

Original Article

Institutional Precarity and the Erosion of Secular Nationalism: A Theoretical Study of Anjum Hasan's *History's Angel*

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ABSTRACT: *Anjum Hasan's History's Angel (2022) presents a nuanced literary engagement with the precarious position of religious minorities in contemporary India, specifically the quotidian mechanisms through which institutional structures systematize discrimination against Muslims. This paper argues that the novel demonstrates how what might be termed "structural precarity" the systematic vulnerability of minorities within ostensibly secular institutions, operates as a form of institutional violence that escapes spectacular representation. Drawing on postcolonial theory, particularly Spivak's theorization of subalternity and Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and institutional ambivalence, Walter Benjamin's philosophy of history, and contemporary scholarship on minority representation in Indian literature, this analysis reveals how Hasan's novel operates as a counter-narrative that challenges the erosion of secular nationalism and institutional capture by Hindu nationalist ideologies. The figure of Alif Mohammad, the protagonist-teacher, embodies Benjamin's "Angel of History", caught between historical consciousness and political powerlessness, unable to intervene in the systematic dismantling of pluralistic frameworks within educational institutions.*

KEYWORDS: *Minority representation, Postcolonial theory, Secular nationalism, Institutional precarity, Indian literature, Benjamin's philosophy of history.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Indian literature has increasingly engaged with the precarious position of religious minorities within ostensibly secular democratic institutions. While scholarship on communal violence in Indian fiction typically focuses on spectacular, historical instances, such as the demolition of the Babri Masjid (1992), the anti-Sikh massacres (1984), or the Gujarat riots (2002), relatively less attention has been directed toward what this study terms "everyday institutional precarity": the systematic, normalized mechanisms through which minorities experience discrimination, suspicion, and exclusion within workplaces, schools, housing markets, and other sites of institutional life. Anjum Hasan's *History's Angel* (2022) constitutes a significant departure from dominant literary representations of communal violence precisely because it shifts register from spectacular to quotidian, from historical trauma to contemporary institutional dysfunction. The novel thus warrants theoretical analysis within frameworks that illuminate how literature can represent the affective, psychological, and material dimensions of structural precarity.

As Ashfaq (2018) argues, "Through an analysis of the postcolonial fiction emanating from acts of violence unleashed in India during the anti-Sikh massacre of 1984, the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in 1992 and the explosion of violence in Gujarat in 2002, this essay examines how literary representation impacts communalism or religious minorities" (p. 1). However, Hasan's intervention moves beyond these chronologically demarcated crises to examine the continuous, institutionalized discrimination that characterizes contemporary Muslim life in a Hindu nationalist political order. This shift from spectacular to structural violence requires theoretical frameworks attentive to what scholars term "precarity", a condition of systematic vulnerability and contingency that shapes minority existence not merely during moments of explicit violence but throughout the texture of everyday institutional life.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: POSTCOLONIAL THEORY AND THE POLITICS OF MINORITY REPRESENTATION

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's foundational essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988) provides essential theoretical apparatus for understanding how representation of marginalized communities constitutes an inherently political and contested terrain. Spivak argues that "speaking of the subaltern implies speaking for them," raising fundamental questions about the ethics and politics of representation (Spivak, 1988, p. 273). This observation is particularly germane to *History's Angel*, which constructs a narrative representation of Muslim minority experience precisely through literary fiction—a form that necessarily involves the

author (a writer situated within specific structural positions) representing characters whose voices and consciousnesses exist within the text.

For Spivak, subalternity designates “not a space of difference” but rather “the non-retrievable difference at the intersection between subject and object” (Piu, 2023, p. 310). The subaltern woman (in Spivak’s foundational analysis) becomes what she terms “the excess of signification”, she exceeds any unified representation precisely because the hegemonic narratives that construct her subjectivity simultaneously deny her agency, voice, and self-determination (Spivak, 1988, p. 306). Importantly, Spivak’s framework does not suggest that the subaltern is simply silenced; rather, “her silence is re-inscribed as the trace of an absence which derives from constructing the representation of the woman as the object and subject of discourse” (Piu, 2023, p. 306).

This theoretical apparatus illuminates how Hasan represents Alif Mohammad and other Muslim characters in *History’s Angel*. While the novel grants Alif interior consciousness and narrative attention, thereby seemingly affirming his subjectivity, the very structure of the novel simultaneously demonstrates how his consciousness, perspectives, and subjectivity are systematically constrained, disciplined, and delegitimized by institutional forces. Alif’s suspension from his teaching position, the school administration’s refusal to acknowledge his professional expertise, and the broader dismissal of his historical knowledge as “irrelevant” to contemporary curriculum concerns all manifest what Spivak might term the paradoxical position of the minority intellectual: granted a voice within the institution only to be systematically silenced through institutional mechanisms that render his voice inaudible or illegible within dominant discourses of national belonging.

Homi K. Bhabha’s theorization of colonial ambivalence and hybridity, articulated particularly in *The Location of Culture* (1994), provides additional theoretical resources for analyzing how *History’s Angel* represents the contradictory nature of institutional power relations. Bhabha argues that the “in-between” space of the Third Space “carries the burden and meaning of culture, and this is what makes the notion of hybridity so important” (Literariness, 2016). Hybridity, in Bhabha’s formulation, does not suggest equal exchange or cultural synthesis; rather, it emerges from the “ambivalence” inherent in colonial relations, the colonizer’s desire for “a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha, 1994).

Applied to *History’s Angel*, Bhabha’s framework illuminates how Alif occupies an ambivalent position within the school institution. He is, simultaneously, indispensable as a teacher transmitting historical knowledge and disposable vulnerable to suspension and termination. He is recognized as a legitimate educator, yet simultaneously subjected to suspicion regarding his loyalties and appropriateness for transmitting the national narrative. This institutional ambivalence, the simultaneous recognition and delegitimization of the minority subject, constitutes what might be termed the structural precarity of minority institutional participation. The institution requires Alif’s labor (his expertise, his pedagogical care) while simultaneously maintaining the capacity to expel or marginalize him based on arbitrary criteria and shifting political conditions.

Moreover, Bhabha’s emphasis on mimicry as “almost the same, but not quite” resonates with Hasan’s representation of Alif’s intellectual formation. Educated in Indian secular traditions, steeped in Nehruvian humanism and multicultural pedagogy, committed to national integration through historical knowledge, Alif represents the ideal secular-nationalist intellectual yet finds himself increasingly unrecognizable within the institution he seeks to serve. His failure to achieve “sameness” with the emergent Hindu nationalist consensus within his institution, despite his demonstrated commitment to education and national service, demonstrates how minority subjects can never achieve the full institutional belonging they nominally pursue, regardless of their professional qualifications or intellectual achievements.

Recent scholarship on minority representation in Indian literature emphasizes the political stakes of literary representation. As one study notes, “Emerging as a powerful and radical critique, these fictions can be read as counter-narratives or studies in resistance that interrogate and unravel the politics of suppression that governs nationalist discourses thereby challenging the secular underpinnings of the Indian nation-state” (Ashfaq, 2018, p. 1). This formulation is particularly applicable to Hasan’s novel, which operates precisely as a counter-narrative to dominant Hindu nationalist narratives about Muslim “history” in India.

Conversely, scholarly work on communal violence emphasizes how literature functions therapeutically, processing collective trauma through narrative. According to one analysis, “Literature with its therapeutic powers has been able to produce catharsis for its readers. The fear, the trauma and the pain experienced during the partition violence by the multitudes is transmuted by literature into purging narratives” (Communal Violence as Social Problem, 2020, p. 1). However, *History’s Angel* complicates this cathartic function; the novel does not offer resolution or psychological purgation but rather maintains Alif in a state of perpetual liminality, offering no clear path toward institutional rehabilitation or personal resolution. This refusal of catharsis itself constitutes a political intervention, suggesting that Hindu nationalist domination of Indian institutions cannot be overcome through individual effort, institutional reform, or appeals to reason and historical knowledge.

3. WALTER BENJAMIN'S PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY AND THE "ANGEL OF HISTORY"

Anjum Hasan's title *History's Angel* draws explicitly from Walter Benjamin's final essay, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (written 1940, posthumously published), and specifically from Benjamin's meditation on Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus* (1920). In his Ninth Thesis, Benjamin writes:

"A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees instead one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of rubble before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress" (Benjamin, 1940/2007, p. 257-258).

Benjamin's philosophical framework inverts conventional historical consciousness, which typically construes history as a narrative of progress, improvement, and movement toward enlightenment or emancipation. Instead, Benjamin argues that history constitutes catastrophe, "one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage" (Benjamin, 1940/2007, p. 258). The angel of history, despite its apparent agency and moral sensibility, remains powerless: unable to awaken the dead, unable to piece together what has been smashed, and irresistibly swept forward by the storm of "progress" while facing backwards toward the accumulating catastrophe of historical violence.

Crucially, Benjamin emphasizes that this storm "is what we call progress", the very concept that legitimates modern historical consciousness and justifies contemporary actions, becomes, in Benjamin's formulation, the mechanism that prevents intervention in ongoing catastrophe. As one analyst notes, "For Benjamin, catastrophe is progress; progress is catastrophe" (Lucero-Montano, cited in Ub.edu). The implication is radical: those who believe they are serving progress are actually participating in catastrophe; those who attempt to resist historical forces through appeals to reason or linear improvement merely accelerate the disaster.

Alif Mohammad embodies this Benjaminian angel with striking fidelity. As a history teacher, Alif occupies the position of consciousness turned toward the past, contemplating historical layers, complexities, and achievements. His commitment to teaching students "the difference between history and story" reflects his investment in historical knowledge as a form of critical consciousness that might illuminate the contingencies obscured by nationalist mythology. Yet Alif's historical consciousness renders him incapable of effective action in the present. His knowledge of Mughal cosmopolitanism, his appreciation for cultural synthesis in medieval Delhi, his understanding of how "there is no Muslim history of India, because when you go back far enough, all you find are entanglements" (Hasan, 2022, cited in UNSW Centre for Ideas, 2025), all this erudition cannot prevent his suspension, cannot challenge the school curriculum's rewriting of history, cannot intervene in the institutional capture of education by Hindu nationalist ideology.

Like Benjamin's angel, Alif "would like to awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed" his commitment to preserving memory, transmitting knowledge, and honoring historical complexity represents precisely this impulse. Yet he finds himself "irresistibly propelled" into the future of unemployment, professional precarity, and social marginalization, while the "pile of rubble" of secular nationalism, secular institutions, and pluralistic pedagogy grows behind him. The "storm" propelling him forward is what contemporary India calls "progress", the rise of Hindu nationalism, the assertion of cultural majoritarianism, the reinterpretation of Indian history through monolithic religious narrative—a storm presented as inevitable, as modernization, as national awakening, yet which Benjamin would categorize as catastrophe precisely because it destroys what previous generations laboriously constructed.

The theoretical significance of reading Alif through Benjamin's angel framework lies in how it illuminates the novel's political proposition: historical consciousness, critical thinking, and commitment to truth cannot suffice to prevent catastrophe in times of rising authoritarianism and institutional capture. The angel's knowledge of what is being destroyed, the very thing that grants moral stature to the angel's stance, simultaneously disqualifies the angel from effective action. Alif knows too much about what is being lost; his consciousness of historical complexity renders him inarticulate within institutional contexts demanding simplified, monological nationalism.

Another dimension of Benjamin's philosophy, particularly relevant to *History's Angel*, concerns his theorization of the "state of emergency." Benjamin argues that for oppressed peoples, "the state of emergency is not a lived exception but the rule" (Literariness, 2017). This concept reframes the relationship between normalcy and crisis: what dominant consciousness construes as exceptional violence or rupture constitutes, for oppressed peoples, the quotidian condition of existence. Benjamin's formulation refuses the distinction between "normal" institutional functioning and "emergency" conditions; instead, it suggests that oppression operates continuously, systematized within institutional structures, normalized through habituation and consent.

Applied to *History's Angel*, this Benjaminian framework illuminates how Muslim precarity in contemporary India is not exceptional (a temporary disruption of secular normalcy) but rather constitutive of institutional functioning itself. Alif's suspension, while occasioned by a specific incident, manifests the perpetual vulnerability that structures his existence within the institution. He is vulnerable not despite his qualifications or professional record but because the institution has been reorganized through leadership transitions, curriculum changes, and ideological shifts to render minorities systematically vulnerable. This is not a state of emergency; this is, to use Benjamin's formulation, "the rule."

4. THE NOVEL AS COUNTER-ARCHIVE: REPRESENTING SECULAR NATIONALISM'S EROSION

Scholarship on Indian secularism emphasizes how secular nationalism, premised on the accommodation of multiple religious traditions within a unified state, has entered a profound crisis. As one analysis notes, "Secularism is not robust like democracy, or justice, it is a thin, limited and procedural concept. In India, this fragile concept has shouldered the onerous task of national integration, and of mandating the need for a uniform civil code, bearing responsibility for the eradication of the caste system, and standing in for democracy. Unable to bear the weight of too many political projects and ambitions, it is bound to implode" (The Wire, 2024).

This theoretical observation that Indian secularism is fundamentally fragile and overburdened illuminates the historical context within which Hasan sets *History's Angel*. The novel takes place during 2019-2020, the period following Hindu nationalist electoral dominance and the implementation of the Citizenship Amendment Act, widely viewed as antithetical to secular constitutional principles. Within this context, the school becomes a microcosm of broader institutional capture: the "newly appointed principal" represents the infiltration of Hindu nationalist ideology into secular institutions; the curriculum changes represent the systematic rewriting of history to erase or delegitimize pluralistic pasts; the suspension of Alif represents how individual minorities become vulnerable to expulsion from institutions they have loyally served.

Hasan's novel thus functions as what might be termed a counter-archive, a literary preservation of what is being deliberately destroyed. Through meticulous attention to Alif's interiority, his love for Delhi's Mughal heritage, his commitment to historical truth, and his genuine pedagogy, the novel insists on preserving memory of secular, pluralistic institutional possibilities even as these possibilities are systematically dismantled. The novel's memorial impulse, its stubborn insistence on representing what is being lost constitutes a form of political resistance that acknowledges the diminishing capacity to prevent catastrophe while refusing to accept catastrophe as inevitable or deserved.

A particularly significant dimension of *History's Angel* concerns its representation of educational institutions as sites of ideological struggle. Through the figure of the school principal, Mrs. Rawat, Hasan represents how curriculum control becomes a mechanism for establishing hegemonic narratives. When Alif attempts to defend the retention of a particular historical figure in textbooks, Mrs. Rawat dismisses the concern: "Throw him out of the history books? But he's not there in the first place" (Hasan, 2022).

This exchange crystallizes how revisionist historiography operates not merely by rewriting what exists but by retroactively erasing entire figures, epochs, and traditions as though they never existed. This represents what contemporary scholarship terms "Hindu nationalist rewriting" of Indian history. As one analysis documents, "Hindu nationalists rewrite history in India's classrooms" through systematic curriculum revision that privileges Hindu epics and religious texts while marginalizing Mughal achievements, pluralistic traditions, and the contributions of religious minorities to Indian civilization (Coda Story, 2024).

Hasan's representation of this curricular rewriting invokes what Spivak terms the problem of representation. Mrs. Rawat's assertion that a historical figure "is not there in the first place" represents a particularly insidious form of historical violence, the retroactive erasure of what was previously acknowledged, as though pluralistic memory itself constitutes a deviation from historical truth. Against this erasure, Alif's commitment to teaching history that encompasses multiple traditions, that recognizes cultural synthesis, that insists on complexity and entanglement, this becomes an act of counter-historiography, a refusal to accept the retroactive rewriting of what was demonstrably real.

5. GENDER, AGENCY, AND THE LIMITS OF MALE INTELLECTUAL CONSCIOUSNESS

While the novel privileges Alif's consciousness and interiority, it simultaneously represents Alif's perspective as limited and potentially blinding. Tahira, Alif's wife, pursues an MBA and manages a supermarket, representing what Alif perceives as crass materialism but what more accurately constitutes pragmatic adaptation to precarity. Unlike Alif, who seeks transcendence through historical knowledge, Tahira pursues material security through professional credentials and economic advancement. This thematic tension reflects broader questions about the adequacy of intellectual consciousness in times of crisis. Spivak's theorization of subalternity emphasizes how the scholar's or intellectual's attempt to represent the subaltern or to speak for the oppressed can itself become a form of epistemic violence. Alif's habit of imaginatively constructing the women in his life romanticizing Prerna as a victim-poet, dismissing Tahira's ambitions as shallow, failing to recognize their agency and self-

possession, illustrates how even sympathetic male intellectuals can replicate patriarchal patterns of representation while believing themselves engaged in progressive politics.

This dimension of the novel complicates any simple endorsement of Alif's historical consciousness as inherently valuable or subversive. His commitment to truth, his intellectual sophistication, his ethical sensitivity to historical loss—these do not automatically translate into recognizing the agency and subjectivity of actual living women. The novel thus performs a sophisticated critique of how male intellectual consciousness can remain partial, limited, and even implicated in the very structures it claims to resist.

Significantly, Tahira's material precarity intersects with religious precarity when she attempts to rent an apartment and encounters housing discrimination. The landlords demur upon learning she is Muslim, a scene Hasan includes specifically because, as the author states, it represents "the only point in the book that I felt, 'Alif, say something!'" (UNSW Centre for Ideas, 2025). This incident crystallizes how precarity operates across multiple axes: economic precarity (the need to secure housing in a competitive market) intersects with religious precarity (the systematic denial of housing to Muslims). Tahira's MBA aspirations and professional success do not exempt her from religious discrimination; in fact, they may intensify it, as she pursues material security only to discover it remains structurally unavailable to her as a Muslim woman.

The housing discrimination scene invokes scholarly work on minority precarity in India. One analysis notes, "India's discrimination against Muslims expands to housing" (Fair Planet, 2023), documenting how landlords systematically deny rental housing to Muslim families regardless of economic qualifications. This structural discrimination transforms housing, ostensibly a market commodity accessed through economic means, into a site of religious gatekeeping, revealing how capitalism and communalism interpenetrate in contemporary India.

Contemporary scholarship on violence distinguishes between spectacular violence (riots, massacres, terrorist attacks) and structural violence, systematic disadvantage and constraint embedded within institutional frameworks. Structural violence, precisely because it is normalized and routinized, often remains invisible within dominant discourse yet constitutes the primary mechanism through which power relations are enforced. Hasan's novel insists on representing institutional violence in all its mundane, procedural, legitimate-appearing forms: the suspension from employment, the rewriting of curriculum, the reinterpretation of history, the erosion of occupational security.

The theoretical significance of *History's Angel* lies in how it elevates institutional violence to the level of explicit aesthetic concern. The novel does not depict Alif being attacked or harassed; rather, it represents how institutional procedures designed to appear neutral, procedural, and fair systematically disadvantage and ultimately expel him. The school's disciplinary committee, the formal suspension process, and the uncertain timeline for resolution all these institutional mechanisms operate with an appearance of legitimacy while performing systematic exclusion.

As Piu (2023) notes regarding Spivak's theorization of subalternity, "Representing subalternity is an aesthetic and political question, because speaking of the subaltern implies speaking for them" (p. 310). Hasan's aesthetic choice to represent institutional violence through realistic, novelistic modes through Alif's consciousness, through domestic scenes, through quotidian detail constitutes a political decision to insist that such violence deserves the same aesthetic attention and moral weight as spectacular violence.

Contemporary scholarship on precarity, emerging from European social movements, emphasizes that precarity designates not merely economic vulnerability but a broader condition of existential contingency and institutional uncertainty. As one study notes, "Precarity captures not only quantitative losses but also paradigmatic transformations in labor under the knowledge economy" and extends "to every corner of everyday life, representing a spreading condition of vulnerability brought on by neoliberalism" (Casas-Cortés et al., 2021, p. 1).

Applied to *History's Angel*, precarity describes Alif's condition: his employment is contingent, his professional identity remains subject to institutional whim, and his future is radically uncertain. Yet precarity, in the formulation of some scholars, also designates a position of potential political mobilization. Activists working around precarity have developed what Casas-Cortés terms "'precarity pride' the politicization of insecurity," where vulnerability becomes "a source for nurturing a fluid space of political creation" (Casas-Cortés et al., 2021, p. 1).

However, *History's Angel* suggests that such politicization remains unavailable to Alif. His precarity does not generate political consciousness or collective mobilization; rather, it produces isolation, self-doubt, and the sense that his suspension represents personal failure rather than systemic violence. This represents what might be termed the tragedy of structural precarity: those most devastated by institutional violence often lack frameworks for collective political response, instead internalizing their displacement as individual inadequacy.

4. CONCLUSION: THE NECESSITY OF LITERARY WITNESS IN CATASTROPHIC TIMES

History's angel emerges from this theoretical analysis as a significant work of literary testimony that refuses spectacularity while insisting on the moral weight of institutional violence and minority precarity. Through the figure of Alif Mohammad himself embodying Walter Benjamin's angel of history, Hasan represents how historical consciousness, intellectual commitment to truth, and ethical sensibility cannot suffice to prevent catastrophe in times of rising authoritarianism and institutional capture.

The novel's particular achievement lies in its refusal of redemption or resolution. Alif does not triumph; he does not restore the secular institution; he does not successfully transmit his vision of pluralistic history to the next generation. Instead, the novel maintains him in perpetual liminality, suspended between past and present, between commitment to truth and institutional incapacity to recognize that truth, between individual integrity and systemic violence.

Yet this very refusal of redemption constitutes the novel's political force. By insisting on representing what is being destroyed the minority intellectual committed to pluralism, the teacher dedicated to critical historical consciousness, the man attempting to maintain dignity within structures designed to diminish him the novel performs what Benjamin theorizes as the necessary task of historical consciousness in dark times: "Each age must strive to wrest tradition away from the conformism that is working to overpower it" (Benjamin, 1940/2007, cited in Literariness, 2017). Hasan's novel wrests the tradition of secular pluralism away from conformist narratives of Hindu nationalism by insisting, through literary representation itself, that such pluralism was real, constitutive, worthy of preservation.

For scholars of contemporary Indian literature, postcolonial studies, trauma studies, and literary theory, *History's Angel* demonstrates how the novel remains a vital form for representing political catastrophe precisely through its refusal to reduce complexity to ideology, its maintenance of individual consciousness even while documenting systemic violence, and its aesthetic insistence that literature constitutes a form of political resistance available even when institutional resistance becomes impossible.

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