



RESEARCH PAPER

A Postmodern Quest to Reconstruct Human Ties: A Nostalgic Desire for Reality in an Era of Simulation in *Red Birds* by Muhammad Hanif

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DOI [http://doi.org/10.47205/plhr.2021\(5-II\)1.20](http://doi.org/10.47205/plhr.2021(5-II)1.20)

PAPER INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Received: June 08, 2021</p> <p>Accepted: September 20, 2021</p> <p>Online: September 25, 2021</p> <p>Keywords: Exploration Reconstruction, Red Birds, Simulation, War-Stricken,</p> <p>*Corresponding Author Bushra.shoukat@iub.edu.pk</p>	<p>This research aims at exploring the unknown postwar country with desert. This is a quest to reconstruct human ties and a desired past and reality in an era of simulation by a well-known author, <i>Muhammad Hanif in his text Red Birds</i>. In the novel, the writer does not only satirize the hypocrisy of the civilized society by making the statement that these people first create unrest and chaos by bombs and then send their experts to study the young Muslim minds. The text <i>Red Birds</i> will analyze the dirty politics of Americans over an unknown Muslim country in the desert. The theoretical framework of this research is Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulation which was used as a lens for the analysis of war-stricken, displaced people who are forced to live in camps, about their missing dear ones and the brutality of Americans with different signs and symbols which will convey the dark desires of Americans.</p>

Introduction

Red Birds is the third prize-winning text of 2018. Muhammad Hanif, the author of the book is known as a British-Pakistani writer who belongs to Okara, Pakistan. He graduated from Pakistan Air Force Academy as a pilot and joined a career as a journalist. He has written plays for the stage and screen, including a critically acclaimed BBC drama. His first novel "A case of exploding mangoes" was published in 2008. It was shortlisted for the Booker Prize, His second novel, our lady of Alice Bhatti, won the Welcome Book Prize. *Red Birds* is his third novel and published in 2018 about a landscape in a desert. Hanif is known as "The brightest voice (Guardian). The text *Red Birds* is about war, family, love, and the absurdity of postmodern time. This text presents a dark picture of the ferocity of Americans over Muslims in a satirical tone. The text will shed light on the violence, Resentment, and devastation caused by the war with comic scenes. M. Hanif proves his success in mixing two opposing

elements; the comic and the tragic together, and gives a beautiful fabricated sense to his readers. "What is evident though is that something profound has been at work the whole time: a Kafkaesque doubleness of purpose, with one structural absurdity couched within other" (Hanif.2018). The narrative is in the first person. The novel is a postwar traumatic account and about a tumultuous family. The novel starts with an American soldier, major Ellie, a bombardier who has crashed his plane in an unknown desert of an unknown country. Ellie got stranded in that desert for eight days without food and water and there, he came across with the fear of death. Ellie is rescued by Momo another important character of the story. The novel is a true representation of the postmodern world. In the desert, he sees many mirages. The things seem real to him but as he reaches there, finds it mere a shadow. Then he reached a refugee camp, which he was supposed to bomb. The place was very filthy, contrary to his expectations. The dirty place shows how war is real and destructive. He comes across with a real picture of the war-torn landscape. He finds himself in an uncertain world, a hellish world with his hellish existence. He has to live with the people he sent to kill. The family consists of three members, father dear, mother dear, momo a fifteen years old boy, and momo's dog mutt, Hanif presents this dog, not as an animal rather as a character with a more philosophical mind than humans in the story he is narrating not only the important incidents and events, but the inner thoughts of the characters as well. "With his fried mind" (Hanif.2018) the story sheds light on the human relationships after the war and we can see a deep desire of many characters for the past when they were happy with their families. Bro Ali has suddenly disappeared on the very first day of his work, and there is a rumor of his being sold to Americans. "People tell me bro Ali was sold, bro Ali had no idea he was being sold. He thought he was being offered contractual employment at the Hangar with guaranteed employment; most bright school graduates think life is contractual employment. I think life is a business opportunity" (Hanif 15) Momo tells about his business plans and he talks about his business deals and the percentage, as "I find the solutions to the problems that grown-up have" (Hanif 17) But the after-effects of war he has to face in an imbalanced economic system, " some might say I am a bad entrepreneur, a post-war profiteer, a petty black marketer, and I am gonna tell you that is jealousy speak" (Hanif 17) The entire book is full of different images, signs, and symbols which convey us an idea not only about postmodern age but also about post-war fragmented relationships and anxieties of human beings. The callousness and brutality of Americans are evident in the text. Mutt is an important character of this novel and has a good observation about humans. This postmodern text discusses the problems of existence and there is a quest of a mother for her lost son, Ellie's exploration of war trodden landscape and his hatred and loathing towards the people and their culture. White man's supremacy, hatred towards eastern, and treachery are some important features of this text. This text poses some questions for a researcher.

Theoretical Framework

This research report is qualitative and inductive which comprises the material taken from critical books as well as online articles to improve its reliability. The primary text is "The Red Birds" and the secondary sources are online articles from the

Journal stores and journals. Jean Baudrillard's theory of "simulation" or "simulacra" has been taken to support this research work. According to this concept of Baudrillard, what has happened in the postmodern age is that reality is left behind and we are now living in the age of simulations which is the mere copy of the "real". We are relying on some prototypes which make us far away from reality; even reality itself has started imitating these prototypes. According to Baudrillard, when we talk about postmodern simulation and simulacra, it remains no longer a question of imitation, not of lampoon. It becomes a question of exchanging the signs of the real for the real. On another hand, Baudrillard is not only signifying that postmodern culture is artificial and it demands from us some sense of recognition between reality and artificiality. Here the point of the writer is that according to his point of view we have lost the ability to distinguish between natural and artificial. To make his ideas valid, he maintains that there are three "orders of simulacra" one in the first order of simulacra, which he links with the pre-modern time, the image is a clear copy of the real; the image is predicted as just an artifice; In the second order of simulacra, which Baudrillard associates with the industrial revolution of the 19th century, the divisions between the image and the illustration begin to break down because of bulk production of copies. Such productions distort and mask an underlying reality by copying it so well, thus threatening to ideology; though there is still a conviction that, through analysis or effective political action, we can still access the hidden facts of the real; thirdly, at this stage simulacra, makes its association with the postmodern age, we are challenged with a procession of simulacra; that is, demonstration leads and determines the real. There is not any division between reality and its depiction; there is only the simulacrum. To authenticate his arguments, Baudrillard addresses many points and explains this loss of dissimilarity.

Baudrillard points to several things to explain this loss of distinctions between real and simulacrum. The very first point which he discusses is Media culture, in which television, magazine, and the internet are included, and through media, it becomes very easy to approach each other through media images. Now we want to get goods, not for the real need but these things become our desire and keep us away from reality and the world which surrounds us.

2. Exchange-Value. According to Karl Marx, we are living in a capitalist postmodern society, and now we have stopped to think the goods in terms of their use-value, which means in the terms of real use instead we have started considering things in terms of their worth, and term of exchange value. We have started measuring things and as a result, things lost their material reality. According to Baudrillard, in the postmodern age, we have lost all sense of use-value.

3. Multinational capitalism. In this postmodern age, capital determines our identities. Because the things we use in our daily life are the product of complex manufacturing procedures, we have lost touch with the originality of the goods we consume. According to Baudrillard, We are losing touch with the material fact of the laborer, a common example of this is the fact that most consumers do not know how

the products they consume are related to real-life things. How many people could identify the actual plant from which is derived the coffee bean? Starbucks, by contrast, increasingly define our urban realities.

4. Urbanization, as in modern times there is continuous developments in the geographical sites, as a result, human is equally losing touch with the natural world. Even natural places are now assumed as “endangered,” which means that they are defined in contradistinction to a metropolitan “reality” signs and symbols point out that how “real” they are.

5. Language and Ideology. Baudrillard elucidates how in such delicate ways language keeps us away from interpreting “reality” According to the previous understanding of ideology was that it veiled the truth, that it represented a “false consciousness”. This interpretation of ideology parallels Baudrillard's second order of simulacra. Postmodernism, on the other hand, understands ideology as the sustenance for our very awareness of reality. We are so dependent on language, to structure our views; every illustration of reality is always already ideological, and constructed by simulacra.

Red Bird's text is following the pattern of Baudrillard's concepts of simulation and simulacra. The novel has many signs and symbols which are indicating the underlying structure of things. The picture presented in this novel is based on simulations; the novel is not just about the war but about the discerning mind and frustration of war. The speeches are incompetently based on reiteration; this is the failure of language and nature. Capitalist society in this book and the character of Momo tell the readers the importance of money. He wants to get more profit and aspires to become a successful businessman. As in these words, the writer says, "They used to say time is money. They were right. My time is gonna make you money. One day that's gonna change" (Hanif 145). Major Ellie seems like a deserted soldier but he is more than this. In reality, he has some secret mission. Everyone is in search of truth and truth lies somewhere else. The whole novel is full of ironic statements and truly represents the postmodern dilemma. Americans are at war with the people of the desert to make their capital more powerful. There are mirages in the desert as well, which are symbolic of the difference between real and what seems real.

Literature Review

Literature always plays a vital role in developing the narratives in fiction. The novel is set in a Refugee camp abandoned by the American army. The location is not known but it seems from the hint in the novel that this is an area between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Hanif voiced against the prejudices of numerous Americans in this fiction.

“When I look up, I see people cashing in. I don't see heaven or saints or angels. I see people cashing in on every decent impulse and every human tragedy.” So says John Yossarian, the bombardier protagonist of Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, a work to

which Mohammed Hanif's Man Booker's long-listed first novel, *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*, was widely compared. Like Heller, British-Pakistani Hanif is a pilot turned satirist; but it is his third novel, *Red Birds*, that is the closest relative to Heller's classic satire of the Second World War". According to the analysis of Heller's definition of "Red Birds," it is a story of tragedy, a never-ending tragedy that is hovering in the minds of the people in a never-ending desert. So this novel *Red Birds* is more relevant to Heller's *Catch 22*, a satirical account of the war. As it is said for Hanif,

"Hanif is Pakistan's Joseph Heller, this is his *Catch 22* and it is almost as bad"

As Plato said about war,

"Only the dead have seen the end of war" (Plato)

"*Red Birds*" are real. The reason we do not see them is that we do not want to because if we see them, we will remember. When someone dies in a raid or shooting or when someone's throat is slit, their last drop of blood transforms into a tiny red bird and flies away. When we think we have forgotten them when we think we have learned to live without them when we utter that stupid word that we have 'moved on' it is just a reminder that they may have gone but they have not left reality yet" (Hanif 84).

"The air is filled with red birds, Hanif says. "This is not a case of exploding mangoes; it could not be but it reminds you what a magnificent writer Hanif is". (Jerry Pinto). Hanif proves himself a brilliant writer and portrays all the happenings of war with profound observation. He is highlighting the feelings of victims of a war that they have already lost their past, present, and future are unknown to them in this devastating situation what, and where to move on is their question. The American planes are hovering in the sky and creating unrest among the masses. As Mutt says about these red birds, "These red birds worry me. They are everywhere what worries me, even more, is that nobody seems to be able to do anything about them" (Hanif 81). Sadness becomes the fate of all the characters in the novel. "Sadness does not worry me. Sadness is practically my sibling in this household" (Hanif 82)

"*Red Birds* begins well, with Hanif's trademark sarcasm, and after that, it falls flat. I liked the basic idea, a satire on America's recent wars, which rely heavily on aerial bombardment". "A surrealist tale is seen through the eyes of three characters: US airman Ellie, who crash-lands in the desert, a 15-year-old teenager Momo living in a bombed-out refugee camp, and his dog Mutt. It has some very comic passages as Hanif cleverly intersperses the story of how Ellie is brought into Momo's family compound with the cognitive dissonance of two uncomprehending cultures". (Will Ansbecher 2019). As Ellie makes fun of Eastern culture that's the extent of my deception by saying, "Humans are different. If they want to make babies, instead of humping each other they will invite the whole village, feed them, tell them about their noble intentions, then go hide in a room and tries to make babies. When they fight evil they become evil" (Hanif 100).

“The irony of war for peace or even democracy has struck this world over and over again. The hypocrisy of countries such as America, UK, Russia, and France when it comes to wars and conflict in Palestine, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Latin American countries, and African countries is crystal clear to those who are the receiving end of it and those who are witnessing it. But unfortunately, it is openly ignored by a large percentage of the population in the countries mentioned above. That is because they are made to believe by their governments that these wars are necessary, that their armies are knights in shining armors saving hungry children and emancipating women. But the reality is miles away from that”. The western nations always have the intention to subjugate the rich lands of the Middle East and Asia, to fulfill their greediness they make false claims that wars are for the benefit of these people as these nations want to save the masses from hunger and want to train them but the reality is different. They want to occupy the rich lands for their own sake. As Mutt says, “Oh the human duplicity” (Hanif 50) According to Baudrillard’s theory of Simulacra, “This is not how the distribution of wealth works in post-war economies” (Hanif 53)

“This book brings you that reality. The satire goes through your heart and wakes you up if you have been blind to the chaos and madness that post-war organizations like USAID introduce into a place already torn down by an unnecessary war”. This USAID was an organization to deceive the victims of war; they claim to provide rations, injections, grains to refugees. “First they bomb us from skies, then they work hard to cure our stress” (Hanif 2018).

“With Mutt the all-knowing dog, Momo a lost teenager in a desert fraught by war, a mother awaiting her lost son, a father unable to accept the reality, a lost American pilot who was posed to bomb the very camp he has landed in, and a researcher trying to piece stories together; this book will make you laugh and crying with sadness at the same time The deadpan irony is delivered in a razor-sharp narrative” (Surabhi Chatarpathi, 2018). All these characters not only unveiling the details about war and destruction but also tells about history, economy, politics, religion, binary cultures, human nature, and most important of all the feelings of a mother who is waiting for her missing son and ready to do anything for him. The text has multiple perspectives. In addition, there is a continuous quest to get all lost things back including humans is the motive here in the postmodern age, where reality lies somewhere else.

Discussion and Analysis

Red Birds, a fantastic, dark comedy is a satirical account of American war policy. The narrators are narrating the details in the first person. In the desert, the story highlights the aftermaths of war and the problem of existence in a chaotic world. The war stopped but the fear of war in the minds of people continued. America’s excuse for the war is, “ We are fighting this war and the previous war and the ones budgeted for next year to bring some of these freedoms to the other parts of the world” (Hanif 161). The bombings have stopped but there are some rumors about the stoppage of

bombs, as bro Ali is suddenly disappeared and no one knows what the reason is. His younger brother Momo wants to retrieve his elder brother. "Hangar" becomes a source of attraction for all, as no planes are coming and going everything sealed. No one knows either Americans are residing in Hangar or they have left, momo believes that his brother Ali is being captive in Hangar for some purpose. Major Ellie an American soldier, another narrator of the story after stranded in the desert for eight days rescued by momo and brought to a camp, which he is supposed to bomb. The landscape Hanif chooses is an unending desert, which symbolizes the idea of unending war. Major Ellie becomes the first narrator of the novel and gives his views and ideas about binary cultures.

Ellie feels loathing with this culture of desert people and feels it very divergent from his own. He idealizes his norms and traditions and he feels how humans are different from them. He says, "I smile. A polite smile, culturally sensitive smile, which is supposed to mean I do understand but do not give a fuck" (Hanif 103). He sarcastically defines his supremacy over the natives by saying, "US government department to feed them, a five-star Hangar to protect them, all funded by my countrymen, by my taxes, to feed these guys, and now where is my food?" (Hanif 107). With his hallucinations, he recalls many past incidents in his life. He recalls his wife Cath. He wants to go back to his wife and wants to get out of her, he says, "My wife is depressed, I need to go home, please let me go" (Hanif 106). "Things are a bit slow here" (Hanif 108). He feels homesick. He says, "We need to inflict some more pain to make the original pain go away" (Hanif 121). He makes many comments about natives about their culture, their past, and their present awkwardness and says as; they are mean hosts, etc. He talks about the nothingness of life and feels his existence miserable and worse.

He was on a secret mission but lies he is a person of USAID, he has to live with the people whom he is supposed to kill. He says, "I have seen these places, these compounds with their clay ovens, in our simulations, but there were no hunger pangs in the simulations. As part of our Cultural Sensitivity program, they sent us on a halal cookery course" (Hanif 104). Moreover, he recalls his sessions and workshops. "To bomb or not to bomb, or as central command put it, "To be or not to be" (Hanif 105). In the novel past and present are mingled together, to give the sense of transformation of how present is savage, surreal, satiric, fragmented, and war-torn.

The novel sheds light on many issues as mentioned above the third world countries are trapped in religious disputes and lacking in development and this leads towards cultural deterioration. Hanif, effectively through dark humor exposes the evil doings of these countries. This is an account of the bitter realities of life; US war policy against the Middle East is the major focus of Hanif in this text. Hanif's excellent contribution in this regard is that he successfully mixes the comic and the tragic elements and gives his readers a beautiful mixture.

Momo is the second narrator of the story and views the insanity and hollowness of human behavior from outside. He can see that being a human he is

living in an inhuman world full of sorrow and misery. In the uncertain world, we are living but no one is anxious about his being. Then in this fragmented and war-torn world, he wants to become a rich person and want to find his lost brother Ali as well. He is more intelligent than his age; he is fifteen years old and can drive his jeep Cherokee efficiently. When lady flower's body tells about her thesis on "Young Muslim Minds" he starts looking for her real mission. He says, "She goes around the camp all day, clipboard in her hand, asking everyone, how you feel? What kind of researcher wants to know so much about feelings, what does she think anybody is gonna tell her about their real feelings" (Hanif 145). He always says "My land, my people" (Hanif 146). Momo was very concerned about the feelings of his natives. Momo talks about the artificiality of life in the word, "In real life, everybody is gonna talk and talk and only pull out our guns when we have run out of words" (Hanif 210). Here he highlights the situation of his relations to other people that are lacking in feelings and emotions.

Then there is a third narrator very philosophical and keen observer of not only the outside world but also can probe into the minds of others also. Mutt is the very important narrator who unveils very important incidents and tells about the meaningless existence of human beings. An electric shock makes him able to realize not only the world around him but his existence also. Mutt, most of the time remembers his past days and calls them the best days of his life. Mutt is although an animal he teaches his readers lifelong lessons. Hanif is at his best when he portrays an animal as more philosophical than a human being does. In mutt's words, "I am what they call stoic of nature but sometimes I bark and howl. But do, these people listen? This place is in shambles" (Hanif 24). At another place, he says, "Leave me alone to contemplate my miserable existence" (Hanif 24). Mutt claims that he can see ghosts, as only innocent children and animals can see supernatural creatures with innocent souls, "I saw red bird shoot up from the sand before the white man in green overalls rose out of the sand. I am not scared of ghosts but I do not like to hang out with them either" (Hanif 80). Then he refutes his statement and says, the ghosts are human being's creations and the result of their foolishness. As he says, "I do not believe in ghosts, they are invented by my human companions to console themselves that when you die, did you do not die" (Hanif 80). "The world is coming to an end, the bombs are going to start falling again, or the cat is eyeing the milk pot" (Hanif 82). Mutt has a sharp intellect and keen insight and can look the things beneath the surface. Mutt criticizes momo's intentions towards the safety measures plan and ironically says that "He is not going to take any sides. He is not interested in saving bro Ali; he is not interested in saving humanity. He wants to save the desert. He thinks that the desert is the source of life, and reminds us there are more than thirteen thousand species in the desert. Most of these species are poison disguised as life" (Hanif 221). Mutt does not believe in myths, all lies. He names the war as the fog of war in which one can lose his ability to see. Mutt analysis the sound of alarm from the Hangar, and says, " It is a shrill sound that stuns the morning birds, pierce through every mud wall, stirs everyone in their dreams, It is sound of thousand American dead soldiers screaming, then it rises in cacophony, like all the dead from their bombing, pulling, themselves

out of their graves" (Hanif 192). Mutt is very conscious about his surrounding as well as about all human beings. All philosophical underpinnings come from this character.

This text is full of signs and symbols, which provide the complete idea of the writer's motives. This is purely a postmodern text and all the characters are representatives of the postmodern dilemma. Their anxiety, hollowness, fragmentary minds, their inability to see reality, their concentration of false belief systems, all these qualities characterize the postmodern world. The signs frequently used by the writer are Edge, which is very important in conveying the postmodern idea of being at end of everything, the last line, then window, cave, dig, ditch, whole, hole, fog, and shadow. About edge, Mutt says, "I know he cannot take the pain away, but he can take the edge off it" (Hanif 117) "In addition to, "We were sitting on the edge of the pond" (Hanif 197). About fog, in this fog of war sometimes people do not know what they want" (Hanif 232) Further writer says, "He never thought all this clearing out was gonna leave a big hole in our lives" (Hanif 64). The symbol of the window is used to look into another side, or to look for the future. However, here in postmodern time, the present is chaotic and the future is uncertain. "Hundreds of windows and the silhouettes of people stuck in those windows" (Hanif 282)

Shadow becomes the most important sign of the postmodern age. According to Baudrillard's theory of simulation, in the postmodern age, all humanity is living with imitations, far from reality in the mere shadow of reality.

Conclusion:

Red Bird's novel is Muhammad Hanif's landmark in literature and it is a descriptive analysis of the Postmodern era with all its signs and symbols. The story is about the aftermaths of war, and in this devastating condition, the search for human love, true relations, and the search for reality seems inevitable. The search for the real is tedious and difficult. In this postmodern era, all humans need is reconstruction. This text also sheds light on "A postmodern quest to reconstruct human ties, which they have lost in this era of simulations. The world consists of images, symbols, signs, and replicas. The characters of Mutt, Momo, and Ellie are the mouthpieces of Hanif. Ellie is looking for reality in mirages, for Momo reality is imitation and instead of finding the meanings of his existence, he tries to find out the truth in a vast desert. He does not believe in human beings. "Mutt, Momo spat out the word like it was a bitter almond" (Hanif 54) Ellie is also unable to see the reality of things. Ellie says, "They took away my security badge, he says with such misery as if they took away his manhood along with his badge. Due to war, the people are homeless and displaced. Human relationships are getting more complicated in the postmodern age and we need to reconstruct these distorted ties with one another. In this war-torn situation, the past is idealized and everyone is recalling the memories. Past is looking here as an ordered and golden most of the time, although at some points Momo is not in favor of the past, he wants to make an association with the present world of America. However, mother dear recalls the past with happiness and tries to make her association with the past as her present is very bitter for her with the memory of her

lost son. She recalls the past and says to Momo that in past few people lived but they had love in their relations. Now we have a large number but feel lonely. Momo and Father dear have a problematic relationship with each other; momo thinks his father dear is responsible for the disappearance of Bro Ali. Towards the end of the Novel, Hanif exposes all character's real motives. Hangar again opens, mother dear and Momo discovers Ali in a miserable condition in Hangar. Ali says about their trick as they think I brought down their planes. They think that now they have no other way except to shut the Hangar, They consider me as a traitor. Ellie proves himself a treacherous American and disappears in the end. Mother dear's faith in Allah wins she finds her son Ali. Redbirds proves itself a truly postmodern document and the quest for lost ties is ended now after getting the sense of all signs and symbols. The present is unacceptable, the world is out of order because of war, anarchy is there and nothingness prevails every here.

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