

SOCIO-RELIGIOUS IDENTITY AND CRISIS OF MINORITY IN MOHAMMAD HANIF'S OUR LADY OF ALICE BHATTI AND BINA SHAH'S SLUM CHILD

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ABSTRACT

The present study investigates the Socio-religious Identity Crisis prevalent among religious minorities in Pakistan, with reference to the English novels Our Lady of Alice Bhatti by Mohammed Hanif and Slum Child by Bina Shah. As the selected novels address the conditions of Christians in Muslim-majority Pakistan, the authors chose the case of Christian women to reflect the community's socio-religious and socio-economic struggles. The study is conducted in the light of Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory of personality development. The fundamental component of this research is a psychosocial analysis of the novels employing Erikson's theory. Textual analysis of the novels within a qualitative method was employed to achieve the objectives of the research under hand. According to the findings of this study, Alice Bhatti and Laila, the Christian protagonists of Our Lady of Alice Bhatti and Slum Child, respectively, represent the typical socio-religious rejection and ensuing desperation to escape the suffering. After a close reading of the text it was found that the female protagonists in both novels suffer from low self-esteem, lack of social respect and recognition because they belong to a minority group. In a larger sense, the same social conduct demonstrated against Christians may be applicable to other religious minorities in Pakistan. The agony of Christian characters in both stories may be applied to any minority individual in Pakistan owing to the inherent cultural consequences imposed by the dominant group.

Keywords: identity, crisis, social, religious minority, Erikson, Hanif, Shah.

INTRODUCTION

Pakistan is a Muslim Majority Country along with the fact that it has diverse religious minorities living in it. These minorities commonly confront discrimination in exercising their rights. Discrimination based on unequal access to opportunities and legislation highlights themes such as pride and inequality. Inequality brings anarchy and chaos among the dwellers of any state. Be it social, religious, political or economic disparity it damages the harmony and peace (Atiq, 2024). On the other hand Christen (1981) opines that religious discrimination is as old as recorded history and religious minorities are not excepted from this phenomenon. Since all human beings have freedom to choose and change one's religion which is protected by international law and in any situations, people's fundamental rights cannot be broken

(Siddiqui et al, 2023). Unfortunately, in Pakistan it appears that certain institutes are striving to limit religious freedom. Their rejection of religious pluralism contradicts Islamic values (Siddiqui et al, 2023). The Pakistani fiction writers have highlighted the miseries of religious minorities in their works to bring the attention of authorities towards such an unavoidable matter. Therefore, the present research explores socio-religious identity crisis of minorities and how they establish their individual identity in a country like Pakistan by selecting Mohammad Hanif's novel *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* (2011) and Bina Shah's *Slum Child* (2010) by using Erikson's (1968) psycho-social theory of personal development as a theoretical framework. The contents of the novels give rationale for the research questions of socio-religious identity crisis of minorities as the protagonists in either of the novels—Alice and Laila—are Christians by religious faith, and both of them have been presented as miserable facing several hurdles and complications to gain an identity in a Muslim majority country like Pakistan. The struggle of both female characters justifies the selection of the novels for the present study validates the research enquiry. Alice and Laila perceive themselves to be socially alien because they live and grow up in a culture that devalues their work and religious identity. Both fail in their pursuit of status and respect in their lives. Alice dies tragically, and Laila comes home to discover her problems have grown. The research is highly significant to the present condition of events throughout the world. Erikson's (1968) psychosocial development theory has been highlighted and used to the current research of the socio-religious identity crisis of minorities in Pakistan. Erikson's theory is based on various stages among them 'Identity vs Role Confusion' discusses identity and role confusion. In this stage identity crisis take place when individual's inner conflict intervene at every stage of his/her life (Tetty, 2023). The theoretical framework establishes validity and an objective criteria for evaluating any social research issue. Identity crisis has been researched as an implication of unwanted psychosocial development of personality as a result of certain socioeconomic situations, hence Erikson's theory appears to be unquestionably relevant to the study question.

Critical examination of the novels would reveal the deep link of the struggle of the characters with their religious identity which leads them to feel socially inferior and psychologically explosive. Alice stays combative at odd moments, indicating that she is more of a reactionary than a woman of poise and maturity. Similarly, Laila flees her home because she fears being trafficked. She was unable to live a pleasant life thereafter. Their confused personalities are the result of unfavorable social settings that have a negative impact on their psychosocial growth. Erikson's theory of psychosocial growth appears to be a suitable theoretical framework for the research because it focuses on the characters' psychosocial development in their contemporary society. This theory was chosen to examine the appropriate material from the selected novels. The study of socio-religious identity and minority crises in Mohammad Hanif's *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* and Bina Shah's *Slum Child* adds significantly to the field of postcolonial and gender studies. These novel provide critical insights into the daily realities of troubled populations, with a special emphasis on religious minorities and women in modern Pakistan (Perveen, 2024). Hanif and Shah investigate how socio-religious identity is produced and disputed in a sociopolitical environment filled with systematic injustice and religious fanaticism. By investigating the crises of minority identity, the research provides light on the intersectionality of religion, class, and gender, demonstrating the complicated ways in which people manage their identities in situations that stigmatize them because of their beliefs, ethnicity, or social standing (Mondaca & Lisboa, 2022). This study adds to our knowledge of

minority experiences in postcolonial cultures and how socio-religious forces form individual and community identities. Furthermore, it broadens the scope of minority discourse by examining the psychological, emotional, and social components of belonging and alienation, filling a vacuum in the literature regarding how contemporary Pakistani writers approach these topics in their works. The present research contributes to the existing corpus of research on socio-religious conflict and identity development in South Asian literature. The world literature with regard to the research enquiry has also been investigated and critically summarized to offer reliability to the problem proposed by the researcher and the conclusions thereof. In the end, the research results duly substantiate the research question 'Socio-religious Identity Crisis of Minorities'.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

To identify the aspects of the Socio-religious Identity Crisis of minority in Bina Shah's *Slum Child* and Mohammad Hanif's *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*.

To explore how society marginalizes the main characters in both novels from a socio-religious standpoint.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Q.1 How do Bina Shah's *Slum Child* and Mohammad Hanif's *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* reflect the Socio-religious Identity Crisis of Minorities in a society like Pakistan?

Q.2 How are the main characters (Alice and Laila) in the chosen novels are marginalized in Pakistani society due to their socio-religious status?

LITERATURE REVIEW

This critical literature review synthesizes literature on the concept of identity crisis taking the psychosocial development theory by Erik Erikson (1968) as the main guide to provide an analysis of the socio-religious identities struggle with minority groups in *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* (2011) and *Slum Child* (2010) by Mohammad Hanif and Bina Shah respectively. The fifth stage of Identity vs. Role Confusion in the seminal work by Erikson (1968) argues that the process of identity formation becomes that of tension between how the individual thinks about himself and what society expects, a situation that is enhanced in the case of minorities who are dealt with socio-religious marginalization (Erikson, 2000). According to Erikson, identity should be understood as a relational concept and becomes unique when marginalized groups seek autonomy of their own over powerful cultural narratives as a response to existential question of identity of oneself (Who am I?) (Erikson, 1968). This model is especially relevant when analysing the selected novels in which the central heroes of Christian faith struggle with the identity crisis as the religious, ethnic, and social differences intervene (Malik, 2002). This theory throws light on how the social-political culture of Islam-centricism in Pakistan ostracises non-Muslim minorities to the extent that it breeds sectarian war and social deracination (Malik, 2002; Crocetti et al., 2018). The initial review was repetitious in an introduction of the theory by Erikson and was not critical. This revision unifies the discussion to have a dialogue, critique the

individualistic approach of Erikson and incorporate the theory by Tajfel and Turner to achieve the crisis-driven sentiments in postcolonial and diasporic settings, adding to the theoretical strength of the discussion. In an attempt to apply these psychoanalytic approaches in examining identity conflicts in novels of Anita Desai and Manju Kapur, Smitha (2015) suggests that conflicts in regard to internal needs which are opposed against external threats of society are some of the many causes of psychological distress. Although this perspective can be very insightful, it is also vulnerable to the risk of over emphasising the effect of individual pathology in relation to systemic oppression. Thavamani (2016) covers four forms of Parsi diasporas, namely Indian, psychological, partition, and postcolonial, who are characterised by alienation and nostalgia but fails to be precise on details of the socio-religious confluence applicable to Pakistani Christian minorities. Ganie and Madhavan (2015) address the concept of identity crisis in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight Children*, describing how existential alienation is presented through the idea of illegal paternity, but their approach is limited to the sphere of personal stories based on a narrow and biased view of socio-political matters. On the same note, Sharma (2013) reviews the immigrant identity struggle in *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri where the element of discrimination plays out to alienation but does not cover religious identity. Both Zubair (2012) and Akram (2015) compare the works (*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid and *An American Brat* by Bapsi Sidhwa respectively) and portray identity transition in the globalised setting but downplay the presence of religious marginalisation in Pakistan. The criticism of the book *Bhowani Junction* by John Masters expressed by Jajja (2013) evinces colonial attitudes that are relevant to the postcolonial minority experiences; hence the argument by Ashcroft et al. (2013) that the legacy of colonisation continues to dictate cultural identities. The literary sources of the original review were monotonous and did not represent critical analysis. Globalisation affects the process of identity formation in a manner that introduces multiculturalism and supports socio-cultural and religious biases simultaneously; thus, minorities are struggling in a rather unsound situation (Cameron & Kulick, 2005). In Pakistan, minority alienation is furthered by the domination of Islamic identity and this is a factor that weakens social cohesion (Malik, 2002). The discussion of globalisation in the initial review was general and separated. Although previous research has done a lot, there is a significant gap in understanding the socio-religious identity crises in Pakistan literature, and it has been relevant in Hanif and Shah novels. The present study aims to fill in this gap by critically examining how minority identity struggles are presented in the context of the phenomenon of the oppressed-oppressor relationships proposed by the postcolonial Pakistan setting developed in these two novels. The research gap in the original review was insufficient and un-innovative. The gap has been well defined by this version, the theoretical framework is justified, and the contribution of the study to the field of postcolonial literary studies is well highlighted.

THEORY OF IDENTITY CRISIS

Erik Erikson's psychosocial development theory is analytically criticised as a formative theory of studying socio-religious identity crisis in the selected novels with regard to the fifth stage, Identity vs. Role Confusion. In *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (1968), Erikson outlines eight psychosocial developmental stages determining the personality of an individual. The fifth level, which is key in this paper, is the stage where adolescents are struggling with the dilemma, Who am I? as they attempt to shape a unified identity amidst expectations of the people in society (Erikson, 1968). Erikson refers to this phase as a revolution in psychology as one goes through an interchange between external pretences and an inner sense of identity, which selfishly tends to

not match prior roles with future ones, like career or even social identity (Erikson, 1963, p. 261; Taubenheim, 1979). When the resolution is successful, the sense of self-sufficiency identity is created, but failure leads to role confusion, insecurity, and alienation (Mitchell et al., 2022). Minority groups in Pakistan are especially familiar with this step because social-religious marginalisation in their countries compound's identity conflict (Tettey, 2023). Nevertheless, individual-orientated views of Erikson can fall short of the group-orientated socio-religious dynamics, and additional theories have to be used as a complementing analysis. According to the literature, the Eriksonian framework can be applied to studies on socio-religious identity crises in literary works, but little has been done on this front about the novels written by Hanif and Shah. This paper fills this gap because it examines the contribution of the said novels to the development of minority identity struggle in the setting of oppressed and oppressor created by postcolonial Pakistan through the lenses of Erikson's theory.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The current study follows a qualitative research design. Kumar (2011) suggests that qualitative research as one of the best ways for understanding, explaining, exploring, and discovering narrative data. He goes on to say that the qualitative method to study is thorough and worthwhile (Kumar 2011). The text of the Qualitative research includes data that exists in the form of words and may include extensive descriptions of situations, events, persons, and observable behaviors (Sangi, 2009, p.18). The qualitative research method has already been employed by number of researchers to reach the finding of the study. Jabeen and Afzal (2024) employed a qualitative research approach to investigate the representation of the male-dominated system and the predicament of women in Shahraz's *The Holy Woman*. Similarly, Ali et al, (2020), Zaib (2019) and Asghar et al (2020) also chose qualitative research approach for their research projects. The selected novels have been analyzed by using Alan McKee's textual analysis approach. Alan McKee (2003) defines textual analysis as a process or approach for collecting and analyzing data in hypothetical research. According to McKee (2003) when we study a text, we make informed guesses about some of its most likely meanings. Textual analysis is carried out using close reading techniques. It is a thorough examination of a text. Close reading comprehension entails the reader acquiring a deeper grasp of the text rather than a short read to get the substance of the text.

DATA ANALYSIS

ELEMENT OF SOCIO-RELIGIOUS IDENTITY CRISIS IN *SLUM CHILD* AND *OUR LADY OF ALICE BHATTI*

To present a clear picture of the study it is significant to describe step by step procedure of present research. Religious minorities all over the world have always been victimized due to their social, cultural and religious difference with that of majority group. A thorough reading of novels; *Slum Child* and *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* gave researcher idea to work on themes based on socio-religious identity crisis of Christian community in Pakistani context.

The first step of collecting data was a close reading of two selected novels. The detailed reading helped me to understand the important extracts which were relevant to my research topic which is socio-religious identity crisis of minority in Bina Shah's *Slum Child* (Shah,

2010) and Mohammad Hanif's *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* (Hanif, 2011) Close reading is a technique which supported me to pick up all major as well as minor themes from which few themes were which are being discussed in data analysis section. When I thoroughly read both novels, I observed facts and details about the text. I focused on particular passages which were quite relevant to my study. In this way my aim was to notice relevant chunks of the text which may help researcher to support my research questions. Payumi (2018) is of the view that Close Reading is more thorough, in-depth and thoughtful reading of any text which aims at analysis, evaluation, and interpretation of a reading material.

The second step was to select the important chunks of the text both novels. Those chunks were more concerned about the identity crisis, because the present study aims at analyzing the socio-religious identity crisis in the novels and direct connection of such important parts of the text which justify the sufferings of the protagonists being religious minority.

After the completion of two steps the third step of my research procedure was to compare the text selected from the novels. Researcher's purpose was to look forward for the similarities in both texts. Since both writers have talked about Christians as religious minorities, both have depicted Christians as inferior to others in Pakistani context. Even both writers chose female protagonist as a mouth piece of Christian community. So, in the fourth step similar themes supporting the research topic were analyzed and discussed to achieve the goal of the researcher.

Mohammad Hanif's novel *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* is set in modern day Karachi. The novel's action takes place in a less affluent locale and demographic group, and its style and appearance are fairly authentic, normal, and specific. Characterization provides consistency to the story. The novel journeys through the Catholic run hospital to a dream-like 'submarine' marriage to Catholic nursing school to the socially outcast 'stinking' French colony to suspicious G squad police activities to the acid throwing under the Old Doctor to the Pope's petition of 'martyred' Alice's father Joseph.

The power paradigm in society is biased towards the less dominant and disadvantaged strata. As a result, cultural/religious minorities are more prone to abuse, low self-esteem, and other types of social, cultural, economic, religious and political discrimination. Mohammad Hanif's novel *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* depicts such a display of socio-religious prejudices. The protagonist Alice's issue is described with subtle comedy, irony, and sorrow. As a Christian and a member of a religious minority, she has additional difficulties in a country dominated by Muslims. *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* is an explorative journey story of protagonist Alice (Joseph) on her journey to find her 'self'. Alice, who was born into a socially and culturally outcast Choochrah community and belongs to a Christian minority religious sect in Muslim-majority Pakistan, feels alienated in society. Carrying the stigma of being untouchable, as well as belonging to the smelly sewer cleaners' colony, renders her vulnerable, making her voyage even more dangerous. The selected novel depicts an untouchable's heroic struggle to establish her own identity. This is the struggle of a socio-cultural misfit who lives in the 'stinking' French colony, mockingly dubbed 'the French perfume' by outsiders; *She is aware of the fact that different rules apply outside French Colony: some people do not want to drink from the same glass that she has drink from, others will not take a banana from the same bunch that she has taken a banana from* (Hanif, 2011, p.140).

The text explores Alice's fight for recognition, a discovery of 'self', which is submerged under the traditional idea of her being a woman, of course lovely, and subject to unwelcome lusty gaze,

and belonging to Choochrah ancestry-the untouchables-and lived in the French colony. Erikson's (1980; 1993; 1994) theory of personal development relates to her appropriately--her attitude/demeanor/psycho-social state/her strengths and weaknesses developed throughout time 'overlapping'. The experiences of one era of her life complement the others. Her unhappy youth, in which "starvation is passed off as fasting" (137), complements her early adulthood, when her sense of herself and a need for acceptance and identity begin to emerge. She suffers from identity crisis in the given socio-religious setting. Alice's identity is formed up by the socio-religious values of the given society. So rather, it is a socio-religious identity crisis. From the above given text it is also clear that Alice was seriously suffering from the clash of two different worlds around her. One world is the one she lives in and another where people of majority group live. the text of the novel describe the existence of two worlds with different socio-religious understanding/norms, within a larger society.

On an occasion Joseph Bhatti Alice's father reminds her daughter of the social and psychological challenges of being a Christian/Choochrah, who is believed to have been born just to sweep sewers and suffer the consequences of ridicule. The following lines from the novel text intensely prove the influence of religious divide and identity and their attending consequences: *These muslas will make you clean their shit and then complain that you stink* (Hanif, 2011, p.1). Alice belongs to Christian Bhatti clan. Her very identity becomes sometimes so embarrassing for her that she feels reluctant of adding her family name to her name: *Are you Alice or you Bhatti...your full name is Alice Joseph Bhatti. Are you ashamed of your father's name?* (Hanif, 2011, p.8). Desire of Alice's community for identity is so distracted and convincing that they keep Muslim names to gain acceptability in the mainstream social fabric: *They remind him of those people in French colony who give their children these names (Salamat or Saleem) in the hope they will pass as muslas* (Hanif, 2011,p.265).

Similarly, *Slum Child's* action takes place mostly in Issa colony, a slum populated by the destitute. Though the slum becomes the collective identity of its miserable inhabitants, the religious division cannot be ignored. The following lines from the novel *Slum Child* depict the theological difference vividly: Laila, the protagonist and a Christian by religion, discusses her religious beliefs, worries, and biases.

The thing we learned best, I suppose, was how to fit in. this as a vital skill for a Christian living in any Muslim area. We had to be nondescript. We could not flaunt our faith outside of the safety of the colony. We went to church and told anyone who asked that we were Christians, but we avoided wearing crosses, and our women took to wearing dupattas on their heads or even burqas when venturing out of the house. Why ask for more trouble than you had already had been born to? (Shah,2010, p. 19-20).

The passage from Shah (2010) depicts a situation in which individuals must negotiate a complicated social context in which their religious identity clashes with the mainstream cultural and religious ideals of the greater community. This situation connects with Erikson's theory in various ways. The novel *Slum Child* suggests Laila's community's deeper psychological turmoil. Their religious identity becomes a hindrance. They have to conceal their religious identification by not wearing any identifiable religious symbol. They are unable to freely identify as Christians or publicly celebrate their faith. At the age of nine, Laila finds it difficult to accept criticism of her faith and its adherents. Laila is dealing with the challenges of life at this point in her life. She

starts to grasp religious polarization, which divides individuals based on sects and ideas. A community is thought to be inferior based on its religious connections. However, the members of the minority group live on the same territory and have the same material objectives and social orientation as the inhabitants of the dominant community.

Laila faced a severe discrimination in the name of religion, class and culture. In the following lines Shah (2010) highlights the social identity crisis which caused Laila a sense of loss. *My journey from Issa Colony had been as long and tortuous as everyone else's. We were all refugees from somewhere, and perhaps it was part of our fate to be immigrants again somewhere else in the years to come (Shah, 2010, p.246).*

The text denotes that the Laila has gone through a long, painful process, which involves displacement and a sensation of being uprooted. From an Eriksonian standpoint, this might symbolize a battle to establish a solid identity. When people go through trauma, suffering, or lengthy periods of instability (as refugees frequently do), it can make it difficult for them to explore and identify who they are, which is a key job in the Identity vs. Role Confusion stage. The "long and tortuous" voyage might represent a period of searching and trying on many roles, which is typical of Erikson's theory. These external problems may cause internal tensions and uncertainty, making it difficult to develop a coherent and stable sense of self. This might depict the uncertainty that occurs during adolescence when attempting to reconcile numerous parts of life and identity.

The term "refugees" implies a shared experience of displacement and a sense of not belonging anywhere completely. Refugees' sense of identity is frequently disrupted when they are forced to leave their culture, language, and social institutions. This loss might cause confusion as people seek to reconcile their history with their current reality. According to Erikson's paradigm, this might symbolize an individual's battle to maintain a stable identity when external events (such as displacement or migration) undermine their current sense of self. In adolescence, the tension between the past and the present can cause role confusion as people strive to find out where they fit in. The allusion to fate and the cyclical nature of immigration highlights the difficulties of developing a firm, durable sense of self, implying that role uncertainty is still a chronic struggle.

Conclusion

The research statement is supported by the above-mentioned in-depth description and critical analysis, which includes appropriate references and data. The data gleaned from a thorough study of the novels, as well as their theme and content investigations, assure the required research problem findings. The selected novels depict minorities' misery and worry in Pakistan, which is accountable for their social and religious identity problem. The novels place them at a significant disadvantage. Their Christian characters have not been proved to be socially or religiously equal to the Muslim majority.

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