

STYLING FEMALE IDENTITY: AN IDEO-STYLISTIC ANALYSIS OF GENDER, POWER, AND RESISTANCE IN MOHAMMED HANIF'S OUR LADY OF ALICE BHATT

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Abstract

This article examines the ideological construction of female identity in Mohammed Hanif's *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* through an ideo-stylistic approach that brings feminist stylistics into dialogue with critical stylistics. Rather than treating female identity as a fixed category, the study understands it as a contested textual and social formation produced through language, bodily description, naming, clothing, dialogue, focalization, metaphor, irony, and representations of action and thought. The analysis focuses primarily on Alice Bhatti and, where necessary, Sister Hina Alvi as a contrasting female subjectivity. Close reading of the novel demonstrates that Hanif repeatedly places the female body under surveillance and turns appearance, clothing, sexuality, religion, class, caste, professional status, and marriage into sites of ideological negotiation. Alice's body is described through anatomical and grotesque imagery, while her clothing becomes a strategy of self-protection against the male gaze. Her linguistic behaviour is similarly regulated: she carefully controls her words, avoids eye contact, negotiates between Punjabi, Urdu, and English, and manages bodily movement in anticipation of social judgement. At the same time, the novel's irony, satire, exaggeration, and grotesque humour expose the absurdity and violence of the social structures that police women. Sister Hina Alvi further complicates the representation by providing an alternative female voice that questions marriage, religious categorization, and conventional femininity. The article argues that Hanif's style performs a double ideological function: it represents the mechanisms through which female identity is constrained while simultaneously disrupting those mechanisms through irony, narrative distance, female speech, and resistant characterization. The study contributes to scholarship on Pakistani English fiction by demonstrating how detailed stylistic analysis can reveal the ideological processes through which gendered identities are constructed, contested, and renegotiated.

1. Introduction

Literary representations of women are never produced through theme alone. They are also produced through the linguistic and stylistic decisions by which bodies are described, characters are named, actions are represented, speech is presented, relationships are organized, and readers are positioned. In this sense, style is not simply an aesthetic surface added to an already existing meaning. It is one of the principal mechanisms through which a literary text constructs social reality. Questions of female identity are therefore especially suitable for stylistic investigation because gendered meanings often become visible in apparently small linguistic choices: a noun used to name a woman, an adjective used to describe her body, a metaphor that turns her into an object, a pronoun that assigns agency, or a narrative perspective that gives access to one character's thoughts while restricting another's.

Mohammed Hanif's *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* provides a particularly productive site for such an investigation. Published in 2011, the novel centres on Alice Bhatti, a Christian nurse working in the Sacred Heart Hospital in Karachi. Her identity is shaped by several overlapping social positions: she is a woman, a Christian, a member of the Bhatti community, a professional nurse, a daughter of a poor family, a former prisoner, and later a wife. The novel therefore does not construct gender independently of other categories. Female identity is repeatedly entangled with religion, class, caste, labour, sexuality, marriage, and institutional power. The narrative is also stylistically distinctive because Hanif combines social realism with satire, dark humour, grotesque imagery, irony, absurdity, and moments of magical or quasi-religious transformation. The resulting style allows the novel to represent social oppression while simultaneously making that oppression appear ridiculous, contradictory, and morally unstable.

Previous scholarship has already established the importance of gender and marginalization in the novel. Arshad and Uzair (2017) identify dominant and contesting gendered discourses in the text through a feminist critical discourse perspective. A later study of gendered discourse similarly argues that the novel constructs suppressed female identities while allowing the protagonist to redefine identity through resistance. Ahmed and Nasir (2022) approach the novel from a postcolonial feminist perspective and emphasize the intensified marginalization of a woman who also belongs to a religious minority. Muhammad, Naeem, and Khan (2024) focus on women, work, poverty, class distinction, and gender oppression. More recent work has examined feminist stylistic fragmentation and the objectification of women, showing that the novel reduces women at points to bodily parts while also exposing the violence and absurdity of the male gaze. These studies demonstrate the richness of the novel, but they also indicate the value of a more integrated stylistic account that connects specific linguistic choices to broader ideological processes.

The present article develops such an account through the concept of *ideo-stylistics*. The term is used here to designate a mode of textual analysis in which stylistic choices are examined as carriers of ideological meanings. The approach draws on Mills's (1995) feminist stylistics, which places language at the centre of feminist literary interpretation, and Jeffries's (2010) critical stylistics, which provides tools for identifying how textual choices construct particular versions of people, actions, relationships, and social reality. The purpose is not to claim that every stylistic choice has one fixed ideological meaning. Rather, the analysis asks how patterns of naming, describing, metaphor, dialogue, focalization, transitivity, modality, and representation of speech and thought contribute to the construction and contestation of female identity.

The article argues that Hanif constructs female identity as a contested ideological formation rather than a stable social category. The female body is repeatedly transformed into an object of visual and sexual surveillance, yet the narrative makes that surveillance visible as irrational and violent. Clothing becomes a form of self-regulation but also a strategy through which Alice attempts to reclaim control over how her body is read. Language becomes another form of regulation, as Alice learns to speak carefully and

manage her linguistic repertoire in order to avoid interpretations of intimacy or sexual availability. At the same time, Alice's professional competence, sarcastic speech, physical courage, and refusal to accept imposed roles create counter-discourses of agency. Hina Alvi strengthens this counter-discursive dimension by offering a female voice that challenges the assumption that marriage necessarily produces security or freedom.

The study is guided by three questions. First, how does Hanif employ stylistic choices to construct female identity in *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*? Second, how do lexical, figurative, grammatical, narrative, and discursive patterns encode ideologies of gender, sexuality, class, religion, and power? Third, how do these stylistic strategies simultaneously reproduce and challenge patriarchal constructions of female identity through representations of agency and resistance?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Gender, Identity, and Pakistani English Fiction

Female identity in Pakistani English fiction has frequently been examined in relation to patriarchy, religion, class, domesticity, and social marginalization. Such approaches are valuable because gendered experience is embedded in institutional and cultural structures rather than produced by individual attitudes alone. In *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*, these structures include the hospital, the police, the family, religious institutions, marriage, and the informal social practices through which women's bodies and reputations are monitored. The novel is therefore compatible with intersectional approaches that understand gender as operating together with other forms of social differentiation.

The existing scholarship on Hanif's novel repeatedly identifies Alice as a marginal female subject whose Christian identity and lower socioeconomic position intensify the consequences of patriarchal power. Arshad and Uzair (2017), using Sunderland's approach to gendered discourses, identify both dominant and contesting discourses. Their work is particularly relevant because it demonstrates that the novel contains multiple voices rather than one simple patriarchal message. The 2021 discourse study likewise emphasizes the construction of suppressed female identity and the possibility of redefining identity through resistance. Ahmed and Nasir (2022) extend the discussion into postcolonial feminism by emphasizing the combined effects of gender and minority status. Muhammad et al. (2024) foreground the relationships among women, work, poverty, and class distinction.

These studies establish the thematic and ideological significance of the novel, but a stylistic approach asks a more precise question: what textual forms make these ideological meanings possible? A thematic reading can state that Alice is objectified, but stylistics can show how objectification is produced through body-part descriptions, evaluative adjectives, metaphors, narrative focalization, reported speech, and the contrast between professional and sexual registers. A discourse approach can identify patriarchy, but an ideo-stylistic approach can connect the ideology to the exact textual mechanisms by which people and events are represented.

2.2 Feminist Stylistics

Mills's *Feminist Stylistics* (1995) is foundational to the present study because it treats linguistic analysis as central to feminist interpretation. Rather than assuming that sexism is simply a matter of explicit offensive language, feminist stylistics examines the subtler ways texts construct women and men differently. Its attention to word choice, naming, character and role analysis, agency, narrative, discourse, and reader positioning is particularly useful for Hanif's novel. The framework permits the analyst to ask who is represented as acting, who is represented as being acted upon, whose speech is foregrounded, whose body is described, and from whose perspective a character is perceived.

The concept of fragmentation is also relevant. When a woman is represented through isolated body parts rather than as a whole person, the stylistic pattern can participate in objectification. Recent

scholarship on *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* has used this concept to demonstrate that descriptions of the female body can simultaneously reproduce and expose the male gaze. The present article extends this insight by placing bodily fragmentation within a larger stylistic network that includes clothing, gaze, naming, language choice, professional identity, and narrative irony.

2.3 Critical Stylistics and Ideology

Jeffries's *Critical Stylistics* (2010) provides the second major component of the framework. Critical stylistics combines detailed stylistic analysis with attention to ideology and asks how textual choices construct a particular version of reality. Among its major analytical resources are naming and describing, representing actions and events, equating and contrasting, exemplifying and enumerating, prioritizing, implying and assuming, negating, hypothesizing, presenting speech and thought, and representing time, space, and society. This orientation is valuable because ideological meanings in Hanif's novel are not confined to explicitly political statements. They are distributed across descriptions of bodies, institutional spaces, relationships, and everyday interactions.

An ideo-stylistic reading therefore treats style as neither politically innocent nor mechanically deterministic. A description can reproduce an ideology at one level and criticize it at another. Hanif's use of sexualized description provides a clear example. The language sometimes reproduces the objectifying gaze by presenting Alice's body in highly physical terms. Yet the narrative context often exposes the gaze as invasive, absurd, contradictory, or dangerous. The same stylistic resource can consequently become both representation and critique. This double movement is central to the argument developed below.

2.4 Research Gap

The existing scholarship demonstrates that *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* has been examined through feminist critical discourse analysis, postcolonial feminism, thematic analysis, gender discourse, and feminist stylistic fragmentation. The contribution of the present study lies in bringing these concerns together through an explicitly ideo-stylistic framework. Rather than selecting one feature such as fragmentation or one social issue such as minority oppression, the study examines a network of stylistic choices through which female identity is constructed. It therefore moves from the question of what the novel says about women to the more specific question of how the novel's style makes particular gendered meanings possible and how that style also unsettles them.

3. Theoretical Framework

The analytical framework combines feminist stylistics and critical stylistics. Feminist stylistics provides the gender-sensitive orientation, while critical stylistics supplies a systematic account of the ideological work performed by textual choices. The combined framework is termed feminist ideo-stylistics in this article. It is not presented as a new grand theory; rather, it is an operational combination of two compatible traditions for the purposes of close literary analysis.

Analytical level	Primary stylistic features	Ideological question
Lexical	Naming, nouns, adjectives, evaluative vocabulary, body-part terms	How are women categorized, valued, sexualized, or marginalized?
Grammatical	Agency, transitivity, modality, pronouns, negation	Who acts, who is acted upon, and whose choices are constrained?
Figurative	Metaphor, simile, hyperbole,	How are gendered meanings intensified,

	irony, grotesque imagery	naturalized, or challenged?
Discourse	Dialogue, reported speech, thought presentation, focalization	Whose voice is heard and how are women positioned in interaction?
Narrative	Perspective, juxtaposition, satire, narrative distance	How does the narrator reproduce or expose dominant ideologies?
Social-semiotic	Clothing, professional uniform, names, religious markers, bodily movement	How are female identities materially and socially performed?

At the lexical level, the study examines how Alice and other women are named and described. Naming is particularly important because identity is often reduced to categories such as girl, wife, nurse, Christian, sister, daughter, or woman. At the grammatical level, the study considers agency: who initiates actions and who becomes the object of another character's action. At the figurative level, metaphors and similes are examined because Hanif's comic and grotesque comparisons frequently transform ordinary descriptions into ideological commentary. At the discourse level, dialogue and thought presentation reveal competing voices. Finally, the narrative level considers how irony and focalization shape the reader's response to the social structures represented.

4. Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative interpretive methodology based on close textual analysis of Mohammed Hanif's *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*. The uploaded primary-text PDF was treated as the principal source for textual evidence. The analysis covers the novel as a whole but concentrates on passages in which female identity becomes especially visible through descriptions of the body, clothing, language, marriage, religion, work, social status, and resistance. The selected passages were examined repeatedly at lexical, grammatical, figurative, discourse, and narrative levels.

The analytical process involved three connected stages. First, passages relevant to female identity were identified through close reading. Second, stylistic features within these passages were categorized according to the combined feminist-stylistic and critical-stylistic framework. Third, the stylistic observations were interpreted in relation to ideological questions concerning gender, power, sexuality, religion, class, caste, and agency. The method is interpretive rather than statistical; frequency counts are therefore not used as evidence of significance. Instead, recurring stylistic patterns and their contextual functions form the basis of the argument.

The study also maintains an important distinction between the narrator's representation of an ideology and the author's endorsement of that ideology. Because Hanif frequently uses irony and satire, an objectifying description should not automatically be interpreted as authorial agreement with objectification. The analysis therefore considers the surrounding narrative context, the position from which the description is offered, the consequences attached to the representation, and the contrast between different voices in the novel.

5. Analysis and Discussion

5.1 The Female Body as an Ideological Site

One of the most persistent stylistic patterns in *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* is the construction of the female body as a site on which social meanings are imposed. Alice's physical appearance is described through a combination of anatomical vocabulary, food imagery, comparison, exaggeration, and grotesque humour. Her ribs, collarbones, ankles, and breasts become objects of narrative attention. The description is deliberately disproportionate: bodily thinness is placed beside sexualized fullness, producing a grotesque contrast that makes Alice's body appear simultaneously fragile and conspicuous (Hanif, 2011, pp. 68–69).

This stylistic construction has ideological consequences. Alice's body is not initially presented as belonging entirely to her. Other characters observe it, measure it, comment on it, and assign value to it. The tailor's measuring tape becomes particularly significant because the professional act of taking measurements is mixed with memories of Alice's mother, marriageability, and social history. The body is thus moved from the medical and material domain into the social domain: it becomes something that can be assessed as attractive, marriageable, respectable, or problematic.

The narrative then shifts from the description of the body to Alice's awareness of being watched. This shift is crucial because it transforms the male gaze into a psychological condition. The narrator explains that Alice experiences her supposedly desirable figure as a curse and repeatedly pulls down her shirt to redirect attention. The stylistic movement from physical description to interior perspective demonstrates how an external gaze becomes internalized as self-monitoring. The body is controlled because it is expected to communicate something about the woman who inhabits it.

The ideological contradiction becomes sharper when the narrator distinguishes between social disgust toward Alice as an "untouchable" and men's willingness to touch her without permission. The text thereby places caste prejudice and sexual objectification in the same discursive field. Alice may be treated as physically contaminating in one social context while being treated as sexually available in another. The contradiction reveals that the issue is not the physical body itself but the power relations through which the body is interpreted. The novel's irony exposes the instability of supposedly respectable social boundaries (Hanif, 2011, p. 69).

From an ideo-stylistic perspective, the body therefore functions as a contested sign. The descriptive language can reproduce the objectifying gaze by emphasizing body parts, but the narrative framing makes the gaze itself visible as a social problem. Hanif's style does not permit the reader to remain comfortably inside the perspective of the spectator. The grotesque exaggeration and Alice's discomfort force attention toward the violence hidden inside apparently ordinary looking.

5.2 Clothing, Modesty, and the Politics of Visibility

Clothing provides a second major stylistic mechanism through which female identity is constructed. Alice's clothes are not represented simply as fashion or personal preference. They are part of a defensive strategy. The novel explains that she selects loose clothing, covers her chest with a dupatta, covers her neck, ties her hair back, and ensures that her shalwar covers her ankles before going to work (Hanif, 2011, p. 69). The accumulation of these details creates a stylistic effect of sequential self-regulation. Each item of clothing becomes another layer between the female body and the social gaze.

The list-like sequencing is ideologically significant because it presents modesty as labour. Alice must actively construct a socially acceptable exterior before entering public space. The burden of avoiding male interpretation is placed on her body and her clothing rather than on the people who stare or touch. Clothing therefore becomes a material form of linguistic and social negotiation: Alice attempts to control the meanings that others may attach to her appearance.

The tailor scene intensifies this relationship between clothing and ideology. Alice's request that the shirt make her bodily "privileges" appear flatter is ironic because what is called a privilege is experienced by her as a liability. The euphemistic expression "privileges" converts breasts into an ideological category: the body is socially valued as feminine attractiveness but personally experienced as a source of surveillance. The irony lies in the gap between public valuation and private suffering (Hanif, 2011, p. 72).

The novel consequently challenges the assumption that modest clothing automatically produces female safety. Alice can cover herself and still be stared at, touched, threatened, and sexually interpreted. Clothing is therefore neither a simple symbol of oppression nor a complete strategy of resistance. It is a

negotiated practice through which Alice attempts to exercise limited control over an environment that refuses to leave her body uninterpreted.

5.3 Language Choice and the Performance of Female Respectability

Hanif extends the construction of female identity from the visual domain into language. Alice learns to speak in ways that minimize the possibility of being misread. The narrator states that she uses precise sentences, chooses her words carefully, answers in Urdu when addressed in Punjabi, and restricts her use of English largely to medical terminology. This linguistic behaviour is not presented as an abstract language preference. It is connected to the fear that particular forms of speech might be interpreted as intimacy, forwardness, or sexual invitation (Hanif, 2011, p. 72).

This passage is especially important for an ideo-stylistic analysis because it shows that identity is performed through linguistic choices. Alice is not simply a bilingual or multilingual speaker. She is a speaker who has learned to anticipate ideological interpretations of her linguistic repertoire. Punjabi, her mother tongue, can become a marker of intimacy; English can become a marker of forwardness; Urdu becomes comparatively safer. Her linguistic choices therefore reveal how social ideology enters everyday communication.

The novel's representation of Alice's speech also complicates the conventional stereotype of the submissive woman. She is careful, but she is not silent. Her professional language, sarcasm, and occasional bluntness provide spaces in which she resists the identities imposed upon her. The stylistic contrast between careful everyday speech and sharp moments of direct dialogue creates a multidimensional female subject. Her identity is not reducible to either silence or rebellion; it is negotiated according to context.

This is one of the points at which feminist stylistics and critical stylistics intersect. Feminist stylistics asks how a woman's speech is evaluated and constrained, while critical stylistics asks how linguistic choices construct a social world in which certain forms of speech are safer than others. Alice's speech therefore becomes evidence of both ideological constraint and strategic agency.

5.4 The Male Gaze and Sexual Objectification

The novel repeatedly connects female identity to the male gaze. Looking is not represented as a neutral act. Men evaluate women's bodies, and the act of looking can move toward touching, harassment, and violence. Alice recognizes that men treat the visual examination of female anatomy as a normal social practice. The narrator's use of predatory vocabulary for the eyes transforms looking into an act of consumption and pursuit (Hanif, 2011, p. 69).

The ideological force of this representation lies in the contrast between professional identity and sexualized identity. Alice is a trained nurse whose body should be understood within a professional context, yet her professional environment repeatedly returns her to bodily visibility. The interview sequence establishes this contradiction from the beginning. Alice enters the hospital seeking employment, wearing a carefully prepared uniform, yet the atmosphere around the interview is unstable, satirical, and sexually charged. The narrative therefore undermines the expectation that institutional spaces automatically protect women from gendered objectification.

The interview scene is particularly effective because the style shifts rapidly between bureaucratic language and grotesque or comic imagery. Alice's job is formally associated with nursing, patients, and service, but the narrative repeatedly introduces bodily and sexual associations. The juxtaposition exposes institutional hypocrisy. The hospital claims professional authority while its internal social relations remain saturated with gendered assumptions (Hanif, 2011, pp. 4-10).

The novel also complicates the male gaze by making Alice aware of it. Because readers are given access to her thoughts, the woman is not merely an object being looked at; she becomes a subject who

interprets the gaze. This focalization is a crucial stylistic countermeasure. The gaze exists, but the narrative refuses to allow the gazer to possess the entire meaning of what is seen.

5.5 Naming, Religion, Caste, and the Construction of Identity

Female identity in the novel is also constructed through naming. Alice's name carries religious and familial meanings, while the surname Bhatti places her within a social group that is repeatedly associated with sanitation work, poverty, and caste stigma. The name therefore functions as more than an identifying label. It becomes a condensed social history. The novel repeatedly demonstrates that people do not encounter Alice as an individual alone; they encounter the categories that they associate with her.

The relationship between name and marriage is especially important. Once Alice marries Teddy Butt, the possibility of becoming Alice Bhatti Butt, Alice Butt, or Alice Teddy Butt is discussed humorously. The joke is stylistically light but ideologically serious. A woman's name can be transformed through marriage, and the possible combinations imply a negotiation over which male identity will be attached to hers (Hanif, 2011, p. 60).

The same issue appears in Hina Alvi's identity. Her public name conceals a complicated religious and marital history. When she eventually reveals that her original name was Hannah Massey, the revelation shows that identity is shaped by marriage, religion, class, and public expectations. Her explanation that she retained her married surname after divorce because changing official documents is practically difficult turns naming into an institutional issue as well as a personal one (Hanif, 2011, p. 144).

The ideological significance is that the novel does not treat identity as an internal essence. Names, surnames, religious labels, and professional titles are social technologies through which people are recognized and positioned. Women negotiate these technologies differently, but none of them exists outside them. Hina's hidden Christian identity and Alice's public Christian identity demonstrate two different strategies for negotiating religious visibility.

5.6 Religion and the Negotiation of Female Subjectivity

Religion is intertwined with gender throughout the novel. Alice's Christian identity makes her vulnerable to religious prejudice, but the novel avoids presenting religion as a single coherent force. Instead, religious discourse is fragmented across different characters and institutions. The Sacred Heart Hospital is simultaneously a place of medical work, religious symbolism, corruption, suffering, and occasional care. Hanif's satire therefore prevents religious language from functioning as a stable moral authority.

Hina Alvi offers a particularly important example of religious negotiation. She publicly inhabits one identity while privately maintaining another religious affiliation. The stylistic presentation of this revelation is conversational rather than solemn. Alice's questions and Hina's blunt responses transform religious identity into an intimate interpersonal negotiation rather than a doctrinal debate. The effect is to humanize the complexity of religious belonging while showing the social pressure that makes concealment necessary.

The novel also connects religion with marriage. Hina's discussion of Alice's marriage suggests that changing religious or marital identity does not automatically liberate a woman. Her argument that a married woman may experience even greater subordination turns marriage into an ideological institution rather than simply a romantic relationship (Hanif, 2011, p. 96). The irony of the dialogue is crucial: a social institution celebrated as security is reframed as a possible multiplication of dependence.

5.7 Marriage, Sexuality, and the Ideology of Female Dependence

Marriage is one of the novel's most important ideological sites. Alice initially imagines that she can live without a man and that professional employment can provide the security she needs. Her decision to marry Teddy emerges from a combination of emotional vulnerability, social danger, and changing perceptions of security. The narrative does not present the decision as a simple romantic fulfilment. Instead, it places marriage within a network of fear, violence, protection, desire, and social expectation. Hina's reaction is therefore significant. She questions not only Alice's choice of husband but the assumption that marriage itself produces freedom. Her warning that a woman can become doubly enslaved through marriage exposes the contradiction between the cultural promise of female security and the potential loss of autonomy. The dialogue is stylistically powerful because Hina speaks in a mixture of humour, sarcasm, intimacy, and political seriousness. The apparently casual conversation becomes a critique of a major social institution.

At the same time, the novel avoids constructing Alice as completely independent of emotional relationships. Her interactions with Teddy contain affection, fear, humour, and vulnerability. This complexity is important because an ideo-stylistic reading should not replace one stereotype with another. Female agency does not require emotional isolation. Rather, the novel shows that agency becomes difficult when intimate relationships are embedded within unequal social structures.

5.8 Sister Hina Alvi and Alternative Female Subjectivity

Sister Hina Alvi is essential to the novel's representation of female identity because she provides a powerful contrast to Alice. She is professionally senior, verbally direct, socially confident, and willing to challenge Alice's assumptions. Her dialogue is often marked by sarcasm and bluntness. Unlike a conventional maternal or respectable female authority, Hina combines professional competence with behaviours that the novel deliberately renders unconventional.

Her authority is also represented stylistically through action. She speaks, interrupts, evaluates, suspends, protects, and advises. Her actions make her a subject rather than an object. Yet Hanif does not idealize her. She can be judgmental, intrusive, and contradictory. This complexity strengthens the ideological argument because female agency is represented as contested rather than pure.

The relationship between Hina and Alice also creates a form of female solidarity. Hina worries about Alice, offers practical advice, shelters her, and ultimately provides a weapon for self-protection. Yet their relationship is not free of surveillance. Hina questions Alice's marriage, religious identity, and personal choices. The novel therefore presents solidarity and regulation as overlapping practices. Women can protect each other while also participating in the social processes through which women are judged.

This ambivalence is one of the novel's strongest stylistic features. Dialogue allows multiple female positions to coexist without forcing them into a single feminist voice. Alice is not Hina, and Hina is not a universal model of liberated womanhood. The novel instead constructs a field of competing female subjectivities.

5.9 Irony, Metaphor, and the Grotesque as Ideological Critique

Hanif's most distinctive stylistic contribution to the representation of female identity is his use of irony and grotesque humour. The novel repeatedly places serious social violence beside absurd comparisons, comic dialogue, bodily imagery, and satirical descriptions. This combination creates emotional instability: the reader may laugh and then immediately recognize the brutality underlying the joke.

The grotesque treatment of Alice's body is one example. Another is the hospital environment, where the language of healing exists beside images of corruption, violence, sexual harassment, and institutional indifference. The effect is not merely comic. The grotesque makes social structures appear physically distorted. What society treats as normal is represented as bizarre.

Metaphor also contributes to ideological exposure. When social suffering is represented through financial, bodily, animal, or mechanical metaphors, abstract power relations become tangible. Alice's experience of repeated humiliation, for example, is conceptualized through the language of debt and payment. The metaphor suggests that even happiness must be purchased by a marginalized woman, transforming social inequality into an economic structure of obligation. The stylistic choice makes the ideological burden visible without requiring an explicit political statement.

Irony further allows the narrator to distinguish between social labels and lived experience. Alice's supposedly privileged body is experienced as a curse. Marriage, supposedly a source of security, can become another form of subordination. A hospital, supposedly a place of healing, can reproduce violence. A religious institution, supposedly a site of morality, can coexist with hypocrisy. These contradictions form the novel's central ideological architecture.

5.10 Professional Identity, Agency, and Resistance

Alice's professional identity as a nurse provides an important counterweight to her sexualized representation. The novel repeatedly shows her competence with patients, her willingness to enter dangerous spaces, and her commitment to care. Her work gives her a form of identity that is not dependent on marriage or sexuality. At the same time, professional identity does not protect her completely from patriarchal violence. This tension is central to the novel's critique.

Her first experience in the hospital demonstrates that institutional inclusion remains conditional. She must pass through a strange interview environment in which her professional qualifications are entangled with gendered perception. Later, when she resists sexual violence, the institution responds by suspending her. Her observation that she is being punished for resisting an assault condenses the ideological contradiction of the institutional system: the woman who resists violence becomes the problem rather than the violence itself (Hanif, 2011, p. 57).

The sentence is stylistically important because it is direct, syntactically simple, and declarative. After the novel's elaborate metaphors and comic digressions, the plain formulation has a strong rhetorical effect. The simplicity gives Alice's statement the force of an accusation. The contrast between the bureaucratic suspension and the language of resistance exposes institutional power.

Alice's resistance is not always triumphant. She survives through strategies of avoidance, clothing, controlled language, professional competence, humour, physical courage, and alliances with other women. This form of agency is significant because it reflects the constrained agency available to marginalized subjects. The novel does not suggest that Alice can simply step outside ideology. Instead, she negotiates it, sometimes reproducing its practices for protection and sometimes openly challenging them.

5.11 Female Identity as Negotiated and Contradictory

Taken together, the stylistic patterns demonstrate that female identity in the novel is fundamentally relational. Alice is constructed through how others look at her, name her, speak to her, touch her, employ her, desire her, fear her, and attempt to protect her. Yet the narrative repeatedly interrupts these external definitions by giving readers access to her thoughts, judgments, humour, and decisions.

The resulting identity is contradictory. Alice is vulnerable but not helpless, sexualized but not sexually available, religious but skeptical of institutional religion, professional but institutionally marginalized, socially stigmatized but personally assertive, and emotionally vulnerable but capable of physical resistance. The contradictions are not weaknesses in characterization. They are evidence that identity is socially negotiated.

Hina Alvi reinforces this principle. Her public and private religious identities, her marital history, her professional authority, and her unconventional speech demonstrate that female subjectivity cannot be

reduced to a single category. The two women therefore represent different strategies for navigating the same ideological environment. Alice tends toward careful self-management, while Hina often uses direct speech and institutional authority. Both, however, are constrained by the structures within which they act.

6. Synthesis of Major Findings

The following table summarizes the principal stylistic patterns identified in the analysis and the ideological meanings generated by them.

Stylistic pattern	Textual manifestation	Ideological effect	Female identity constructed
Bodily description	Anatomical and grotesque imagery	Makes the female body visible to social surveillance	Woman as body, spectacle, and contested subject
Clothing imagery	Loose shirt, dupatta, covered neck and ankles	Represents self-monitoring and defensive modesty	Woman as responsible for managing male interpretation
Naming	Alice, Bhatti, wife-related surnames, Hannah Massey	Links women to family, religion, marriage, and class	Identity as socially assigned and negotiable
Language choice	Careful sentences; Urdu, Punjabi, English used strategically	Shows fear of being interpreted as intimate or forward	Identity as linguistic performance
Dialogue	Alice and Hina's direct, ironic exchanges	Creates competing female voices	Women as speakers, critics, and agents
Irony	Privilege becomes curse; marriage may reduce freedom	Exposes contradictions in patriarchal norms	Woman as subject who recognizes ideological absurdity
Grotesque metaphor	Bodies, institutions, violence, and social life represented through distortion	Destabilizes normalized social structures	Marginalized woman as a figure exposing social monstrosity
Institutional discourse	Interview, suspension, hospital authority	Shows professional spaces reproducing gender power	Working woman as both professional and institutionally vulnerable
Focalization	Access to Alice's thoughts and perceptions	Re-centres the woman who is otherwise objectified	Woman as interpreting subject rather than merely observed object
Resistance	Sarcasm, refusal, professional action, physical defence	Challenges patriarchal expectations	Female identity as active, strategic, and contested

7. Discussion

The findings suggest that Hanif's representation of female identity operates through a continuous tension between objectification and subjectivity. The novel undeniably contains language that fragments and sexualizes the female body. However, treating such language as straightforward authorial endorsement would ignore the stylistic architecture of the narrative. Hanif frequently places objectifying

language within contexts of irony, discomfort, contradiction, and female consciousness. The reader is therefore invited to recognize both the existence of the gaze and the damage it causes.

This double function is particularly important for feminist stylistics. Mills (1995) emphasizes that stylistic choices can participate in gendered representation, but they can also become sites of resistance. In Hanif's novel, the same descriptive strategy can first make Alice's body an object and then expose the social mechanisms that turn it into an object. The ideological meaning is consequently produced through interaction among lexical selection, narrative perspective, context, and irony.

The findings also extend the discussion beyond sexual objectification. Female identity is constructed through a network of intersecting categories. Alice's Christian identity cannot be separated from her gender; her caste position cannot be separated from her class; her professional identity cannot be separated from institutional patriarchy; and her marriage cannot be separated from questions of social security and vulnerability. The stylistic representation of these categories demonstrates that identity is cumulative rather than singular.

The analysis further suggests that agency in the novel is best understood as negotiated agency. Alice does not become free by escaping every social norm. She frequently uses norms strategically. She dresses conservatively, controls her speech, manages physical movement, and avoids behaviour that could be interpreted as intimacy. These actions can look like compliance, but they are also survival strategies. The distinction matters because marginalized women may exercise agency within constraints rather than outside them.

The role of Hina Alvi strengthens this interpretation. Her direct speech and institutional authority provide a different form of agency. She is less concerned with appearing conventionally respectable and more willing to speak openly. Yet her own life demonstrates that female independence remains entangled with religion, marriage, institutional identity, and social expectations. The novel thus avoids presenting one ideal female subject. Instead, it creates multiple female strategies for navigating power.

The critical-stylistic perspective also reveals that institutional power is encoded in ordinary language. The hospital does not need to announce a patriarchal ideology. It produces that ideology through who is interviewed, who is judged, who is suspended, whose testimony is trusted, and whose resistance becomes an institutional problem. The stylistic contrast between formal professional discourse and the absurd or violent events occurring within the institution exposes this ideological contradiction.

The novel's irony is therefore not merely comic decoration. It is an epistemological strategy. By making social realities appear absurd, Hanif encourages readers to question their supposed normality. A woman's body should not be a public object; a hospital should not punish a woman for resisting sexual violence; marriage should not automatically be equated with freedom; and religious identity should not require concealment for social survival. The stylistic form of the novel makes these contradictions emotionally and intellectually visible.

8. Conclusion

This study has argued that Mohammed Hanif's *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* constructs female identity through a complex interaction of stylistic choices and ideological structures. Using a feminist ideostylistic framework that combines Mills's feminist stylistics with Jeffries's critical stylistics, the analysis has shown how bodily description, clothing, naming, language choice, dialogue, metaphor, irony, focalization, and institutional discourse participate in the construction of gendered identity.

The analysis demonstrates that Alice's body is repeatedly positioned as a site of surveillance and objectification, but the narrative also gives her consciousness sufficient space to interpret and challenge the gaze. Clothing becomes a defensive practice through which she attempts to manage how her body is read. Language functions similarly: she carefully regulates her linguistic choices because social ideology makes even ordinary communication vulnerable to sexual interpretation. Naming connects female

identity to religion, caste, family, and marriage, while institutional discourse reveals how professional women can remain subject to patriarchal power.

At the same time, Hanif's use of irony, satire, grotesque imagery, and narrative juxtaposition prevents the novel from becoming a simple reproduction of patriarchal ideology. These stylistic strategies expose the contradictions of the social structures represented. Alice's professional competence, directness, humour, and resistance provide counter-discourses, while Hina Alvi introduces another form of female agency through outspoken institutional and interpersonal authority. Female identity consequently emerges as a field of negotiation rather than a fixed essence.

The study contributes to the existing scholarship on *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* by shifting analytical attention from the general theme of women's oppression to the stylistic mechanisms through which gendered meanings are produced and contested. It shows that ideology operates not only through explicit statements but through seemingly ordinary descriptions, names, clothing details, speech patterns, metaphors, and narrative perspectives. The novel's ideological force lies precisely in this interaction between representation and critique.

The broader implication is that literary stylistics can make visible forms of gendered power that thematic readings may overlook. In Hanif's novel, female identity is produced at the intersection of body and language, visibility and invisibility, conformity and resistance, religion and social belonging, professionalism and institutional vulnerability. The title's emphasis on "styling" female identity is therefore deliberate: style does not merely describe the female subject; it participates in making that subject socially legible while also providing resources through which that subject can resist the meanings imposed upon her.

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