



RESEARCH PAPER

Representation of Refugees after 9/11: A Critique of American Neo-Orientalism in Hanif's Red Birds

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Received: June 23, 2021 Accepted: September 22, 2021 Online: September 27, 2021 Keywords: Accident Counter-Narrative, Neo-Orientalism, Orient, Refugees, Representation, *Corresponding Author aurangzeb.eng@iub.edu.pk	This paper analyzes <i>Red Birds</i> as a representation of refugees in the context of post-9/11. Western discourse after the disaster of September 11, 2001, has created new stereotypes against the refugees. Employing Said's and Behdad's theoretical model, it investigates to reach the Neo-orientalist perspective. Said is of the view that western literature in stereotypical representation creates a prejudice against 'oriental' other especially the Muslim world. Behdad argues that Neo-Orientalism is a monolithic ideological discourse based on the renewed binaries of orient and occident especially America. Neo-Orientalism has recently emerged as the continuation of classical orientalism operating in the post-9/11 context. Pakistani English fiction counters American Neo-Orientalism. This paper explores the representation of refugees from a Neo-Orientalist perspective coupled with the creation of discursive stereotypes and political ideology as depicted in Hanif's <i>Red Birds</i> .

Introduction

American war on terror in the post-9/11 era reflects centuries old western bias against orients specially Muslims. There had been a power play of Neo-Orientalist ideology in the context of terror discourse after September 9, 2001. Post-9/11 representation of Islamic world in terms of Neo-Orientalism is pervading in the context of today's politics and media. Post-9/11 landscape continued to have a great impact on America's representation of and the relationship with the Muslim world. Since the 9/11 attacks on the Twin Towers of America, the fate of Muslims in the United States of America and all over the world has been altered altogether: they become the victims of repression and reduction, i.e. psychological violence and physical violence respectively. Muslim communities or refugees in the United States have become compelled to confront the dilemmas of identity crisis while facing

various strategies and influential discourses from American government and its people in the form of imprisonments, surveillance, banishments, arrests and the tag of terrorists in the logics of fighting against the War on Terror (Brinkerhoff, 2011). This indifference from the American government has been elaborated by Powell who argues that there were nearly 16,000 Pakistanis who shifted to Canada and other European countries or they considered it better to go back to their native homeland just because of the discrimination by the American government and its people (Powell, 2004, p. 11).

The recent emergence of Neo-Orientalism is the continuation of Orientalism operating within the post-9/11 context. Ali Behdad and Juliet A. Williams in their essay "On Neo-Orientalism Today" define Neo-Orientalism as "a mode of representation that, while indebted to classical Orientalism, engenders new tropes of *othering*. Neo-Orientalism entails a popular mode of representing, a kind of doxa about the Middle East and Muslims that is disseminated throughout the world" (Behdad & Williams, 2010, p. 6). In the war of ideas regarding the binaries of East and the so-called West, Neo-Orientalism has potentially revived the legacy of American and European idea of colonialism on Asian and African especially Muslim countries through distorted images of Islamic identity and integrity. Said (1978) states that all Western, American literature, and cultural representations reinforce prejudice against non-Western cultures, putting them in the category of the Oriental/or the "Other" (, p. 42). He states that the Orientalist thought forms an academic structure in which Islam is positioned as inferior of object of study because of western hostility and fear: "so far as the West is concerned, Islam represents not only a formidable competitor but also a late-coming challenge to Christianity" (p. 45). Neo-Orientalism holds a new ideologically motivated agenda to construct Islamophobia, intensified in post-9/11 scenario that has served to construct the image of the Neo-Orientalist image of the Muslim world, backward and inferior, violent and threatening.

Muslim refugees are also facing uncongenial circumstances because of their ethnicity and religion because of western indifference and discrimination. Powell discusses the lives of the left-behind Pakistanis who were psychologically tortured because they submitted complains against the American government through wiretapping e.g., being chased by the US agents (Powell, 2004, p. 13). Hall discusses the US government's callousness: after the 9/11 attacks the Office of the Inspector General of US appraised approximately 762 residents, who were detained and the Pakistanis were the largest in the custody, double the number of the detainees from the other countries of this world (Hall, 2005). Muslim refugees are left alone in their misery because of their being Muslim. The expats have to face imperialist extremism, identity problem and communication problem (Vertovec, 2004, p. 31). The consequent unemployment and failure of social adjustment result in broken marriages, the crisis of acculturation, and socio-psychic discorders. Asma Mansoor explores the difference of contemporary Asian-American dispersed women living in American society who struggle to establish individual identity by defying homogeneity in her article *Exploring Alternativism: South Asian Muslim Women's English Fiction* (p. 2).

Nausheen Pasha-Zaidi's first novel *The Colour of Mehndi* (2006) analyses the pathetic life of a young Pakistani American woman combating both mental depression and societal pressure, continuously struggling to continue her endless obligations to her community and her family and finally surrenders because her cries for help are ignored by her host society. Likewise Shaila Abdullah's debut novel, *Saffron Dreams* (2009), examines the impacts of 9/11 in the life of a young Pakistani American woman and the death of her husband and is persecuted by socio-cultural confrontations of being a single parent of a disable child (Cilano, 2013). Since the beginning of 21st century, Western discourse has presented the Muslims as religious aficionados, a threat to national and global safety. Abou-Eid argues that diaspora or refugee Muslims are prominently absent in the host social orders on the discriminatory basis of religious beliefs (Abou-Eid, 2013, p. 12). Because of the relocation narratives of Muslims into these Western nations, they have faced and still confronting the difficult challenges in the course of their everyday lives, especially in the United States (Ahmed, 2004, p. 2).

Islamophobia

"Islamophobia", first introduced in the 1910s (Delafosse, 1911, p. 10), is a neologism implying irrational fear of Islam and Muslims; it includes simple apprehension, fear, rejection, contempt, and hatred in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 events. The recent reappearance of the term underscores a new construction of Islam as a whole in the Western relationship with the Muslim world. Islamophobia is then a broad social phenomenon that should not be conflated with Western criticism of religions (Islamophobia, 1997; Mohammed, 2014), not reducible to a mere act of rejection. Mohammed (2014) thinks that the phenomenon is the consequence of the artificially constructed "Muslim problem" in European societies, a "problem" whose fundamental stake is to question "the legitimacy of Muslims presence" (légitimitéprésentielle des musulmans) there (par. 1). Mohammed thus restricts Islamophobia to a society-related and/or a nation-related issue solely linked to Muslim immigration and presence in Europe. He views Islamophobia as a phenomenon involving only its xenophobic promoters and Muslims in European societies. The ontological fear is essential neo-Orientalist component that drives Islamophobia. Guerlain (2013) says there is often confusion between whether Islamophobia is about the fear and hatred of Muslims because of their faith or because of their foreign origins. Since the term is sometimes confused and coupled with racial prejudice against the people of Arabic or Asian descent and cultures in Western societies. Mohammed and Guerlain shed light on the European domestic aspect of the phenomenon. In fact, through the Western neo-Orientalist prism, Islamophobia also operates towards the Muslim world in general. This ultimately leads to some kind of essentialization, targeted stigmatization, and stereotyping. The Western-centric vision of the Orient, Islam, and the Muslim world, perceived through the lens of a renewed Orientalism or neo-Orientalism, far from giving an accurate representation of Islam and Muslims, emphasizes exclusively on what are considered negative dimensions and components of the Islamic faith and culture, or the alleged behavior of the Muslims. Islamophobia is also a kind of xenophobia since it also represents Islam and

Muslims as elements extraneous and irreconcilable to the societies of the Western world (Islamophobia, 2010; Lowe, 1985, pp. 55–61). American and European neoconservatives and right-wing intellectuals such as Pipes (2003), Caldwell (2009), or Harris (2007) often try to make the case of this alleged incompatibility – and even threat – in their neo-Orientalist discourse, with ontological insecurity as a constitutive component. It is the vision of a Western world under siege and threatened in its culture, way of life, and identity. Heated disputes over the construction of a mosque, food preferences, veils, or long skirts, have fueled the subjective constructions of a threatening Muslim Other, one that is threatening Western culture and identity.

It is important to recast Islamophobia in a new theoretical framework being imposed for two decades by Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" thesis (1996), exacerbated by the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States and the emergence of a peculiar kind of political violence claiming to act on behalf of the Muslim faith. Since 2001, the subsequent "War on Terror" paradigm has been closely working in relation to often distorted understandings of the Muslim faith and peoples. Islamophobia is a complex phenomenon having world-wide echoes and consequences, functioning on reductionist cultural reading of Islam and Muslims, in Western societies or in the Muslim world.

Literature Review

The post-9/11 landscape has seen a renewed wave of Pakistani English fiction which has got vast international reception. This boom in Pakistani fiction in English has gone side by side with a renewed interest in representation and re-presentation of literature and human rights, especially in the current period of global tension. Mushtaq Bilal in *Writing Pakistan: Conversations on Identity, Nationhood and Fiction* states that traveling between Pakistan and the West has equipped Pakistani fiction writers to look at how Pakistan is stereotyped in the West and also how west is stereotyped in Pakistan and why it is important to undo these stereotypical and formulaic representations of both (Bilal, 2016, p. 3). The role of contemporary Pakistani fiction has been a valuable counter-narrative to dominant 9/11 writings in the West, and it traces its engagement in alternative history of the people of the direct or indirect victims of war on terror. David Waterman says that "fiction can never tell the whole story, as knowledge provided by fiction is different from historical knowledge" (Waterman, 2015, p.161), but still Pakistani post-9/11 writers duly present the powerful voice of orient *others* especially Muslims through their fiction that depicts the realities of historical experience. Mohammed Hanif in his *Red Birds* presents an American character, Ellie, who narrates his personal views regarding Neo-Orientalism and American imperialist dominant ideology. Hanif satirizes the absurdity of war and humanitarian intervention. Dina Nayeri, *The Guardian* reviewer, states that "Red Birds is an incisive, unsparing critique of war and of America's role in the destruction of the Middle East" (Oct. 10, 2018). She continues: "It is the photo-negative of the many south Asian novels that appear each year, all succumbing to the well-worn trope of melancholy eastern-sounding language paired with western

realism" (Oct 10, 2018). *Red Birds* presents "the dredges of a once flourishing warfare economy that dropped bombs and limitless aid supplies, provided local employment and wowed with heavily armoured military convoys," Aysha Raja reviews in *Dawn* (2018). Aditi Padiyar in *DNA India* see Momo in *Red Birds* as the prototype of a spirited Young Muslim Mind, mocks the Western researchers that collect grief in war-torn countries as badges of honor, a sentimental version of the 'White Man's Burden'. Tripathi (2018) analyses this novel under the lens of post 9/11 scenario around this globe and expresses that *Red Birds* seems to be relevant with the "never-ending war on terror" (Tripathi, 2018, p. 2). The Novel provides "an insight into the dual sides of a war: the people who are hired to expedite it, and the poor victims who lose everything, even when they might be innocent bystanders" (Masoom, 2018, p. 2). Answering the question that America attacks other countries for human rights and how that construct is adapted to justify large scale invasion, Hanif says: "that is rubbish. There is whole intellectual industry based on [human rights], and I am violently opposed to that. I think they are culpable as much as war criminal is" while (Bilal, 2016, p. 131).

Pakistani English writers in fiction including Mohsin Hamid, Nadeem Aslam, H.M. Naqvi, Kamila Shamsie, Jamil Ahmad and some other Muslim writers are presenting a counter-narrative of post-9/11 fiction. They are also engaged in exposing the Neo-Orientalist discourse of American academia and stereotypes regarding Muslim orient. *Home Fire* (2017) by Kamila Shamsie traces the issues of identity crisis in post-9/11 world. It is powerful critique of the troubles of Muslims as they struggle to erase the stigma that all the Muslims are potential threat to Western civilization while defending their "Britishness" and loyalty. H.M Naqvi's *Home Boy* (2010) describes the terrorist discourse as a Neo-Orientalist thinking of America in which Muslims are portrayed as violent, intolerant and life hater mongrels. They belong to a religion and the book which motivates as Grizzly, the character in novel *Chuck* during inquiry "terrorism" (Naqvi, 2010 p. 116). Naqvi presents Bush as a Neo-Orientalist who spreads phobia among Americans, and criticizes radical Muslims for hijacking Islam (Naqvi, 2010, p. 97). *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) by Mohsin Hamid, arguably the best novelist of Pakistani English, traces the themes of patriotism, fundamentalism and American imperialism in the post-9/11 America. Through his character Changez, Hamid tries to portray the Occident/Orient conflict in the context of American neocolonialism and neo-orientalist world.

Khaled Hosseini in his novels *The Kite Runner* (2003) and *Sea Prayer* (2018) describes the plight of refugees of war and presents the powerful critique of war on terror. The redemption of self, cultural differences, displacement, religiosity and orient others are the major concerns of Khaled Hosseini. Recently published, *We Are Displaced: My Journey and Stories from Refugee Girls around the World* (2019) by Malala Yousafzai, captures the post-war displaced refugee themes and Neo-Orientalist perspective.

In *Our lady of Alice Bhatti* (2011), Hanif presents a marginalized character Alice who is doubly marginalized by being a woman as well catholic Christian in mainstream Pakistani metropolitan city of Karachi. Although very different from his

recently published novel *Red Birds*, this novel is similar in representing marginalized character defying the stereotypes. *Red Birds* presents the plight of refugees living in temporary camps feeding on USAID junk food. In biting satire of the absurdity of war and Neo-Orientalist ideology of American institutes like Central Command and USAID, Hanif tries to expose American imperialistic design by giving voice to the displaced war refugees of Muslim world. This research is an attempt to provide a new lens to the context of recently developed paradigm of Neo-Orientalism in Hanif's representation of refugees from a writer who belongs to orient *other*.

Theoretical Framework

Two seminal postcolonial theorists, Edward Said and Ali Behdad, have been used for the exploration of the selected fictional work in this research. Said's *Orientalism* (1978) traces the history of Orientalism and maps the imaginative geography of the oriental other. Said exposes the western stereotypes of the orient. Said states that Orientalism as an academic project has been fundamental in defining the orient "as [west's] contrasting image, idea, personality, experience" (Said, 1978, p.2). By this, he means that west has used orient for its own understanding in terms all these stereotypes. Said is of the view that "the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West)" (p. 9). Said is crucial to the understanding of Neo-Orientalism which has gained great importance in post-9/11 landscape. Despite being a paradigm shift in classical Orientalism, Neo-Orientalism nevertheless has many characteristics of classical Orientalism. Neo-Orientalism has been an ideological phenomenon working behind the terrorist discourse of many western writers as well as Government officials and media discourse.

Since the current working of this world is going through various kinds of paradigmatic shifts and conceptual changes, the Western construction of the Muslim world, especially Islam, is also changing. If the contemporary international political situations, the concept of Orientalism is not static anymore because it is interpreting within "the historical frameworks of thinking" (Behdad, 2012, p. 1) as the Western powers are using the knowledge of the Orients through the propagation of subjective representations. Behdad is of the view that the developments in the field of orientalism or the shift from orientalism to neo-orientalism can be understood within the domains of hegemonic empires and historical contexts (p. 1). Behdad terms neo-orientalism as American Orientalism (p. 2) because America plays a significant role in terms of the changes in the international politics, especially the relations with Muslim and Eastern countries. This neo-orientalism is "post 9/11 orientalism towards the Muslim world and particularly focused on the Islamic modes of thinking" (p. 2). This innovative "neoconservative construction of the Muslim world and Islam" (p. 2) is purely related to the Islamic countries, the Muslims and their ways of living in the different corners around this globe.

Results and Discussion

American people and its government believe that they are the saving angels whose duty is to save this world. This idea of being different contributes to the process of *othering*. The pilot in the narrative of the novel, Ellie, believes in American superiority: "Roving angels would be on their way to rescue me, but sometimes angels can take their time and in order for this rescue to be successful I need to stay alive" (p. 3). At another point, Ellie avers: "I can lie down in the sand and wait for the Angels to come and take me away in a helicopter" (pp. 6-7). Unfortunately, angels do not come to save Ellie or the miserable people in the Camp. The idea of American superiority pushes the American forces into violence and islamophobia is the catalyst. Hanif is severely criticizes this mindset as he writes, "an American in pain, God help us. An American in pain is a fucking pain in the ass of this universe" (p. 88).

The American madness is reflected through the Hangar near the Camp to control the refugees and their movements. The Colonel is of the view that this Hangar "is a combat unit. We are pilots, not fucking monks. You go, you take it out, you take your Purple Heart and get the hell of here" (p. 8). The Colonel makes stereotypical Orientalist remarks: "Get the goat fuckers but watch out our own" (p. 8). The orients are considered animals and untouchables. Ellie remarks: "When rescue teams arrive they find lumps of coal and still-intact fireproof bits like helmets and oxygen masks" (p. 12). The American soldiers at the Hangar believe that they are there to "conquer their enemy" (p. 11), who are in fact innocent refugees struggling to spend their days in this hostile world. Ellie's is representative American view regarding the refugees, Muslims or the Orients: "So this camp at the *end of the world*, hideout for some of the *worst human scum*, we have positive ID, there is some talk of sending the SEALs in" (p. 8, emphasis added). Under this revulsion, many false raids are exercised against the refugees: "... we take it out first and say it was all a happy mistake" (p. 8). The soldiers that take part in the combat missions are not aware of the hypocrite agenda of the war. Regarding the Camp, Ellie was enlightened by the Colonel's abhorrent description to Ellie: "it used to be a refugee camp but they downgraded it. Basically a real bad place full of bad people. You can smell the evil from the skies" (p. 8). The Neo-Orientalist Colonel believes that "the refugee camp is the source of all troubles" (p. 9). All the evils are associated with the Muslims/the orients that are deemed a threat to the security of the world. When Mutt, a dog that is used by the writer as a narrator, becomes witness to the cruel treatment of the forces upon the innocent people, he laments: "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" (p. 81). These red birds symbolize the refugees humiliated by the west. Like the red birds, the refugees are left alone and nobody in the world takes care of them. For the Occident Ellie, the Orients do not deserve to be called in ethical language, reflecting American hatred for the Muslims: "I climb over a little sandy hill and see a man sticking out of sand. I found the fucker," says Ellie (p. 10). He in a stereotypical American bias considers the refugees vicious, illiterate, and unrestrained. Ellie also expresses his trepidations that "if the goat fuckers had shot me down they would be all over the place to hunt me down" (p. 32). The Americans use abusive language for

the orients their happy as well as sad mood. Momo comments on the helplessness of the refugees: "Some people are born to be slaves" (p. 40). Momo says to Bro Ali that "he had to become a corporate slave. And slaves, by the very nature of their profession, are not supposed to be very good" (p. 40), suggesting that the nature of the orients never changes. Hanif's mouthpiece Momo presents Flowerbody as a "consultant ... sent to assess the psychological effects of post-war adjustments that young have to make to integrate the changing world and their own evolving bodily needs" (p. 46). Violence with its psychological ferocity has lasting effects on the refugees in the Camp, who are denied their social, cultural, economic and religious rights.

Parents lose their children in the process of migration and are shifted in the new alien milieus where only uncongenial uncertainty prevails. Bro Ali's mother "wants her son back. She wants to go to sleep watching him snore gently. She wants to pile more butter, more sugar on his bread. She wants to hear him banging the door, barging in and shouting I am hungry" (pp. 46-47). She further says 'First they bomb our house, then they take away my son and now you are here to make us feel alright' (p. 48). Bro Ali's mother is miserably nostalgic of her son missing for long and still waiting to see him back home. She "wants to collect his shirt strewn on the floor and smell them before throwing them on the laundry" (p. 47). The victims of this wretchedness are entirely helpless. Bro Ali's mother laments: "I refuse to recognize my loss. It will never be my loss. If you don't give me my son back, you'll learn the meaning of the word loss. Your do-gooder families will burn. Your fragrant world will rot" (p. 47).

Neo-Orientalism also targets the customs and traditions of *other* cultures. Ellie dismisses the indigenous music of flute: in the desert "you will meet a goatherd with flute, playing some stupid sad-ass melody that will make you homesick" (p. 36). Flute is purely an oriental invention. Ellie comments that the common Arab "hates nature, he wants to escape nature and live in that porn movie that he once saw, with the foam mattress and two Russian women" (p. 36). Momo satirizes the absurd American claims for humanitarian claims: "First they bomb us from the skies, then they work hard to cure our stress" (p. 67). The reason of bombing these Arabs is only their incessant fear produced through concocted stereotypes. While explaining his own existence, Momo considers himself "a survivor of the most useless war in the history of the wars. Even our conquerors have abandoned us" (p. 69): the Americans have left these refugees alone after destroying their homes and shelters and killing innocent members of their families.

The western ideology takes the form of religious, political, and economic matters to fulfill the prescribed and hidden agendas by the West. Bro Ali is the victim motivated by these ideologies, acting according to the American desires, a typical *modus-operandi* to colonize the people. Momo is right in his analysis of Ali's character: "You need to be careful about what you read. Bro Ali read many books and it made his mind a place of trouble" (p. 44). In the contemporary war dynamics,

propagating and practicing ideologies works faster than weapons. Reading serves as a remote control system to manipulate Bro Ali's body. He has *learnt* Islamophobia from the engineered stereotypes. In the middle of the desert, moving here and there in search of food and water, Ellie thinks about the refugees at the Camp and envisages that "I can hear voices, tribes on the march, yelping their war cries and trying to scare me" (p. 57). He even feels fear of these Arabs. After *training*, he even endorses the killing of these refugees.

Mutt, a dog in the narrative of *Red Birds*, is also a witness to the American violence at the Hangar. The refugees have lost their peace of mind, compelled to live a troubled life in the obnoxious surroundings. Mutt remarks: "Momo sleeps in Bro Ali's bed now, although I'm not sure if he gets any sleep anymore. One gentle lick on his ear and he jumped out of the bed. When Bro Ali was around I had to wrestle Momo out of that bed" (p. 49). Mutt gives the photo graphic exactness in terms of the reality of post-traumatic stress disorder of the refugee families.

Red Birds is a critique of hegemonic American apparatus working to oppress and exploit the orients/the Muslims. Ellie is unmindful to the American violence: "I cannot believe the cruelty of this fifteen-years old. Where is his humanity? Here I am dying after starving for eight days, and the boy is accusing me of excessive consumption" (p. 88). He forgets about his own insensitivity to the refugees who are starving in the middle of the desert.

Conclusion

Western power structure has created new stereotypes against the Muslim refugees through the terrorist discourse produced after September 11, 2001. The Neo-Orientalist approach of American think tanks especially Central Command has perceived Muslims as terrorists or potential terrorists. Even the displaced refugees living in temporary camps whose houses have been destroyed by the American bombardment, are seen as potential threat to American sovereignty. Pakistani English fiction in post-9/11 landscape has contributed to the counter-narrative of Neo-orientalist American perspective on war on terror and its hostile representation of Islamophobia. *Red Birds* exposes the Neo-Orientalist treatment and the resulting plight of refugees living in temporary camps feeding on USAID junk food. Due to historical paradigmatic shifts, three kinds of Orientalism developed and succeeded one another along the nineteenth, twentieth, and early twenty-first centuries. Whereas the first two paradigms of Orientalism created a body of knowledge about the peoples of Orient, and more specifically the Arab-Muslim world, the third one, rooted in "Clash of Civilisations" paradigm in the United States and European public space, has a less territorialized dimension. It focuses on the dissemination of the new distorted knowledge about Islam and the Muslim world and the promotion of Islamophobia within the West. Contemporary neo-Orientalism originates from the neoconservative school of thought and right-wing pro-Israeli circles purported to impose distorted hegemonic representation of Islam and the Muslim world, and advocate the Zionist worldview. Neo-Orientalism generates an "us versus them" schema that brings the differentiation – and even confrontation – between identities, religions, and

civilizations to the fore. Neo-Orientalist discourse and knowledge and their entailing conflations, essentialisation, and Manichean constructions aggravate the divide between the West and Islam in the sense that they consciously conceal and misshape the nuanced and objective understanding of the Muslim faith and peoples. This renewed Orientalist knowledge hides the reality of the existing diverse scholarly Islamic debates within the Muslim world. It also prevents the Western public setting from addressing actual issues such as the Palestinian question and the political and social roots of religious fanaticism and forecloses any lucid interreligious and inter-civilizational understanding.

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