts. Inverted nipples! How do you deal with them?...Ortho Sir rolls his tongue around his gums as if there might be nipples stuck between his teeth" (ibid, p.9). Such liberty with other's private body parts not only shows the insignificance of female body in a patriarchal society but it also implies subordination and marginalization of the lower classes. Another similar kind of incident takes place when a VIP patient sexually harasses the protagonist at gun point. He feels entitled to her just as the ruling classes deem it their right to exploit the bodies of the lower classes whenever and wherever they like. The patient unhesitatingly vociferates his animalistic desire which underlies his anticipation of non-resistance from the one from lower stratum of society. She is considered as a commodity to satisfy his urge, although the result of the attempt is unexpectedly different. The incident indicates that the proletariat can be (ab)used anytime for the personal or collective interests of the bourgeoisie.

Hegemonic ideologies like classism, religion and nationalism etc., tend to blind people from viewing their socio-economic condition as a cultural construct. Such repressive ideologies are imposed by the ruling class to exercise their cultural hegemony. For the lower classes, differences of ideologies are highlighted; but the class consciousness on their part is deliberately obscured. The poor are kept from developing their own working-class consciousness that might enable them to address their socio-economic issues. The elites set the norms of society for the poor to follow. Alice Bhatti and all the characters from the lower class are so entangled in, the finer net of overarching social conditions that they find no space to move and interact as per their will. They undergo a series of oppressive and exploitative circumstances. The novel evokes the rules of Charya Ward in the Sacred Heart Hospital as much similar to the rules of the Capitalist Hegemonic System. The ward is full of psychotic patients, who are indulged in their own affairs and are quite indifferent to other humans who are suffering on their stake. As Sister HinaAlvisays to Alice, "I don't know if you have done any psycare, but there is only one rule you need to remember: you have to tell them that everything is normal" (Hanif, 2011, p. 43). On the other dimension, the condition and status of the patients of Charya Ward may also be equated with the lower, underprivileged classes of society. Nobody cares for them. They suffer a great deal owing to what they themselves know little about. No one, not even doctors, visits that Ward. Sister HinaAlvi said about the patients of that ward; "These Boys in Charya Ward are suffering from what everybody suffers from life" (Hanif, 2011, p. 42). Life means the same to those patients as it is meant to Alice. They are all victims of this capitalist system. Storkey (1985), in *What's Right with Feminism*, writes, "The capitalist system has harshly exploited vulnerable workers, especially women workers in low paid jobs" (p.86). The proletariat, the working class, is always compelled to carry out their assigned tasks, often by hook or by crook. Even when the protagonist of the novel finds herself locked in the arms of her lover, she is obsessed with the thoughts of her patients. She tries to rid herself of Teddy and cries, "I still need to give them lithium sulphate" (Hanif, 2011, p. 53). In fact, she is very much responsible and is concerned about her job. Her lover finds her quite lightweight in his arms. She yells and shouts and tries to disentangle herself but to no avail. This lightweight and her useless resistance indicate the vulnerability of the poor working class against a strong capitalist system. The oppressive hegemonic ideology of religion operates as a blinding force that pushes the sufferings of the oppressed away from the foreground. As a result, the people of the same class as Alice's but having different creeds take weapons against each other. This favours the capitalistic mindset and the ruling elites who always try to divert their attention from class disparity issues. Hanif rightly opines, "...Yassoo was the son of God. Try shouting that out in a public square in this place, and you will be lucky if you only end up in a jail and are not lynched on the spot" (ibid, p.228). In addition to being diverted from the core issue related to class identity, the common lot is made to view the other religions as opposing, adverse and fallacious, mainly to perpetuate mutual opposition and intensify the differences. The religious ideology can easily be (mis)used and even abused by the powerful elitist to achieve their ulterior motives.

Conclusion

Marxism primarily focuses on the relationship among classes that have different socio-economic conditions. It explains all human activities in terms of the distribution and dynamics of economic power. The novel has been studied in light of the assumptions provided by Marxist literary theory. Three Marxist elements, namely Ideology, Class and Hegemony, have constituted a framework to analyze the text. The basic contention was based on the premise that the oppression meted out to the Christian sweeper community is a reflection of subordination and marginalization of the proletariat at the hands of the capitalist. And the protagonist suffers more because of her social status (class difference) than for her religious difference. The study reveals that the issues of poverty and discrimination on the basis of creed and gender are the results of class-war between the capitalistic mindset and the working lot, which in turn stems from corruptible and ineffective governance. And the difference among various strata of society on the basis of their socio-economic conditions is much more crucial and significant than the religious, racial, gender or ethnic

differences. The study also shows that the novel understudy tacitly assumes that the debate of colonialism and postcolonialism in the context of such menaces is highly irrelevant. The protagonist's unspeakable troubles both at the workplace and outside and the onerous living conditions of her poor clan indicate a heart-rending inequitable distribution of the country's wealth where at one hand, the hegemonic capitalist powers are bent on multiplying their assets and the poor (lower and lower-middle) find it extremely hard to make both ends meet. Not to speak of the basic facilities of health and education, they are even unable to get a square meal. The study suggests that different labels of identification like caste, creed and colour are mostly used as capitalistic exploitative tools, which not only keep the common people away from the mainstream but also keep them unaware of the fact that they are deliberately kept ignorant divided and mere puppets. Through this research, the readers, researchers and critics will be enabled to view present-day Karachi as a cesspit of socio-economic inequities and ideological contradictions. The study invites and encourages the readers to see the unhappy truths about material/historical reality behind the apparent ideologies.

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