



Lyotardian Language Games: A Postmodernist Critique of *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*

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Abstract

This research seeks to analyze Our Lady of Alice Bhatti in the light of Lyotardian language games. The novel is written by Muhammad Hanif who is a renowned Pakistani novelist and writer. The novel, through language games, subverts the master narratives of nation, science, justice, culture, and faith. This research explores the role of language to interpret, understand and communicate in the postmodern world as in today's world every idea exists in the form of signs or language. This reading explores the novel through textual analysis, and it is qualitative and exploratory. It ends with the findings and recommendations for further research.

Key Words: Postmodernism, Metanarratives, Science, Enlightenment, Lyotard, Language Games

Introduction

It is difficult to define 'postmodernism' in a clear cut manner as it has been defined differently by various theorists. The main theorists such as Jurgen Habermas, Linda Hutcheon, Ihab Hassan, Hegel, Nietzsche Fredric Jameson, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard have contributed in defining postmodernism. These theorists see the postmodern condition or phenomenon from their perspective, therefore, everyone's definition is different from the rest. In fact, postmodernism, by the mid of the twentieth century, started a debate in the literature, and chronologically it came after the modern period. The term modern was derived from a Latin word 'modo', that means 'of today' or anything that is current, and different from earlier times. Postmodernism has cast a great impact on fields such as music, culture, philosophy, architecture, language and history. The majority of postmodern theorists agree on the point that the vast economic, social, economic, philosophical, technological, and cultural developments that occurred in the second half of the twentieth century transformed all areas of life which constituted 'the postmodern condition.

However, Brooker (2014) defines that "the terms 'postmodern' and 'postmodernism' surfaced briefly in the forties and the fifties, and these were employed in critical essays registering tremors in cultural values" (p.2). It was Federico De Onis, who, at first, utilized the Spanish word 'postmodernism' in his *Antologia de la Poesia Espanola e Hispanoamericana*. From that point onward, Dudley Fitts, in 1942, utilized the word in his acclaimed *Anthology of Contemporary Latin-American Poetry*. Afterward, the expression "postmodernism" was instituted and utilized by Arnold Toynbee, in 1947, and it got well known with the production of Ihab Hassan's *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature*, in 1971. Present-day writing was changed because of different changes affected by postmodernism as Selden et al. (2013) state, "Art which participates in this postmodern awareness of difference and heterogeneity will, therefore, critique and destabilize the closure of modernity. It will explore the 'unsayable' and 'invisible'" (p.186).

Jean Francois Lyotard is a renowned French postmodern thinker and post-structuralist philosopher who was born in France in 1924. He has presented his theory of mini-narratives and language games in his notable book *The Postmodern Condition* (1979 in French and 1984 in English). His philosophy is based on the idea that nothing exists as reality rather every notion is made up as a result of language games. Lyotard significantly challenges science and all its supporting principles. He is of the opinion that the present postmodern condition is the age to

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philosophize as he states about himself that he is “a philosopher, not an expert” (p. x x v). He further explains that he does not have perfect knowledge but at least he knows how to ask questions even if there are no answers to them. He (1984) states that postmodernism is related to modernism as it emerged as a response to scientific and materialistic advancements. His theory of mini-narratives questions the modern ideological constructs and he regards this transformation as a postmodern condition. He states, “Science seems more completely subordinated to the prevailing power” (8). He refers to postmodernism as a movement that shows an ‘incredulity towards metanarratives,’ as it challenges the existing perceptions and thought patterns which are based on claims of objectivity and truth. The word ‘metanarrative’ is a story that refers to some other story, and in fact, it is a man-made narrative that claims for objectivity and transparency.

According to Lyotard, these grand stories represent modern essentials and they claim for objectivity and totalize the knowledge. He talks about post-industrial societies with a highly advanced system of knowledge production and dissemination. He states, “Science, in particular, plays an increasingly major part in the knowledge creation industry” (p. 6), and science is a dominant notion of modern Enlightenment. Lyotard is of the view that scientific discourse is based on the human desire to rule and it does not represent any reality. He believes that these notions of enlightenment work as ‘language games’ that is an idea that Lyotard has borrowed from Austrian thinker and philosopher Wittgenstein’s. Lyotard remarks that there are certain utterances like performative, questions, denotative, promises, and prescriptions, and he highlights that all these games have their moves based on specific rules. Besides science, Lyotard considers history as a language game where traditional historian, being a player, demonstrates only a particular set of knowledge. Malpas (2005) supports Lyotard’s view that these utterances have their rules and they are linked with power as well. He states that “various kinds of discourses utilized in various talks adhere to various principles. The various talks that make up a general public’s information - be they material science, fiction, laws, customs, or even tattle - all have various arrangements of rules for what consider genuine articulations. In The Postmodern Condition, Lyotard alludes to these various discourses as ‘language games’” (21).

Muhammad Hanif is a Pakistan based novelist. He is a globally recognized writer who is known for his fiction, stage plays, and a feature film. He is the author of *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*, *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* and *The Baloch who is not missing and others who are*. All his works are based on political, social, cultural, religious issues of Pakistan. It is said about his writing style that he follows Saadat Hasan Manto, Salman Rushdie and Joseph Heller. The story of *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* is based on the life of a Christian nurse. It was widely read and appreciated and also nominated for many awards including Welcome Trust Book Prize in 2012.

Research Objective

This study is based on the following objective:

To investigate the language games that subvert modern essentials in *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*.

Research Question

This study investigates the following research question:

How does *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* subvert the modern master essentials through Lyotard’s idea of language games?

Literature Review

The issues related to minority communities whether in Pakistan or abroad, have always been represented by fiction writers. Keeping in view the Pakistani and Indian novelists, there are many novels such as *The Ice Candy Man*, *Season of the Rainbirds*, *The Prisoner* written by Bapsi Sidhwa, Nadeem Aslam, and Omar Shahid Hamid respectively on minority communities. Muhammad Hanif’s *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* is one such representation, based on the story of a Christian family who undergoes various conflicts while living in Karachi. It contests the narratives of nationalism, work, religious myths, Asma Aftab (2016) in her Ph.D. dissertation comments on this novel with reference to various themes that it portrays. She is of the view that Hanif, through fictional representation, contests the nationalist narratives and legitimacy of various institutions such as military, police and law. She states, “His subsequent novel is a remark on Pakistani culture as represented through the regular

daily existence of a Nurse battling for her endurance in a general public that Hanif depicts as brutal and misanthropic” (p. 245).

However, Asma does not agree with the representation of the miserable condition of a religious minority who is living in Pakistan. She views that this kind of depiction cannot be generalized as it reflects just a single part of the whole, and the situation is entirely different on the ground level as that of its literary expression. She believes that Hanif tends to generalize his representation of the miserable state of Alice, and that cannot be approved. She further contests that, this depiction, of a few incidents of discrimination against the minority, ignores peace as well as religious harmony that represents the real culture of Pakistan.

Like Asma Aftab, Rasib Mehmood (2016) in his Ph.D. dissertation titled “Colonization, Resistance and Transformation: A Postcolonial Critique of *The Unchosen* and *Things Fall Apart*” contends that Hanif represents a miserable side of minorities. He explores *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* through a feminist lens. He argues that the novel represents women as oppressed and marginalized because of the patriarchal society as well as the difference of religion as the protagonist is a Christian. He states, “Hanif’s feministic lens throws light on the discrimination of the Pakistani society against a Christian lady, Alice Bhatti” (p. 60). However, Mehmood, in his study, overlooks the strong side of the protagonist that attributes magical powers to her, and Hanif gives a saintly depiction of her character.

Research Methodology

The present study is exploratory and qualitative. The qualitative approach is used when a researcher wants to make a deep investigation of a text. Helle Neergaard and John Parm Ullhøi state, “The objective of qualitative research is to create ideas that upgrade the comprehension of social phenomena in regular settings, with a due accentuation on the implications, encounters and perspectives on all members” (p.4). Therefore, the present study explores the subversive language in *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* through the lens of Lyotardian language games. The study incorporates Catherine Belsey’s textual analysis to explore the link between author, reader and the text. It provokes the reader to get involved in a textual encoding and decoding. Denzin (2011) supports this idea as he comments that, “the postmodern line of criticism challenged the fundamental authoritativeness of texts per se” (p. 52).

The selected work of fiction is studied in different components like words, phrases, idioms, and sentences to trace the language games that subvert modern metanarratives in the sense proposed by Lyotard. The textual analysis helps the researcher to find Lyotardian language games through an examination of texts and styles as Norman Fairclough (2003) states, “Texts as elements of social events have causal effects, for example, they realize changes in our insight, our convictions, our mentalities, values, etc. (p.8). Therefore, this research also explores the change and resistance against the hegemonic constructs of society. The study is arranged and organized through divisions i.e. introduction, literature review, textual analysis, conclusion and works cited.

Textual Analysis

Our Lady of Alice Bhatti

The novel highlights various themes such as relationships among gender, caste, and religion in Karachi, an advanced city of Pakistan. Alice Bhatti is the protagonist of the novel who is a Catholic Christian and a professional nurse in Sacred Heart Hospital for All Ailments. Throughout the novel, she is also known by her father, Joseph Bhatti, a low-caste worker, who is a Catholic and identified as “choorha” means sweeper. Both Alice Bhatti and Joseph Bhatti are honest in their work, however, they are constantly confronted with the discriminatory attitude of the society. Through Alice, Hanif reveals the prevailing corruption in the professions of medicine, police and law of Pakistan as in the hospital, she finds doctors running after money at the cost of patient’s life even, police officers detaining innocent people just on the basis of personal fulfillment, courts giving the authority to unprofessional and biased people. Alice marries Teddy, a Muslim and a policeman by profession, but, unfortunately, their marriage does not go well. Teddy attacks her by throwing acid on her and it proves fatal. The novel ends at a letter that is written by Alice’s father Joseph Bhatti that reviews her life from her childhood, and he informs the reader about her struggles in career and personal life. He intends to “leave the matter with the people to decide whether she deserves to be recognized as Our Lady of Alice Bhatti” (p. 339). By involving

the reader, Hanif, in fact, admits his (reader's) freedom to interpret and understand the story, in his own way, and it will generate many moves, and ultimately many language games will be played.

The novel highlights various metanarratives such as science, faith, professionalism, identity, and nationalism and it reflects that how language games lead towards stereotyping of these notions. Through the characters such as Joseph Bhatti and Teddy's father, the novel challenges the legitimacy of the Partition of Indo-Pak subcontinent. They consider that there is no reality in the Partition narrative, and it is a language game that is constructed to conceal the selfish motives of British rulers. The novel re-writes the narratives of lootings, killings and rapes, lootings during the riots in 1947, and it is ironic as Muslims and Hindus, who were living for so many years together, start killing each other blindly in the name of so-called nationalism. Teddy's father, a character in the novel, gets nostalgic while remembering pre-partition united subcontinent, he states:

For Teddy's dad, everybody who was brought into the world after Partition was a sissy puss since no one met his criteria of not being a sissy puss: what amount of wild ox's milk had they tanked? Had they at any point been harmed in a genuine bull race? Had they at any point bicycled 300 miles to watch a Shanta Apte film? Had they at any point taken an administration horse? For hell's sake, had they at any point taken anything? Furthermore, you were yet a sissy puss. (p. 199)

The lines show that Teddy's father makes a move in the language game and alters the pre-established notions about the Partition, and he becomes a player by changing the existing rules. In fact, he challenges the objectivity of the rules of the Partition game and exposes the very aspect that "A language-game thus functions as a kind of frame for an object by creating a standard of rationality believed to be appropriate to the object" (Branigan. 2013, p. 6). Through him, the novel mocks at the idea of freedom, as he remembers good old days when they, in the united sub-continent, used to enjoy their life. He also questions the legitimacy of the modern form of the government that remains unable to solve the problems of Pakistan which have their roots in the partition event. The text presents an ironic scenario that the country that was made in the name of freedom for every citizen is still unable to get rid of its problems which are significantly related to the debate of religion. Teddy also mirrors a similar approach towards the present circumstance of Pakistan, for example, while conversing with Alice, he communicates his grave worry as, "We live in risky times. We live in a hazardous place. It's smarter to know the risk, to work with it, to tame it" (p. 238). These utterances on the part of various characters do challenge the language games of the Partition and nationalism and formulate new moves (mini-narratives).

The textual analysis demonstrates a speculative stance towards the stereotypical assumptions about the faith/religion as a metanarrative. Through fictional representation, it exposes that few Muslims claim to be followers of Islam (a religion of peace) but they act otherwise and impose their interpretation on the minority community, therefore, in this way, they marginalize and dehumanize the minority community. The characters, such as Alice Bhatti, her father Joseph Bhatti, and Sister Hina Alvi, do challenge these stereotypes through their commentary, critique, and actions. The metanarrative of faith is replaced by mini-narratives that shatters the stereotypical assumptions associated with the followers of various religions. The textual analysis represents that Alice and Joseph Bhatti are discriminated against, on the basis of the fact, that they are Christians. The fictional portrayal of mistreatment, through conversations, commentaries, and various incidents, draws the reader's focus towards the current status of Christian minorities who are based in Pakistan. This religious discrimination disturbs the lives of many characters, which stands as a metaphor for the ground reality.

The novel demonstrates that in one of the incidents, Alice gets badly hurt emotionally and physically, it happens that she falls in love with a Muslim doctor who enjoys a good status in his field. She gets pregnant and she discloses the news to her lover who at first, pretends to be excited and also starts planning about the baby. The text writes it, "First he began to cry, at that point he chain-smoked for an hour and experienced and went through a list of infant names that incorporated each conceivable blend from the names of the focal official board of trustees of the Indian Communist Party at the hour of Partition" (p. 263). The lines reflect his acceptance of the fact that he is in love with a Christian lady and he is happy to own his child from her but later on, unfortunately, he contradicts his own behavior and he disowns his baby. He also expresses his embarrassment at the thought of marrying a Christian lady. He, as a player of religious stereotyping, wants to adhere to the rules of segregation, therefore he maintains the metanarrative. His sexual lust and lack of commitment towards Alice symbolize many loopholes in his professional identity as a doctor, and it is ironic that a doctor who is meant to provide comfort

is actually hurting someone this time. The text questions the moral and professional responsibilities of those doctors who are careless in their service. The textual analysis highlights various such incidents, for instance, when a patient dies just because of the negligence of doctors, and many other such serious cases do happen frequently. The novel highlights it in a playful tone when Noor recalls that Alice used to say, “she says things like what is the difference between a doctor and a donkey? Sometimes she says it in a room full of doctors” (p. 35).

Christian community wears a cross as a symbol of the sacrifice that their prophet did for the uprightness of the religion. Joseph reveals that the cross was used a long time ago even before the birth of the religion of Christianity. It later was introduced in various countries such as Latin, Greece, Egypt, Mexico, Syria and India. Joseph Bhatti, even being a sweeper, has got a good knowledge of knows the history of Christianity. He, ironically, traces the roots of his community in Pakistan when he says, “Choohras were here before everything. Choohras were here before the Sacred was built before Yassoo was resurrected, before Muslas came on their horses, even before Hindus” (p.76). These lines, taken from the text, show his utter grief over the bad treatment that the Christian community is subjected to at the hands of their Muslim fellow citizens. These grand narratives stereotype the Christian community by calling them with bad names, and these little stories do not discourage Alice as she also makes move by resisting. The novel mocks at the superficial approach of the laymen who associate every idea with religion, instead of truly following the original message given by it. Though Alice, as a woman and from minority, is supposed to accept her ‘below ordinary status’ in the context of Muslim majority country but she speaks to fight against this class discrimination Hanif has given her uncanny power, by which she can predict what is going to happen in future and also it helps her to recover the dead baby. The marriage of Teddy, a Muslim, and Alice, a Christian depicts an inter-faith relationship that resists the language games rationalized in the society in the form of religious segregations and divisions. Alice’s marriage with Teddy was, in fact, a move in the existing game where she flouts the rules. Ashraf (2014) views the authorial move in this depiction, she states, “Hanif as a novelist constructs the discourse on tolerating Christian as righteous as some other religion can be” (p.2). Joseph Bhatti, even being a Christian, shows great respect towards Islam, its message and, the holy Quran, as the textual analysis reveals that he recites certain verses to cure ulcers.

In her professional set up, Alice’s linguistic behavior shows her strength and a distance that she wants to maintain from the general public. Though she is considered an untouchable but she experiences the double standards of people, where they, as players of language games of faith and patriarchy, obey and flout the rules at the same time. In a playful tone, the text writes that it always surprised her that people wanted to avoid her “but the same people who would not drink from a tap that she has touched have no problem casually poking their elbows into her breast or contouring their own bodies to rub against her heathen bottom” (p.140). In certain instances, she prefers to remain silent, that is, again a move in a language game that shows resistance and rejection. On the contrary, at other points, she gives physical response either by beating or cutting the flesh of the tormentor, such as when she is forced to indulge in sexual intimacy by a male attendant, of a patient, during her (Alice) night duty. He even uses a pistol to terrorize her but she knows how to handle it. The text writes, “The barrel of the pistol hits her face and Alice is slapped again, hard. She still thinks she hasn’t done anything to deserve this, but she has made up her mind to go through with it” (p.89). In this way, she retaliates by cutting this man’s flesh with a sharp knife that she always carries with her for her defense. By this very act, she demonstrates her power that she when she was forced to subjugate, she chooses the other way, that is, to make a move to resist patriarchal powers. Sister Hina represents a player in the language game of grand narratives as she perpetuates the patriarchal hold rather than helping Alice. It happens that an incident of sexual harassment happens with Alice in the VIP ward of the hospital then she (Alice) cuts that man with a knife as a result of self-defense. Later on, sister Hina scolds her as she says, “In fact, you should be more scared than they haven’t registered a case against you. It means they want to deal with it on their own terms” (p.74).

Alice, as a junior nurse, is always marginalized in the medical profession, and she has to face the unjust treatment by male senior surgeons who consider nurses as mere ‘garbage bins in uniforms’ (p.175). The ironical reference to her low social status presents the greatest challenge of her life in cutting edge city of Karachi. The novel, at the same time, delineates on her beauty as a woman, and it portrays that she encounters this aspect of her personality differently rather it serves as a curse to her. She can’t take a ride on public vehicle and subsequently it denies her of the relative assurance from inappropriate behavior that accompanies it. She needs to stroll in

bazaars, travel alone in neighborhood transports and, along these lines, she spends most of her day out in the open spaces. To be sure, “lewd gestures, whispered suggestions, uninvited hands on her bottom are all pieces of Alice Bhatti's everyday presence” (p.9).

Textual analysis reveals that the characters depict multiple identities and they challenge the strict binary opposition of rational/irrational. For example, the character of Teddy Butt, who is a policeman and a lover of Alice (later husband), detains a criminal at first and then helps him to get an escape from the police custody. This shows the shift of roles that he takes in a language game as a defender of law and then as a traitor. Moreover, as a lover too, he shows a non-serious approach towards the metanarrative of love as he does not make any tall claims, rather Teddy's ideas of love are derived from the lyrics of popular songs and his aggressive possessiveness owes to the wildlife documentaries that he uses to watch on National Geographic. Therefore, his expression of love is ironic and it reflects his superficial approach. It also highlights that the love that he has for Alice has not at all touched his feelings and emotions. Then later on, he takes out a gun and forces Alice to accept his love, also reflects his unconventional way of proposing her.

Conclusion

The study found out that *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*, as a work of postmodern fiction, represents the postmodern trend conveyed by Jean Francois Lyotard through his language game theory. The textual analysis manifested that various characters are, one way or the other, connected to some language games which perpetuate certain metanarratives. Few characters such as Alice Bhatti and Joesph Bhatti do challenge these narratives and flout the rules and make new moves to play a new game, a game of mini-narratives (plural voices). The discursive representation of various religions manifests a pessimistic as well as an optimistic reflection of the contextualized approach towards various religions in the backdrop of postmodern globalized social set-up. The novel also shows a strong concern for history as a language game, rather it believes in the construction of local stories to represent the past. The novel, in a true postmodern sense, subverts the modern ideologies related to notions of patriarchy, science, identity, professionalism and progress. The new researchers can look for the issues of minorities dealt with by Bina Shah and Nadeen Aslam in their fiction.

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