“Yes, I am Joseph Bhatti Choohra:” Reading Joseph Bhatti as a Palimpsest

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Introduction

1 Mohammed Hanif’s 2011 novel *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* narrates the story of Alice Bhatti, a Catholic Chuhra woman who works as a junior nurse at the Sacred Heart Hospital for All Ailments in Karachi. Most scholarly studies of Hanif’s novel have rightly focused on Alice Bhatti, the eponymous protagonist of the novel. Maryam Mirza (2015:152), for example, employs a postcolonial feminist lens to explore “Alice’s consciousness of her socially constructed subalternity” and the various ways she subverts her many subalternities. Mirza argues that Alice’s violent death at the hands of her husband, Teddy, and her father’s failed attempt for her canonization strains what Victor Li (2009) calls the “necroidealization” of the subaltern.

2 Similarly, Sadia Abbas (2014: 169) draws parallels between Alice Bhatti’s body and the “social body” of Pakistan as a nation. Abbas shows how Hanif’s novel is a rewriting of Saadat Hasan Manto’s (2015: 169-171) 1955 Urdu short story, “Toba Tek Singh,” and argues that “the novel is an attempt to disarticulate the national body politic.” Mukherjee, Rath, and Tharakan (2017: 132) also focus on Alice Bhatti and read her “identity as a native cosmopolitan evolving from within the taboos and constrictions of Karachi to a space of imagination where she realizes freedom and liberation” (132). By focusing on Alice Bhatti, these scholars have produced creative and stimulating readings of Hanif’s novel; however, there is a different and equally important set of questions that the novel raises through Joseph Bhatti, Alice’s father.
Joseph Bhatti’s “instinct”

Joseph Bhatti is a retired sweeper-scavenger Chuhra, and the third-person narrator tells the reader that he was “born with the instinct to smell a sewer and tell what’s blocking it” (Hanif 2011: 48; emphasis added). This is a telling way of describing Joseph Bhatti because his extraordinary ability to diagnose clogged drainpipes is not presented as an acquired skill but “instinct.” So, how does Joseph Bhatti’s ability to diagnose clogged sewers become an “instinct”? 

John O’Brien (2012: 23) traces the lineage of the Chuhras to the Chandalas, a pre-Aryan aboriginal tribe. Vivekanand Jha (1997: 23) observes that the Chandalas were one of the first groups that the Dharmasutras identified as the Untouchables. As the Hindu Varna system comprising a four-fold hierarchical division evolved between c.1500 BC and c.1000 BC, the aboriginal tribes like the Chandalas found themselves outside the Varna system and on the fringes of the Aryan society. The Varna system condemned the Chandala people to “the Untouchable world of the dead and of polluting bodily effluvia” (O’Brien 2012: 23). Within the Dharmasutras, the most important text that deals with impurity and Untouchability is Manusmriti, also known as the Laws of Manu.

According to B. R. Ambedkar (1948: 11), Manu considered the events of birth and death, and bodily processes like menstruation, as sources of impurity. However, the impurity caused by these processes is considered temporary and does not make the individual Untouchable. This temporary impurity can be removed after an individual has performed a particular ritual of purification. Ambedkar contrasts temporary impurity with permanent impurity ascribed to the Untouchables. This permanent impurity is hereditary and there is no ritual the performance of which can remove it. The Untouchables, Ambedkar (1948: 21) laments, “are born impure, they are impure while they live, they die the death of the impure, and they give birth to children who are born with the stigma of Untouchability affixed to them.”

Scholars of Indian history have argued that what has come to be regarded as a rigid category of “caste” is a result of the imposition of British colonial administrative policies on the indigenous and relatively arbitrary Varna-Jati system of social classification. Metcalf and Metcalf (2006: 112-4) observe that to strengthen their control over India in the aftermath of the 1857 sepoy mutiny, the British devised institutions like the Survey of India and the Census of India to make the local places and populations “legible.” As a result of these colonial institutions, the relatively flexible and far more complex Varna-Jati system of the pre-colonial India was transformed into rigid and immutable classificatory categories of “caste.” O’Brien (2012: 12) observes that the term “Chuhra” was institutionalized through the Punjab Census Reports compiled between 1881-1931 and was used to designate the Chandala people (12).

Joseph Bhatti’s “instinct” needs to be considered against this historical backdrop. Since his ancestors had been forced to do manual scavenging for millennia, the ability to smell choked sewers and drains has, over time, become an “instinct.” He is acutely aware that he is descended from the pre-Aryan aboriginal tribes and asserts, “We [the Chuhras] were here before the Christians came, before the Muslas came. Even before the Hindus came” (Hanif 2011: 51). I read this assertion by Joseph Bhatti as a project of historical revisionism in which he configures his identity in terms of not only a pre-
colonial or a pre-Islamic but also a pre-Hindu past, which goes all the way back to his aboriginal ancestors who inhabited this part of the world millennia ago. Joseph Bhatti, therefore, becomes an intricate palimpsest of various historical, political, social, and cultural transformations in India – the Aryan invasion, the inauguration of the Varna system, the Muslim invasion, and the British colonization. More importantly, however, Joseph Bhatti brings to the fore the one constant throughout these monumental transformations: the impurity ascribed to the Chuhra people and their ancestors. When looked at in this context, Joseph Bhatti’s “instinct” to diagnose a clogged sewer also highlights the robustness and the profound durability of the Varna system, which absorbed and survived such transformative events like the Muslim conquests of India, the British colonial rule, and the Partition.

After asserting that the Chuhras predate the Christians, the Muslims, and even the Hindus, Joseph Bhatti goes on to claim, “I am not just the son of the soil. I am the soil” (Hanif 2011: 51; emphasis added). We can read this powerful declaration by Joseph Bhatti as a highly subversive move in which he lays claim to authenticity through his impurity, which neither the Muslim conquests nor the British Raj nor the institution of the postcolonial nation-state could undo. In other words, Joseph Bhatti can be read as a representation of the native soil on which the Aryan, the Muslim, and the British conquests took place and the only thing that has survived these historical transformations is the impurity of the Chuhras.

Pakistan as a Palimpsest: English Lexicality, Urdu Semanticity, and Brahmanical Purity

Joseph Bhatti’s embracement of the Chuhra identity and its attendant notion of impurity takes on a different kind of salience when looked at in the context of Pakistan. Unlike the names of countries like Afghanistan or Tajikistan where the Persian suffix “stan” is combined with the name of the dominant ethnic group living in that area (for example, Afghanistan literally means “the land of the Afghans”), the word “Pakistan” does not refer to any specific group. Instead, it refers to an abstraction called “Pakness” or purity.

The first documented use of the word “Pakistan” is found in a 1933 pamphlet, “Now or Never: Are We to Live or Perish for Ever” [sic]” by Choudhary Rahmat Ali (1897-1951). According to Rahmat Ali (1933), Pakistan means “the five Northern units of India viz, Punjab, North-West Frontier Province (Afghan Province), Kashmir, Sind and Baluchistan.” In a later work called Pakistan: The Fatherland of the Pak Nation, Rahmat Ali (1947: 225) expands on the definition of the word “Pakistan” and writes that “it is composed of [English] letters taken from the names of all our homelands – ‘Indian’ and ‘Asian.’ That is Punjab, Afghanistan (North-West Frontier Province), Kashmir, Iran, Sind (including Kachch and Kathiawar), Tukharistan, Afghanistan, and Balochistan.” He then goes on to explain that “Pakistan” means “the land of the Paks – the spiritually pure and clean” (1947: 225; emphasis added). Despite Rahmat Ali’s aversion to the idea of Pakistan as a nation-state and his explicit disdain for Muhammad Ali Jinnah, his coinage went on to become the name of the country that Jinnah and the Muslim League had demanded.
What I find interesting is that while Rahmat Ali coins the acronym “Pakistan” in English, he makes it meaningful through Persian/Urdu. What is even more interesting (and surprising) is the fact that most contemporary scholars of Pakistani history have rarely noticed this shift from English lexicality to Urdu semanticity collapsed in the word “Pakistan.” The mention of the word “Pakistan” in contemporary scholarship is quickly followed by the expression “the land of the pure” with little to no comment on how the word “Pak” mobilizes a particular semantic reserve and a specific cultural archive (Jalal 2000: 391-2; Cohen 2004: 26; Jaffrelot 2015: 81).

The word “Pak” is of Persian import and in Urdu means pure and clean but also innocent, unpolluted, virgin, pious, halal, and has deeply religious connotations. It could even be said that the Urdu word “Pak” becomes a vacuous signifier if transported out of a certain semantic field the contours of which are determined and circumscribed by Islam. However, the purity the word “Pak” denotes is not any ordinary purity but a kind of ritual purity specific to South Asian Islam. Further, in the Pakistani context, the word “Pak” also has a metonymic association with being a Muslim, as Rahmat Ali had articulated.

The idea of “Pak-ness” or purity, and its metonymic association with Pakistani Muslims, comes under enormous strain when juxtaposed with Joseph Bhatti’s impurity. Although the notion of ritual impurity does exist in Islam, it is limited to bodily functions such as urination, defecation, menstruation, and sexual intercourse, an impurity that can be removed by performing acts of ritual purification like the *wudu* or the *ghusl*. Unlike the Dharmasutras, the Qur’an does not recognize any caste-based impurity, which is hereditary and permanently associated with a particular group of people. That Islam does not recognize any caste system is frequently used as an argument by Pakistani Muslims to deny that the Chuhras in Pakistan are victims of caste oppression. If Islam does not recognize the notion of impurity ascribed to a particular group of people, the question arises: in which cultural archive is the word “Pak” and its attendant notion of purity rooted?

In the Hindu Varna system, the impurity of the Untouchables is the foil against which the purity of the Brahmins is established. O’Brien argues that the impurity of the Untouchable “is conceptually inseparable from the purity of the Brahmins.” (2012: 5; emphasis added) Considering the above, it can be argued that the kind of purity the word “Pak” invokes is (ironically) the Brahmanical purity. Read this way, the word “Pakistan” also becomes a palimpsest of various cultural archives, semantic reserves, and political transformations: the word “Pakistan” is acronymized using letters from the English alphabet, made semantically operative through Persian/Urdu to conflate the Muslim identity with a notion of purity, which happens to be of Brahman origin. Such a reading of the word “Pakistan” also challenges the so-called Two-Nation Theory expounded by Jinnah in his 1940 Presidential Address to the Muslim League in which he asserted that Hindus and Muslims belong to two different religious philosophies, social customs, and literature[s] [...]two different civilisations which are based mainly on conflicting ideas and conceptions [...] It is quite clear that Hindus and Mussalmans derive their inspiration from different sources of history (Jinnah 1940)

That the word “Pak” in “Pakistan” invokes a notion of Brahmanical purity runs counter to Jinnah’s assertion that Hindus and Muslims are two different civilizations and that they are inspired by two different and exclusive sources of history. It is the impurity of
the Chuhras like Joseph Bhatti against which the purity of both Muslims and Brahmins gets enacted. In other words, if the practice of ascribing impurity to the Chuhras is abolished, the notion of purity or “Pak-ness” collapses.

Joseph Bhatti’s “mixed-up theology”

Joseph Bhatti, however, is not just a Chuhra; he is a Catholic Chuhra. And a brief look at how and why the Chuhras embraced Catholicism will add several more layers to the palimpsest that Joseph Bhatti is. The history of Catholicism in India starts with the Portuguese conquest of the Indian port of Goa during the 16th century. According to Linda Walbridge (2003: 65), Jesuit missionaries, most notably the members of the Society of Jesus (established 1540) started coming to Goa after Alfonso de Albuquerque had made it the center of Portuguese power. Between 1535 and 1537, the entire Paravar caste converted to Catholicism but the “Hindu caste system continued to exist among the Goan Catholics” and only Brahmin Catholics could become clerics (Walbridge 2013: 66). Around 1820, Goan Catholics started migrating to Karachi, which became part of Pakistan after the Partition in 1947.

Joseph Bhatti points out the persistence of the Hindu caste system among Karachi’s Goan Catholics when he tells Alice that the family of Dr. Jamus Pereira, the chief medical officer of the Sacred Heart Hospital, “fed me in their Choohra dishes and then washed their hands as if I was spreading leprosy” (Hanif 2011: 53). Here too Joseph Bhatti juxtaposes his indigenous and aboriginal identity with that of the Goan Catholics: “we are the children of this land, we have lived here for thousands of years and they are just Goan kachra” (53). Importantly, Joseph Bhatti does not assert his identity as a Catholic but as a Chuhra whose ancestors had been living in that part of the world for centuries.

The history of Chuhra Catholicism is remarkably different from that of Goan Catholicism. After the Uprising of 1857, India came under the direct control of the British parliament and missionaries were encouraged to evangelize (Walbridge 2003: 10). As a result, Protestant missionaries started arriving in the Punjab. They tried to convert the higher castes in the hopes that the lower castes would follow suit but they “did not have brilliant success in converting the natives” (11). However, things began to change when the United Presbyterian missionaries from America started coming to the Punjab. These Presbyterian missionaries had little understanding of how the caste worked and instead of limiting themselves only to higher castes they welcomed anyone who was willing to embrace their faith (O’Brien 2012: 261; Walbridge 2003: 11). To escape caste-based oppression, the Punjabi Chuhras started embracing Protestant Christianity en masse, and thus a “Mass Movement” to Christianity started in which “[p]eople converted in groups, rather than as individuals” (O’Brien 2012: 260-1).

The Chuhra “Mass Movement” to Christianity during the late 19th century created a new set of challenges for the missionaries. Since the Punjabi Chuhras were embracing Protestant Christianity in extraordinarily large numbers, the missionaries did not have enough time to catechize the Chuhra converts after they had been baptized and “speedy baptisms became the norm” (O’Brien 2012: 269). O’Brien argues that the groups of the Chuhra converts who were “baptized and not catechized […] would find their way to Catholic Church with its developed institutional life, structured through sacramental rites of passage” (270).
In Pakistan, until the late 1970s, the Chuhra Catholics were a very small community and most Chuhra Christians were Protestants (O’Brien 2012: 277). However, the numbers of Chuhra Catholics have increased over time, and according to some estimates 50% of Chuhra Christians are now Catholics (277). Sara Singha (2015: 1), on the other hand, argues that most Chuhra Christians in Pakistan still practice Protestant Christianity (1). During his work with the Chuhrs, O’Brien (2012: 281) observed that denominational and doctrinal differences were more a “pre-occupation of the missionaries, than of the people themselves” who were happy to avail services of any denomination if that took care of their immediate concerns.

Joseph Bhatti’s “mixed-up theology picked from random sermons” encapsulates the complex history of Chuhra Catholicism in Pakistan (Hanif 2011: 52). He also foregrounds the historical fact that the Chuhrs embraced Christianity – Protestant or Catholic – not because they believed that Jesus was their eternal savior. Instead they hoped that conversion to Christianity would offer them “caste mobility” — which it did not, because “‘Untouchability’ is the force-field out of which there is no flight” (O’Brien 2012: 288). But Joseph Bhatti’s “mixed-up theology” is not limited to combining various elements of Protestant and Catholic doctrines because he incorporates, and more importantly domesticates, elements from Islam too.

When Joseph Bhatti must engage the services of a lawyer to represent his daughter in a court of law, he goes to a street lawyer, “S.M. Qadri, MA, LLB, civil, criminal, property, divorce, cut-price oath commissioner” (Hanif 2011: 46). Instead of paying the lawyer’s fee, Joseph Bhatti offers to cure his stomach ulcers. Joseph Bhatti asks the lawyer to take his shirt off and lay down, and then he lights a candle and puts it in the lawyer’s navel. After counting to ten, he extinguishes the candle by placing a glass jar on it and with his eyes shut recites Surah Al-Asr (“The Declining Day”), the 103rd chapter of the Qur’an. The lawyer is befuddled at the sight of a Catholic Chuhra reciting verses from the Qur’an and wonders if it’s even “legal” (Hanif 2011: 48).

Scholars who have worked on the legends of the Chuhrs have observed that over the course of centuries, the Chuhrs have adopted and adapted myths and legends not only from various Christian denominations but also from Islam (mainly Sufi and Shi’a), Sikhism, and Hinduism (O’Brien 2012: 47-52). Joseph Bhatti’s interactions with Reverend Philip who “suspects him of being a closet Musla” because he can recite verses from the Qur’an illustrate O’Brien’s observation that theological differences are primarily the pre-occupation of clergymen and not the Chuhra people themselves. Joseph Bhatti also illustrates the phenomenon of how the Chuhrs have over time assimilated elements from various dominant religions, but, more importantly, how they have retained their own interpretative frameworks.

Punjabi Chuhrs Leaving Punjab

Although Chuhras are ethnically Punjabis with their ancestral homeland in the Punjab, Joseph Bhatti is not shown living in the Punjab; instead, he lives in a commensally segregated neighborhood called the French Colony in the metropolitan city of Karachi. The history of the Chuhrs’ migration from the Punjab to urban centers like Karachi adds yet another layer to the palimpsest of not only Joseph Bhatti but also that of Pakistan. Walbridge (2003:12) argues that the development of Christianity among the Chuhras is “closely related to the development of the canals and agricultural colonies”
in the Punjab that the British colonial administration instituted towards the end of the 19th century. After the Chenab canal was completed in 1892, Catholic missionaries, particularly Capuchin friars, started buying plots of land to settle the Chuhras (26). The Chuhras found employment opportunities® offered by Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh landowners and were part of the Jajmani system. O’Brien (2012: 244) argues that the earliest Chuhra migrants to urban centers like Delhi during the late 19th century tried “to replicate the Jajami relationships” in cities too. Joseph Bhatti’s interaction with the lawyer in which he offers to cure his stomach ulcer in exchange for securing bail for his daughter can be understood as such an example of a Jajmani transaction.

Until the Partition in 1947, there were very few Chuhras in cities and most of them lived in villages in the Punjab. After 1947, Hindu and Sikh landowners migrated to India abandoning not only their lands but also their Chuhra employees. Since the Chuhras identified themselves neither as Hindus/Sikhs nor Muslims they had no reason to leave their villages in the Punjab. After the Partition, the government of the newly founded Pakistan started allotting plots of agricultural land to Muslims who had migrated from India to Pakistan and in most cases large landholdings were divided into smaller plots (Streefland 1979: 10). As a result, the Chuhras lost their livelihoods and started moving en masse towards urban centers like Rawalpindi, Lahore, and Karachi (Streefland 1974: 11). With no skills or knowledge to survive in an urban environment, most Chuhras ended up taking sweeping-scavenging jobs because the demand for sweepers in cities like Karachi was very high in the years following the Partition (15).

Joseph Bhatti’s presence in Karachi encapsulates the phenomenon of the post-Partition Chuhras’ migration to Pakistani cities. In addition, Joseph Bhatti shows how the notion of impurity gets reimagined and refined in Pakistani urban centers. During his anthropological field work in a Chuhra neighborhood in Karachi, Streefland (1979: 11) observed that there were two kinds of sweeping and sanitation work that the Chuhras engaged in: “dry” and “wet.” While Pakistani Muslims consider all the Chuhras, irrespective of their “dry” or “wet” jobs, equally impure and Untouchable, a notion of hierarchy has evolved among the Chuhras themselves based on their “dry” or “wet” jobs. The Chuhras who perform “dry” jobs consider themselves less impure than the ones who engage in “wet” jobs who are considered highly impure (O’Brien 2012: 16). Because “wet” jobs are considered highly impure, Streefland (1979: 16) observes that these jobs are relatively better remunerated, thus conferring upon those willing to do “wet” jobs “a sort of monopoly-position.”

Shit-Cleaning as a Prophetic Vocation

Joseph Bhatti illustrates the reimagination of the notion of impurity among the Chuhras as he is considered Untouchable even by his fellow Chuhras (Hanif 2011: 96). But because of his “monopoly-position” and his “instinct” to diagnose a clogged sewer, Joseph Bhatti has been able to earn enough money to send Alice to school, something not many Chuhras like him can afford. More importantly, it is also because of his “wet” job and his specialization in diagnosing clogged sewers that Joseph Bhatti remains in a permanent state of impurity and can be considered a “specialist in impurity” (Streefland 1974: 2).

It is crucial to note here that although Joseph Bhatti is considered a “specialist in impurity” even by his fellow Chuhras, his own view of himself, or his self-regard,
inverts the matrix of purity/impurity. O’Brien (2012: 58-59) observes that the Chuhra myths and legends “reject the attribution of impurity that is imputed to them” and instead historicize their status as impure and Untouchable as a product of the dominance of a particular mode of historiography rooted in Brahmanical ideology. Contrary to the Brahmanical explanation that the impure and Untouchable status of the Chuhras is a result of their misconduct in an earlier life, the Chuhra myths claim that they have been victims of historical injustices for centuries (O’Brien 2012: 60). Joseph Bhatti illustrates this particular consciousness rooted in the Chuhra myths when he rants in front of his daughter, “Yes, we are shit-cleaners, but what are they? Shit” (Hanif 2011: 53).

Not only does he invert the matrix of purity/impurity and its correlation with “shit” and “shit-cleaning,” but also defines the practice of “shit-cleaning” in a completely different set of terms. He tells his co-workers that “God needed prophets [...] so that they could take care of your refuse, otherwise humanity would have drowned in it” (Hanif 2011: 48; emphasis added). By defining the practice of “shit-cleaning” as a prophetic vocation, Joseph Bhatti subverts Brahmanical, Islamic, and Christian doctrines about purity and prophets all at the same time. This conception and assertion of the Chuhr identity becomes impossible to be co-opted or domesticated by Hindu, Islamic, or Christian traditions and illustrates the presence of cultural interstices where whatever the Chuhras have adopted becomes meaningful according to their own interpretative frameworks.

A pointed example of the primacy of this interpretative framework is Joseph Bhatti’s recitation of Surah Al-Asr (“The Declining Day”), which he considers “a gift from the Musla god” (Hanif 2011: 119). Surah Al-Asr is a short chapter towards the end of the Qur’an and is only three-verse long: “By the declining day, man is [deep] in loss, except for those who believe, do good deeds, urge one another to the truth, and urge one another to steadfastness” (Abdel Haleem 2004: 435). Although Joseph Bhatti claims that he does not even understand what these words mean, his recitation of this chapter could be read as an attempt to highlight through Qur’anic recitation the steadfastness of the Chuhr community against centuries-long oppression. But even though he recites Qur’anic verses, he does not express any veneration for the Qur’an, which he calls “the Musla book” (Hanif 2011: 47). I read Joseph Bhatti’s recitation of Surah Al-Asr as an assertion that, as long as Chuhras like him are denied equality and justice, humankind will remain in a deep state of loss.

Joseph Bhatti’s inversion of the matrix of purity/impurity also subverts the conventional view of the Chuhr self-image in which the Chuhras having internalized their oppression feel ashamed of their own identity (O’Brien 2012: 16). “I am not ashamed of what I do. This is who I am,” he insists (Hanif 2011: 50). One of the most pointed ways in which he asserts this lack of shame so central to the Chuhr self-image is by embracing the term Chuhr: “Yes, I am Joseph Bhatti Choohra” (51). O’Brien (2012: 296) argues that historically one of the major attractions for the Chuhras to embrace Christianity was that they would be able to leave “forever their abhorred designation as ‘Chuhr’” and become ‘Masih’.” Unfortunately, however, the term “Chuhr” has not lost its derogatory connotations of Untouchability. The term “Masih,” on the other hand, has ended up taking the disparaging sense of Untouchability. Hanif’s novel illustrates this phenomenon through the character of Ortho Sir, the head of the orthopedic department at the Sacred Heart and a practicing Muslim, who considers all
Christians to be sweepers (Hanif 2011: 10). Joseph Bhatti, however, does not feel ashamed of his Chuhra identity and does not try to become “Joseph Bhatti Masih.” It is, however, equally important that he does not feel proud of his Chuhra identity either.

Caste Mobility Through Performing Islam

Joseph Bhatti’s assertion of his Chuhra identity becomes even more salient when looked at in the comparative political context of India and Pakistan. Unlike in India, where the Untouchable castes self-consciously identify themselves as Dalits and actively engage in identity politics, the Chuhras of Pakistan neither identify themselves as Chuhras nor do they engage in any politics as such. Scholars like Mirza (2015; 151) and Sara Singha (2015) have used the term Dalit for the Pakistani Chuhras. While the employment of Dalit as a theoretical category does provide a certain level of methodological convenience to look at the Chuhra Christians in Pakistan, its usage in this context is problematic. Dalit as an identity marker effaces the particularity of the Pakistani Chuhra Christian experience and subsumes it under the larger Dalit experience which, although partly similar to the Chuhras experience, is not exactly alike either.

One of the most fundamental ways that the Chuhra experience in Pakistan differs from the Dalit experience in India is in terms of caste mobility. While it is still extremely difficult, if not downright impossible, for the Dalits in India to be “caste mobile” and escape Untouchability, the Chuhras in Pakistan can escape their Chuhra identity and its attendant Untouchability by embracing or performing Islam. Hanif’s juxtaposition of Joseph Bhatti’s insistence to not move out of the French Colony with those of the Bhatti clan who have moved out to “become cooks in four-star hotels, doctors, guitar players, even professors” by taking on “Musla names” illustrates the possibility of escape from their Chuhra identities (Hanif 2011: 50).

The character of Hina Alvi, Alice’s immediate supervisor at the Sacred Heart, also points out the possibility of caste mobility through a performance of a Muslim identity. Hina Alvi was born Hannah Massey in a Catholic family and went on to marry a Muslim man, Mr. Alvi, whom she subsequently divorced (Hanif 2011: 209). She insists “everyone address her as Ms. Alvi, a name only slightly less Musla than Muhammad” (207). O’Brien (2012: 288) argues that the discourse and practices of upwardly mobile Chuhras who seek to erase their past are complicit in the dehumanizing and violent notions of Brahmanical purity, which has instilled a deep sense of shame in the Chuhras.

Joseph Bhatti is aware that for him to become upwardly mobile he will have to erase his past and, therefore, he “has never shown any such ambitions” to leave his Chuhra identity (Hanif 2011: 50). That there is a possibility for the Chuhras to escape Untouchability through a performance of a Muslim identity foregrounds, on the one hand, the normative status of the Muslim identity in Pakistan, and on the other, frames caste mobility as a function of religious mobility.

Furthermore, the Dalit identity in India is a product of political activism and theoretical discourse, and hence Dalit as an identity marker embodies a very strong emancipatory sense. The Chuhra identity in Pakistan, on the other hand, completely lacks a sense of political activism and the theoretical foundations characteristic of the Dalit identity. As a result, the Chuhra identity does not even have the basic vocabulary to develop a counter-hegemonic discourse. I agree with O’Brien (2012: 38) that Dalit as an identity
marker would be “scarcely recognizable in Pakistan” even by those who could be considered Dalits by scholars.

37 The employment of the term “Dalit” also show that such terminological specificities are pre-occupations of scholars working on Pakistani Chuhras and not the people themselves. In this context, I read Joseph Bhatti’s assertion at foregrounding his Chuhra identity, which in his case is neither a matter of pride nor shame but a matter of historical fact, as a move towards inaugurating a new political vocabulary in which the designation of the Chuhra has been divorced of its attendant shame and through which a counter hegemonic Chuhra discourse could be articulated. To erase his past would mean that Joseph Bhatti is ashamed of his Chuhra identity which he is not. He keeps asserting his Chuhra identity and keeps reminding that “Choohras were here before everything. Choohras were here before the Sacred was built, before Yassoo was resurrected, before Mulas came on their horses, even before Hindus decided they were too exalted to clean up their own shit. And when all of this is finished, Choohras will still be here” (Hanif 2011: 54).

38 The phenomenon of Untouchability, O’Brien argues, has created a “non-place” for Pakistani Chuhras. Instead of letting this “non-place” erase his precolonial, pre-Islamic, pre-Hindu, aboriginal identity, Joseph Bhatti not only inhabits it but also uses it to undo the Brahmanical notion of purity/impurity, which has withstood such monumental transformations as the Muslim conquests of India, the British Raj, and the Partition. I read Joseph Bhatti’s assertion of his Chuhra identity as an attempt to emplace the non-place to generate the possibility of a meaningful discourse on his own terms.

39 Joseph Bhatti invites us to look at Pakistan not as “the land of the Paks” or “the land of the pure” but in terms of a palimpsest of several historical, cultural, social, and political metamorphoses spanning centuries through which the only thing that has remained permanent is the impurity ascribed to the Chuhras like him.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. In Hanif's novel, this word is spelled “Choohra.” However, except for quotes from the novel, I will use the more widely recognized alternate spellings “Chuhras.” The Chuhras in the Hindu caste hierarchy occupy the lowest position and historically have been condemned to do “manual scavenging” (i.e., manual removal of untreated human waste from toilets). Because the Chuhras have engaged in manual scavenging for centuries, they are regarded as polluted and impure and, therefore, Untouchable in the Hindu caste system.

2. Dhamrasutras is a collection of ancient Hindu texts that deal with human conduct. According to Patrick Olivelle (1999: xxii), “Dharma includes all aspects of proper individual behaviour as demanded by one’s role in society and in keeping with one’s social identity according to age, gender, caste, marital status, and order of life.” It is important to remember that these manuals contain instructions for “how people, especially Brahmin males, were ideally expected to live their lives within an ordered and hierarchically arranged society” (xxi).

3. Traditionally, the Varna system has been understood as a hierarchical system of social stratification with four Varnas: Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra. In the Varna system, the Brahmans occupy the highest place and work as priests and educators. Next to the Brahmans are the Kshatriyas who serve as warriors while Vaishyas are generally understood to be traders and merchants. Shudras are at the lowest rung of the Varna system and are supposed to provide labor and other related services. To call it the “Hindu” Varna system will be anachronistic because, as O’Brien (2012: 131) rightly points out, the term “Hindu” was “introduced through the Persian language in the 12th century and indicates post-Islamic terminology.”

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7. Interestingly, the word “soil” in English, when used as a verb, also means to make something dirty or filthy. Such a characterization of “soil” also the potential to disrupt constructs like “sons and daughters of the soil” frequently employed in the Pakistani nationalist discourse. In Uzma Aslam Khan’s (2003: 52) novel Trespassing, a character remarks, “Everyone here [in Pakistan] has a master-subjugator complex. No one takes pride in being a son or daughter of this soil” (emphasis in original).

8. In Persian and Urdu, the suffix “stan” means “the land of” and is also combined with words like “gul” (flower) and “bu” (fragrance) to form compound words like “gulistan” (the land of flowers) and “bustan” (the land of fragrances).

9. Also spelled “wuzu.” Wudu is a specific procedure to ritually purify one’s body. It entails washing one’s hands, arms, face, and feet with water.
10. Ghusl is a full-body bath to achieve ritual purification.
11. See Gazdar (2007) for some of the reasons Pakistani Muslims employ to deny the existence of caste in Pakistan.
12. People belonging to the Paravar, or the Fisherman, caste are also considered Untouchables like the Chuhras, although historically the Paravars have not engaged in manual scavenging.
13. Urdu word for “trash.”
14. The East India Company Act of 1813 had mandated that the Company allowed Christian missionaries to preach their religion in India.
15. The term “Mass Movement” was coined in 1892 and by the early 20th century had become a convenient way of describing the phenomenon of the Chuhras’ embracing of Christianity (O’Brien 2012: 261). Although the term “Mass Movement” is specifically used to explain the Chuhras’ large-scale conversion to Christianity, such Mass Movements had also taken place in the past, when the Chuhras had converted to Islam and Sikhism to escape caste-based oppression and impurity long associated with them. However, they failed to get rid of the stigma. The Chuhras who converted to Islam were labelled Masallis and to Sikhism Mazhabi-Sikhs and continued to face the same levels of discrimination as before.
16. Walbridge observes that not all Protestant missionaries were enthusiastic about the large number of the Chuhras embracing Christianity because they feared that the Chuhras would “frighten off higher caste Indians” (2003: 17). Further, they were also “uncomfortable with the notion of ’group conversion’” because they believed that “[t]he individual, standing alone, must find Christ to be saved” (17).
17. Joseph Bhatti thinks of Jesus not as “the eternal savior of all mankind but a visa officer” because he has seen his fellow Christians use the pretext of serving their Lord to leave Pakistan and go to Italy (Hanif 2011: 50; emphasis added).
18. Abbas (2014: 181) has read this scene, especially the reference to the legality of reciting Qur’anic verses, in the context of the Ahmadis who are legally forbidden to practice Islam or call themselves Muslims in Pakistan. Abbas argues that “[t]he reference to the Ahmadiyya declared non-Muslim [...] is worked into a more complex web of social, national, and even metaphysical — Platonic and religious — injustice.
19. See Walbridge (2003, esp. 185-192), for a discussion of “An Islamic Christianity.”
20. Based on the services the Chuhras provided, Peter Streefland (1974: 1) differentiates between two categories of Chuhras: the Seypi-Chuhras and the Athri-Chuhras. Both categories of the Chuhras were part of the Jajmani system with the Seypi-Chuhras providing services like cleaning and collecting cow-dung while the Athri-Chuhras provided agricultural services to their upper caste patrons (1). Whole families of the Seypi-Chuhras were in the employ of their upper caste patrons while Athri-Chuhras were usually employed by single men with whom the Chuhras had a debt-based relationship.
21. The Jajmani system is an ancient economic system still prevalent in certain parts of India and Pakistan in which the lower castes perform various functions for upper castes and “where income is not regulated solely by market forces or negotiated agreements, but by customary rights and privileges based on and enforced by the hereditary caste division of labour” (O’Brien 2012: 230). The lower castes provide cleaning and agricultural services to the upper castes and are paid with goods and grains. See Dumont (1980: 97-106), for a detailed discussion of the Jajmani system.
22. “Dry” work mainly involves sweeping of houses, streets, and compounds while “wet” work entails cleaning cesspools, unclogging sewers, and manual scavenging.
23. Louis Dumont (1980: 49) used the term “specialists in impurity” for washerman and barbers “who, in virtue of their functions, find themselves living permanently in a state bordering upon
that which the people they serve enter temporarily: a state which these people get out of thanks to, among other things, a terminal bath.” However, Dumont is quick to add that washermen and barbers “do not belong to Untouchables proper” (49). Streefland refashions Dumont’s term to describe the Chuhras who perform “wet” jobs.

24. The Arabic words used in the Qur’anic verse is “insan,” which can also be translated (in gender-neutral terms) as “humankind.”

25. Arabic/Urdu title for Jesus Christ, the Messiah. Many Chuhra Christians use “Masih” as their last name in Pakistan.


27. Punjabi/Urdu word for Jesus.


ABSTRACTS

This paper explores how Mohammed Hanif’s 2011 novel Our Lady of Alice Bhatti challenges the construct of “Pak-ness” (purity), which is at the heart of the idea of Pakistan and Pakistani national identity. I argue that Joseph Bhatti, the father of the eponymous protagonist Alice Bhatti, is an intricate palimpsest of various historical, political, social, and cultural transformations in India (the Aryan invasion, the inauguration of the Varna system, the Muslim conquests of India, the British colonization of India, and the Partition), but more importantly this character brings to the fore the one constant throughout these monumental transformations – the impurity and Untouchability ascribed to the Chuhra people. In addition, the paper shows how the word “Pakistan” too becomes a palimpsest of various cultural archives, semantic reserves, and political transformations: the word “Pakistan” is acronymized in English, made semantically operative through Persian/Urdu to conflate the Pakistani Muslim identity with the notion of purity, which happens to be of Brahman origin.

Cet article s’intéresse à Our Lady of Alice Bhatti (2011) de Mohammed Hanif et à la façon dont le roman remet en question la construction de la « Pak-ness » (pureté), notion au cœur projet politique pakistanais et de son identité nationale. Je soutiens que Joseph Bhatti, le père de la protagoniste éponyme Alice Bhatti, est un palimpseste de différentes transformations historiques, politiques, sociales et culturelles indiennes (invasion aryenne, système des Varnas, invasion musulmane de l’Inde, colonisation britannique du sous-continent, puis Partition de 1947). Avant tout ce personnage met en avant une unique constante : l’impureté et l’intouchabilité attribuées au peuple Chuhra. En outre, l’article démontre comment le mot « Pakistan » est également un palimpseste de diverses archives culturelles, de réserves sémantiques et de transformations politiques : le mot « Pakistan » est acronymisé en anglais, rendu sémantiquement opérant par le biais du persan/ourdou afin de mélanger l’identité musulmane pakistanaise avec la notion de pureté, qui est, en fait, une notion brahmanique.
INDEX

Keywords: Hanif Mohammed, Untouchable, Chuhras, Pakistani fiction, literature, palimpsest, Pakistan, India, caste, Farsi, Urdu

Mots-clés: Hanif Mohammed, intouchable, Chuhras, fiction pakistanaise, littérature, palimpseste, Pakistan, Inde, caste, farsi, ourdou

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