



Representing Muslims: A Postcolonial Study of Mohammed Hanif's *Red Birds*

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Abstract: This research study highlights the role of Mohammed Hanif as a native informer in representing his own culture and religion, Islam, in his novel, *Red Birds* (2018). Edward Said's postcolonial theory, as presented in *Orientalism* (1979) and *Covering Islam* (1997), is applied as a tool to analyze the novel textually and contextually. The research methodology is inductive and exploratory. According to [Said \(1979\)](#), political knowledge may influence a state's policies about a region, as is evident in *Red Birds*. [Hanif \(2018\)](#) uses Major Ellie and Momo in the novel as his mouthpieces in depicting and representing Muslims as backwards and savages. This approach of [Hanif's \(2018\)](#) towards Muslims serves the narrative of the Neo-Orientalists. As [Dabashi \(2011\)](#), argues that Neo-Orientalists have historically used diaspora authors for their purposes. Hanif, as a native informer, has misrepresented Islam in *Red Birds* (2018). [Hanif \(2018\)](#) portrays Islam as an outdated religion. The modern world need not propagate any religion or culture negatively. Instead, we need flexibility and acceptance for peaceful co-existence.

Key Words: Muslims, Native Informer, Postcolonialism, Representation

Introduction

Books are considered as the institution that plays a major and dominant role in the production of knowledge regarding culture and religion. Most people do not travel the world, yet they draw the information regarding the religions and cultures from books and media. Books such as *Red Birds* (2018) may mislead the Western world who has already developed negative perceptions regarding Muslims. Thus, there is an erroneous image created by books and media regarding Islam, which includes the collective cognition of Western societies about Islam. This specific image is adopted as a reference to conceive Islam as a religion of extreme nature ([Kerboua, 2016](#)).

[Said \(1979\)](#) further argues that it has been a methodical approach to misrepresent and damage the image of Muslims and Islam in the West. The Western governments make such rules which misjudge Muslims and the Arab world in general ([Said, 1979, p. xix](#)). Additionally, they hire nationwide and global media to sell their

fraudulent policies. The media plays its role in directing and dictating public opinion. Western public is swayed through repetitive falsehood that Arabs and Muslims are a danger to the liberty of the West and the harmony of the world (Aswad, 2013). [Said \(1979\)](#) argues:

Those [Western] sectors have the power and the will to propagate that particular image of Islam, and this image, therefore, becomes more prevalent, more present, than all others. ... this is done through the workings of a consensus, which sets limits and applies pressures ([Said 1997, p. 144](#)).

Literature certainly plays a vital role in developing a certain narrative, and that is true when it comes to the Islamic world. Fictional writer, argues Said, has always helped define the boundaries between 'good' and 'bad', 'us' and 'them' ([Said, 1979, p. 3](#)). This is even more accurate in the case of targeting the Muslim world as [Said \(1997\)](#), in *Covering Islam*, states that the issue is

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that Islam has not only been continually misinterpreted but also misjudged by the West unremittingly. The falsification has found its way, as Said puts it, “Islam represents not only a formidable competitor but also a late-coming challenge to Christianity” (Said, 1997, p. 4). Ever since the phase of the Crusades, Islamic areas such as the Arab and Ottoman empires had numerous armed conflicts with Europe and were quite effective in paralyzing Europe. The image of Muslims, which runs globally, is the creation of copious efforts of the West (el-Asward, 2013).

The purpose of an orientalist, states Said (1979), has always been to work as an impartial figure. An orientalist, when he expresses the orient, presents himself as a narrator. As Said (1979) puts it:

The orientalist can imitate the orient without the opposite being true. What he says about orient is, therefore, to be understood as a description obtained in a one-way exchange: as they spoke, he observed and wrote down. His power was to have existed amongst them like a native speaker and also as a secret writer (Said, 1979, p. 160).

So, though an orientalist writer acted as a narrator, in reality, he was narrating that would be considered something useful but not for the natives, rather for the Western audiences. As Said (1979), states ‘...what he wrote was intended as useful knowledge, not for them, but for Europe and its various disseminative institutions’ (p. 160). The purpose of an orientalist has never been to use this knowledge of natives in favour of locals; rather, it has been used to exploit the natives through institutions. An orientalist has always continued this interpretation that he just tells what he says. He is always a narrator, an impartial spectator who is not a true declaration. It has always been a conflicting case (Moosavi, 2015). An orientalist sees, he witnesses; he assesses; he moulds into something he likes and dislikes, and then he presents it to the rest of the world. Said (1979) further presented his views by asserting that the representation of the orient has a long history.

The orient, states Said (1979), was made orient as it was imagined (p. 6). West has been powerful to represent and depict Islam, argues Uhlmann (2015), which is why violence is associated with the term Muslim fundamentalism.

The problem elucidates Said (1979), is that most of the Muslim fiction writers study in the

West, and they are filled with the ideas that their region, culture, religion, and custom are backward and uncivilized. Later on, these diaspora writers tell their people about their backwardness and savagery; such people are ‘native informant’ as they please their trainers who have enlightened them (Said 1979, p. 322). Said further (1979) asserts that it has ‘...successfully accommodated to new imperialism’ (p. 322).

This, argues Said (1979), puts Muslim scholar in a situation where he is unable to sustain his ideas; rather, he develops and validates Western narrative in depicting and representing their land and people. Spivak (1990) discusses the native informant as someone who has indigenous knowledge and erases the trace of his past and his origin. Hamid Dabashi (2011) further elaborates the idea of ‘native informant’, which is perfectly applicable to the intellectuals of Arab and Muslim origin.

The term ‘native informer’ was used by Dabashi (2011) in his prominent work *Brown Skin White Mask*, in which he exposes the reality of diaspora author. These ‘native informers’ serve the agenda of their imperialist masters in occupation, oppression, persecution, exploitation and loot by propagating Muslims as uncivilized, backward, and less human and paving the way for their narrative of the civilizing mission. Through their narrative, these authors maintain imperialists’ power and dominance – both politically and economically – over the Muslim world.

Dabashi (2011) further elucidates that today’s world is more colonized than it ever was as the dominant countries maintain their dominancy through capitalism with a narrative produced in the literature that serves their agenda. And to maintain their dominancy, they seek the services of native informers, and they are used as tissue paper; once they do the job, then they are thrown away (p. 37).

In this regard, Hanif’s (2018) *Red Birds* are studied, and one can find a negative image of Muslims, their religion, and cultural practices and norms. The setting of the novel is a Refugee Camp that has been abandoned by Americans. Though the location is unnamed, the people, their religious and cultural practices hint toward somewhere between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The author, Mohammed Hanif, voices his prejudices through various characters in the

novel. These characters constantly mock Muslims and their religion. Furthermore, they, on many occasions, belittle cultural practices and refer to the local people as ungrateful and uncivilized.

Research Question

This study seeks to answer the following question:

Q 1: How are Muslims presented in *Red Birds* (2018), keeping in view their religion and culture?

Literature Review & Research Methodology

The concept or idea of representation is the way of presenting something to the world to express something eloquently regarding it ([Markman, 2013](#)). Due to the particular belief of an individual, the adherent of other religions discriminates and treat a particular group, state, organization, or entity ([Saroglou, Yzerbyt, & Kaschten, 2011](#)) unequally. Besides this, Wyngarden et al. (2011) state that religious stereotyping is the act of differentiating groups of people based on their faith, and they are treated unequally.

According to a study conducted by Rivera et al. (2012), the concept of Islamophobia discussed as the hatred, biases, and fear of Islam and Muslims is based on the geopolitical sources and the propagation of terrorism. In addition to the above-discussed study, Howarth et al. (2012) stated that Muslims are not allowed to practice their religion in countries. Western countries with Islamophobic tendencies have the concept that Muslim women in *hijab* are threats to peace and harmony in their society. France banned wearing *hijab* in 2011, and Austria also banned wearing *hijab* in 2017 legally (BBC, 2018). Additionally, the already misrepresented image of Islam as a religion has been intensified with the contribution of literature ([Coles & Hassan, 2018](#); [Pratt, 2016](#); [Jung, 2017](#)). Under this, the contrasting reviews of Postcolonial writers have yielded a debatable aspect of Islam in the literature ([Beydoun, 2016](#); [Ahmed, 2018](#); [Farooq & Ali, 2017](#); Walker, 2015; [Jung, 2017](#)).

The memories of the terrorist attack marked as 9/11 have been influencing the representation of Islam in the Western region under a negative umbrella. Zaidi & Sahibzada (2018) reveals through discourse analysis of H.M Naqvi's novel *Home Boy* that Pakistanis living in the US are deprived of the rights of citizenship after the Twin

Tower attack. Their in-depth analysis presents a bleak picture of the US political stances and the way these political statements and policies affect Muslims in the US as well.

Both the films and the novels mainly are produced and written from an American viewpoint, and the emphasis is on the traumas of Americans post 9/11 attacks. The producers and the authors have adopted the Neo-orientalist approach, which serves the agenda of the West. They have primarily targeted Islam as a religion that begets terrorism. The characters of the novels *Falling Man* (2007) and *The Blind Man's Garden* (2013) depicted as terrorists, evil, and represented.

Waheed & Muqaddas (2019) discusses Nadeem Aslam's novel *Maps for Lost Lovers*, in which the diaspora author has unjustly condemned Islam and the cultural practices prevailing in Pakistan. The concept of divorce in Islam is ridiculed, and he is in favour of allowing freedom to men and women to fulfil their sexual desires freely. He proves himself to be one of the many native informers. Being a native, he does not represent justly.

The term stereotype represents clustered storage regarding a domain ([Coles and Hassan, 2018](#)). In other words, the view of a certain entity is generalized to the entire population to which that entity belongs. Similarly, Muslims in the entire world encounter the problem of being stereotyped as a terrorist due to misrepresentation by certain groups of people who set negative examples of Islamic rules ([Razick et al., 2016](#)). In this regard, media has been contributing immensely to painting a negative image of Muslims in the entire world. Provided, the intensive and extensive reach of media quantifies the strengthening of the negativity towards Muslims ([Pearce & Lewis, 2019](#)).

The impact of the misrepresented image of Muslims in the world and the promotion of Islamophobia has threatened the lives of Muslims ([Ahmed, 2018](#)). For instance, Muslims all over the world are viewed as terrorists and treated inhumanely. Moreover, from recent surveys, it has been highlighted that only 15% of Americans consider Muslims have a positive influence on society; whilst 37% hold a contrasting view of Muslims and their practices ([Rauf, 2016](#)). Likewise, half of the American believes that Islam is the promoter of violence in society more than any

other religion ([Anushiravani & Khademi, 2015](#)). In response, the lives of Muslims are under threat by different dominant groups in society, where Muslim women have even encountered attacks for wearing the *hijab* (Ali et al., 2015). Thus native Muslims are facing a constant threat in living a normal life in the Western world.

The main aim of the literature review is to provide background support for the content of [Hanif's \(2018\)](#) novel, *Red Birds*. It is observed from the study that before representing any religion, it is necessary to study the religion and understand it deeply. Forged representation of any religion can lead to destructive consequences. In history, multiple tragedies occurred due to the false representation of the religions. Prejudice and discrimination based on religious beliefs lead to false representation and conflicts among the communities. In addition to this, religious stereotyping is the act of a differentiating group of people based on their faith, and they are treated unequally; and it is common in the West, where Muslims are considered as terrorists, and Islamophobia is common.

Methodology

This study is qualitative and exploratory because it uses textual and contextual analysis of the selected text. The textual analysis method in communication research defines and deduces the structure, content, and functions of the messages contained in texts. Specific kinds of texts are selected in textual analysis, and it defines different approaches to utilize for the analysis of a text ([Mckee, 2001](#)).

The research includes several steps of the text analysis. Initially, the researcher closely studied the novel, *Red Birds* (2018) to gather the related parts of the text and scanning the text comprehensively to apprehend the projected message and meaning. Afterwards, the collected primary and secondary text was classified for a more concentrated method textually and contextually. The primary and secondary data were then categorized into two parts based on the research question of the study. Thirdly, the selected text was analyzed through specific aspects of the selected theory and also the already designed theoretical framework. A pattern was explored and established by categorizing different themes that completed the theoretical framework. Lastly, after the identification of the different

themes, their relationships were established, the text was interpreted and analyzed, and findings were listed. These key findings helped to establish the conclusion of the research.

Textual Analysis

One of the aspects of Orientalism, according to [Said \(1979\)](#), is the depiction of women who are labelled as foolish beings (p. 208). When Momo gathers Major Ellie, Lady Flowerbody and Father Dear and they go to Hangar Base where Momo's missing brother Bro Ali is supposed to be locked by the Americans, he finds that his mother is doing nothing useful to help the cause and she is only, in the words of [Hanif \(2018\)](#) "...she [Mother Dear] insisted on carrying her old-fashioned one with ninety-nine beads, one bead for God's every name. Cheap, plastic beads on a nylon string are not going to win us any victories" ([Hanif, 2018, p. 146](#)). [Hanif \(2018\)](#), through Momo, shows his disbelief in divine help that prayers cannot achieve anything positive. It is rather your efforts that will yield positive results, and in this case, Momo is trying his best to find out his lost brother, Bro Ali. [Hanif \(2018\)](#) dismisses the idea of divine help that reciting Allah's names will not help Mother Dear [Momo's mother] in bringing back her son, Bro Ali as [Said \(1979\)](#) argues that for Westerners such as Flaubert, the Orient woman is purely exotic, incapable of saying anything profound and is rather objectified (p. 188). For this purpose, [Hanif \(2018\)](#) reiterates that Mother Dear, a Muslim woman, is only praying, and that is all she could do as she practically knows nothing and that her praying is fruitless as Momo continues: "*What does she recite on it? God this and God that, God up and God down, God above our heads and God under our beds, God in lovers' hearts*" ([Hanif, 2018, p. 246](#)).

[Said \(1979\)](#) in *Orientalism* states that Muslims' way of life is what has been portrayed by scholars. These scholars, though they outwardly present themselves as neutral, they are representing everything according to their understanding. In this regard, [Hanif \(2018\)](#) depicts that Muslims name their shops after Allah, and then they use it as a marketing tool to promote their products and gain the trust of customers.

The store owner of Allah's Servant's Fresh Chicken and Veggies waves him away. _No bad potatoes today. It's not the season.' I sniff some chicken feathers. The doctor pretends as if he

hasn't heard. The doctor has heard the call of the apocalypse. We survived the bombs, but we are not going to survive our own greed, he is always saying, always warning us about the perils of plastic bags and processed proteins. He has seen doomsday, and he is not going to pay attention to a lowly trader who uses God's name to sell vegetables and chicken ([Hanif, 2018, p. 172](#)).

Major Ellie, an American pilot, who tries to bomb the Refugee Camp but fails, now lives in the camp, and he states on numerous occasions that he was told in Culture Sensitivity Courses about people of this region, their culture, norms, and religious practices. He mocks locals on numerous occasions based on his preconceived notions. He says that he remembers being told in Cultural Sensitivity Course that "...*There are many reasons that they [Muslims] hate us, and one of those reasons is our love for our pets...*" (p. 88). Major Ellie does not like to be treated badly. He thinks that he is being treated badly in the camp. He says that "*We were told in our module that you can take local brews and local lovers but don't try the poison of native religious practices*" (p. 140). He was told that "*The more ridiculous a religious practice, the more respect you must show towards it*" (Hanif, 2018, p. 140). [Saïd \(1979\)](#) has discussed these preconceived notions about Muslims and Islam in *Orientalism*. He argues that this production of knowledge [about Muslims and Islam] creates an image of Muslims and Islam. Western public is swayed through it, and they believe whatever they are told (p. xxvi).

Major Ellie was rescued by Momo, a teenager and the resident of the Refugee Camp. Though he is only fifteen years old, yet he drives a jeep which is a surprise for Major Ellie as he says, "What I really want to ask him is *why the fuck aren't you at school?*" (Hanif, 2018, p. 89). The statement is ironical in the sense that though Major Ellie is now bothered about Momo's education, while on the other hand a week earlier he tried to bomb the people of the same Refugee Camp, including Momo, in the first place. The author is manifesting what [Dabashi \(2011\)](#) stated that the diaspora authors, such as Hanif (2018), develop a narrative where an American pilot is worried about the future of a young Muslim boy as if to tell the world that these neo-imperialists are destroying, attacking, and bombing you but they are doing it for your own good (p. 18).

When Momo, along with Major Ellie, reaches the Refugee Camp, he announces proudly that he stole the first brick of the boundary wall of the Refugee Camp. "*This place is full of thieves*" (p. 13) and that "*...you don't know these people, my people. When it comes to stealing, they are artist*" (p. 13), which again confirms Saïd's (1979) point that after native informant's training in Western institutions, he is used to maintaining Western culture dominance by pointing out flaws – whether real or imaginary – in his own indigenous culture (p. 324). [Hanif \(2018\)](#) further dismisses his people by saying that "*These people, my people, they nothing but thieves with tears...these people are rude, they have no shame...*" (p. 20).

[Hanif \(2018\)](#) does not stop here and further dissects with biasness that —Others loitering around the square and drunks...men pimping their wives for a half a bottle of moonshine! (p. 27). For Hanif (2018), the people living in the Refugee Camp, who are Muslims, have no character as they have no morals and no civic sense, thus depicting them as savages and uncivilized. Hanif (2018), through Major Ellie, shows disgust at his people for being thankless as they are given opportunities, they are fed, taken care of by their masters [USAID]. Major Ellie observes that:

...[These] People [natives] who had not left their little hamlets for centuries, goatherds who believed in nothing but grassy fields and folk music, women who had never walked beyond the village well, now they could all go and live in US tents, eat exotic food donated by USAID and burp after drinking fizzy drinks (Hanif, 2018, p. 32-33).

As Dabashi (2011) stated that one of the roles of native informers is to decode his own culture, so Hanif (2018) is calling his own people 'cavemen' with no etiquette, having seen nothing in the modern world. Since they have never had the opportunity to enjoy facilities, they should be thankful and content with what they have.

Major Ellie spends the night at Momo's home where he hears *Azan* [call for morning prayers], and he expresses that "*It seems the person calling out to the people has been dragged out of bed and wants to get back to sleep*" (Hanif, 2018, p. 140). For Hanif (2018), the idea of getting up early is foolish as he further states that:

I observe all this activity [people going to Morning Prayer] and wonder about the sanity of a culture where people start doing stuff at a time of

a day when stars are still burning bright when you cannot even see the next person's face properly. (Hanif, 2018, p. 141)

Hanif (2018) confuses religious practices with cultural practices. For Hanif (2018), this practice of starting your day early is insane. By Hanif's (2018) logic, day-to-day activities should start when everything is visible to the naked eyes. [Said \(1979\)](#) reiterated that fiction writers play their role in promoting the representation of Islam and the Muslim world through which Western people are convinced that Islam and its religious practices are radical, hostile, and extreme ([Said, 1979, p. 13](#)). For [Said \(1979\)](#), the purpose of such narrative is purely didactic (p. 67) and that the orientalist, whether he is a poet or scholar, portray the orient from his point of view. He presents it to the Western world on the basis of his own understanding; he speaks for him, and the orient is always silent (p. 20-21).

For [Dabashi \(2011\)](#), native informers have adopted a different approach to avoid criticism from their own people. He states that —...the function of comprador intellectual is to oblige by wiping out all the national histories and providing an entertaining story to fill the vacuum and so cover up the burglary! (p. 75) and Hanif (2018) has done exactly that by not revealing the region in *Red Birds*. We are time and again reminded about the location of the Refugee Camp that —...this place may look poorer than Afghanistan, and more violent than Sudan...! (p.65). Hanif (2018) sometimes hints that the Refugee Camp is somewhat nearer to Pakistan as he mentions that —...when the signal is good you catch bits of Nat Geo Xtra and *Capital Talk*" (p. 16). *Capital Talk* is a political show hosted by Hamid Mir on Geo News in Pakistan. But this does not prove anything about the region as Momo corrects Major Ellie's presumption about his background. Momo tells Major Ellie that —...Who told you that I'm an Arab?! (p. 90). The names of the characters' are abstract as well. The Muslim characters are Father Dear, Mother Dear, Momo, and Bro Ali. The shop owner does not have a name he is rather called —The store owner of Allah's Servant's Fresh Chicken! (p. 172). Through this strategy, Hanif (2018) tries to evade criticism, so he does not mention any specific region and country. [Dabashi \(2011\)](#) states about such strategy that —The native informers demonstrate the factual dementia of reality, the overcoming of facts by visual fantasy upon a spectacular stage...! (p. 92). Native

informers use various tactics to avoid criticism and at the same time malign their own religion and culture. They feed the global hatred for Islam, say [Dabashi \(2011\)](#).

Conclusion

The study of Hanif's (2018) novel *Red Birds* revealed that the author had continued the stereotypical representation of Muslims, their culture, rituals, and custom. The way Hanif (2018) has depicted, presented, and distorted the image of Muslims, has validated [Said's \(1979\)](#) arguments, as stated in the introductory chapter of *Orientalism*, that the knowledge produced about Muslims is mostly political and is used to Orientalize them. Hanif (2018), throughout his novel, used all the major characters as his mouthpieces to generalize Islam, Muslims, their culture, and norms. Though he tries to hide behind the abstractness as he did not disclose the location of the Refugee Camp, he certainly makes some assumptions when it comes to Islam. Hanif (2018) presented. Major Ellie often observes and comments on the culture and religion of the refugees living in the Refugee Camp. He questions the sanity of a culture where daily activities begin when people are unable to recognize each other faces. Hanif (2018) makes it clear that these practices are outdated and do not belong to the modern world.

Construct distinguishing facts between fundamentalists and Muslims: terrorism, violence and fundamentalism have no religion as no spiritual being belief in promoting violence and disturbance. Therefore, it is recommended to the authors point out this fact and distinguish between believers and non-believers of Islam. It is also recommended for writers not to promote backward portrayals of Muslims. Highlight facts of Muslim contributions to the world. Once the negativity is stopped, it is also recommended to the writers to exhibit the positive contributions made by Muslims to the world. This practice will also assist Muslims in gaining their reputational association with society other than just being criticized. [Said \(1997\)](#), in this regard, proposes in *Covering Islam* that —...the production and diffusion of knowledge [about religion and region] will play an absolutely crucial role... (p. 161). But until and unless we used this knowledge for the greater good of humanity, affairs will further deteriorate.

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