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Subversion of Neo-Imperialist Hegemony: A Postcolonial Study of *Red Birds* by Mohammed Hanif

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Abstract

Although the erstwhile colonies in the Third World are free from the colonial occupation, the imperialist hegemony continues, to be resisted in the societies. For, such enterprise has provided the pretext for the concepts of 'Self' and 'Other' followed by occupation, a reign of violence and terror loosened upon the natives. This paper aims to study Red Birds (2018) a novel by Mohammed Hanif to highlight the plight of the 'Other' with their aggressive vitality and fervor of resistance to counter the imperialist agenda-hegemony. As qualitative research, it employs the postcolonial method, while seeking theoretical insights from the arguments of Orientalism by Edward Said, and the theory of hegemony by Antonio Gramsci to be interpretive in nature to analyze the text. It explores how the text, gleaned selectively from the novel offered, like Orientalism a fabric of textual analyses that is highly critical of the Eurocentric notions and hegemony of the Western world. It underlines the ways and practices sketched by the novel through the troubling encounter of the characters from the East to the West to offer a subversive narrative to the failure of the efforts and narratives of the West. For better analyses of the text to underline the American neo-imperialism and the native dreams of subversion, it takes to the tone of Gramscian precepts to conclude that the powerful subjugates through hegemony—the geo-political method used to

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gain indirect imperial dominance which is maintained mainly through ideology instead of using means like economic force, or coercive strategies.

Keywords: Eurocentrism, center and periphery, hegemony, ‘self’ and ‘other’.

1. INTRODUCTION

The two terms colonialism and imperialism are closely related and complementary to each other. Said (1993) defines colonialism as the establishment of settlements on distant territories. On the other hand, imperialism refers to the theory, practice, and attitude of a dominating metropolitan center that rules a distant territory. Colonialism can be considered a sort of geographical violence, and it is an activity that takes place in the peripheral areas of the center–colonial countries. It has two methods to operate. Sometimes it is content with establishing settler colonies in the far-off distant lands. At other times, it does not establish settler colonies but aims at the exploitation of the periphery–colonized countries, to achieve economic gains. However, imperialism is an ideology through which the metropolitan center operates upon the periphery, without physical presence for the same end (Young, 2016).

Colonialism and imperialism have affected the world for centuries. The world has been divided into two warring factions—a binary. On one side are the colonizers/centers with power. On the other side, there are colonized/marginalized—‘Other’, whom Gramsci (1971, p. 9) calls “subaltern” which has been misrepresented by the colonial imagination, as negative, mysterious, exotic, and “a race of less-than-humans”. The negative portrayal of the natives helps the colonizers to define themselves in comparison to the colonized as “civilized” people with “intellectual and rational faculties” (Crehan, 2016; Said, 1978; Sartre, 2015, p. 13). In his article, “Edward Said and Postcolonial Theory: Disjunctured Identities and the Subaltern Voice”, Burney (2012, pp. 41-42) contends how Said’s work has shifted the focus of attention from the “dominant, logocentric, and mainstream” narrative to the emergent discourse, native culture, and intellectual contributions, unique geopolitical fabric of the Other/periphery, that could find a place in the centers of teaching and learning, what he calls “a pedagogy of the Other”.

A postcolonial reading of the play such as *The Tempest* (Shakespeare, 1958), originally written in 1610c, offers us a colonial “encounter between the civilized and the wild” (Marrouchi, 1999, p. 29), something that Sartre (2015) calls “racist humanism” (p. 13). Sartre (2015) holds that imaginatively “Europeans have been able to become men through the creation of slaves and monsters in other cultures” to manipulate ideologically the subjugated people (Sassoon 1991, p. 230). Shakespeare offers us a shining example in this regard through the play. To weaken, subjugate, and maintain his control on the island he has occupied, Prospero discredits the main figure on the island—Caliban, by ‘describing’ him as “not honored with a human shape” (Shakespeare, 1958) and labels him as a “deformed”, “wild”, “beast”, “dwarf”, “tortoise”, “mix of fish and man”, etc., before he subjects him to physical violence and torture (Vaughan, 1991, pp. 10-14). The dramatic presentation of the play is typical of the third world like Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, Africa, or any other nation that has

been subjected to Western dominance. They have been exposed to enslavement, torture, massive massacres, cultural destruction, and deprivation of land and resources under the Western occupation. They lost almost everything along with their respect and pride in their culture. Worst of all, their history is diluted to present them as if they had no civilization and belonged to the Stone Age (Young, 2016), under Western colonialism. Nkrumah (1965), the Ghanaian leader, considers neo-colonialism as the worst form of colonialism. He argues that it allows the powerful nations to exercise immense power over the weak nations. Such exercise of power is without any responsibility and liability and as a result, gives rise to a reign of inexplicable oppression and violence. For those who suffer at its hands, it means exploitation without any redress and compensation.

However, by the time colonization was wreaking havoc on the occupied territories, the marginalized/colonized nations of the world started a political and intellectual resistance against the colonialists to wrest back power from the latter. In this way, there emerged a body of literature called postcolonial literature (Young, 2016) to redress the wrongs of Western dominance. Colonialism did end in the last century due to the resistance of the colonized against it. However, autonomy and freedom in the colonized societies are still missing. Neo-colonialism emerged at the hands of the West to replace colonialism. Western powers have continued to manipulate global politics and have maintained economic hegemony. There has occurred just a change in form with the end of colonization. In substance, nothing has changed. Decolonization means just a change in political and economic setup as the former masters continue to rule by establishing political, cultural, ideological, and economic hegemony (Gramsci, 1992). In this way, freedom remained an illusion for the colonized people (Said, 1993). Gramsci (1971) underlines this situation as:

The traditional ruling class, which has numerous trained cadres, changes men and programs and, with greater speed than is achieved by the subordinate classes, reabsorbs the control that was slipping from its grasp. (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 210-211)

Engagement of the resistance literature finds it imperative to offer an unambiguous and convenient critique against the manipulative presuppositions of the Eurocentric intellectualism/propaganda/cultural hegemony/historic bloc. For Gramsci (1971), ideological and political superstructure is fundamental to fracture the mechanism and base of hegemony (Sassoon, 1991). In such circumstances, postcolonial literature offers a response to counter the ideological, theoretical, and psychological standpoint of the neo-colonial world. As Sartre (2015) says in his preface to *The Wretched of the Earth* (Fanon, 1963) the white people “had the Word”, and the colonized people learned how to use it against the colonizers. Writers from the periphery have seized the means of communication and power of representation from the colonizers to present their own culture. Fanon (1963) says that the European elite committed to manufacturing a native élite:

...with the principles of Western culture, they stuffed their mouths full with high-sounding phrases, grand glutinous words...whitewashed [them]. These walking lies had nothing left to say to their brothers; they only echoed. It came to an end; the mouths opened by themselves; the yellow and black voices still

spoke of our humanism but only to reproach us with our inhumanity. (Fanon, 1963, p. 7)

Hanif (2018) seems to contend that all sorts of machination even violence of the West to control the ‘Muslim teenage Mind’ of his characters falls flat. Mohammed Hanif, born in 1964, a British national of Pakistani origin, described as ‘Pakistan’s brightest voice’ by the *Guardian*, is the author of critically acclaimed books like, *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* (2008), *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* (2011), *The Long Night* (2002), *What Now, Now That We Are Dead?* (2008), and *The Dictator’s Wife* (2008), and *Red Birds* (2018). He earned his academic specialization as a pilot and chose to work as a journalist after divorcing his job as a pilot in the Pakistan Air Force. He has bagged many international awards for his remarkable literary work. His last work, *Red Birds*, set in a war-torn and half-forgotten place located in some conflict-ridden Muslim country, sketches characters caught in a never-ending war, who disillusion readers about the claims put forward about them.

The novel opens with Major Ellie, an American pilot crash-landing in a desert, hallucinating after ten days of starvation and worrying about dehydrating to death, taking refuge in the very ‘enemy camp’ he was tasked to bomb and meets Momo from there. Momo, like his ‘brain fried mongrel’ with the mind of a poet-philosopher–Mutt, is one of the central characters of the novel, who ceaselessly searches for his missing brother–Ali, who seems to have been swallowed by a ghostly and mysterious American military base, used for local war operations, called the Hangar. The pilot lies to Momo that his plane crashed on the way to deliver American aid to locals in need. Momo, a hustler born and bred in the wartime of the desert, does not give the lie the dignity of a moment’s consideration and startles Ellie with “You can’t be a child in this place for long” (Hanif, 2018, p. 15). Because it is a Godforsaken spot, where nobody can afford to be innocent. Mutt describes the situation as “God left this place a long time ago, and I don’t harbor any delusions about my own role on this earth, but I can imagine what he must have felt. He had had enough. I have had a bit more than that” (Hanif, 2018, p. 26).

Hanif (2018) offers a remarkable critique of the disconnected, outsourced, and technologically-dependent methods of contemporary war. At one point Ellie, espousing the war-was-better-in-the-good-old-days mentality of his superior officer, muses: “We used to have art for art’s sake; now we have a war for the sake of war. No lands captured, no slaves taken, no mass rapes, fuck their oil wells, ignore their mineral deposits. You can outsource mass rape. War has been condensed to carpet-bombing followed by dry rations and craft classes for the refugees” (Hanif, 2018, p. 32). While exposing the inseparable ugly relationship of capitalism, empire, and liberal politics, he highlights the ridiculousness of neoliberal warfare of unspeakable violence committed by neo-imperial powers of the world to create societies dependent on them. As Major Ellie flatly puts it:

If I didn’t bomb someplace, how would she save that place? If I didn’t rain fire from the skies, who would need her to douse that fire on the ground? Why would you need somebody to throw blankets on burning babies if there were no burning babies? ... You need fireworks to ignite human imagination. (Hanif, 2018, p. 201)

In *Red Birds*, Hanif (2018) pins the typical American way of defining the ‘Muslim mind’ through their cosmopolitan academic practices, where the victims of war are the subject of academic experimentation and research. It particularly, stands out in its portrayal of precarity that best describes the lives of the refugees from all sides and from which even such a dedicated and professional Western academician as Flowerbody, a character in the novel, who had come to study the situation in the refugee camp and surroundings, fails to extricate herself. Hanif intrigues particularly the character of a fifteen-year-old precocious teenager named Momo as a foil to Lady Flowerbody, who is shown to be analyzing her refugee subjects in a ‘cold’, ‘impartial’ and impassioned, orientalist manner for her Ph.D. thesis on the “Teenage Muslim Mind”. Momo baffles the ‘scholar’ with his understanding of the Western utilitarian approach to the East and plans to christen her for the fulfillment of his own plans of retrieving his missing brother, Ali.

The novel is wonderfully humane when it paints the dark side of war. But it is utterly savage in its treatment of the ideological implications of war and conflict. It documents a counter-discourse through the encounter of his characters from the East and the West. It seems to dramatize the theory of Orientalism by Said (1993) who reiterates that Orientalism is “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient...even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively” (Said, 1993, p. 3) through the process of othering/marginalization. *Red Birds* sketches an encounter of opposing ideologies discussed by the characters from the East and the West in a miserable setting of a war-torn Muslim society. It reflects the Orientalist approach to the East based on their fantasies of centuries presented by the characters from the West in conversation with Momo and Mutt. The text is full of dark comedy and witty eviscerations of war following the mores of unconventional satire to draw out human ugliness, true brutalities of war of US foreign policy through the narrations of characters, particularly Mutt, “whose wisdom comes from his sense of smell, which extends to emotions and motivations. Fear smells like rotting apples, unrequited love like mustard. Regret is burnt bread. Tricks smell like onions and delusions like vinegar” (Nayeri, 2018).

Red Birds have been explored by researchers worldwide. However, the area of exploration this study aims for evades the scholarly discussions till now. It aims to underline the situation and the ways, in which the native ‘Other’ questions the prevailing ethics and puts up resistance to the forces of hegemony, through an in-depth study of the *Red Birds*. It endeavors to explore how the text foregrounds not only the political and social milieu of the subjugated native culture which is exposed to the barbarity of foreign invasion of the West, but also the native ethics, unconventional characters, and modes of narration that are not so common to the tradition of fiction, that seemingly intrigue to the castigation of the Western research and understanding of the native culture. While focusing on the objectives the study will try to answer the following research questions:

1. How are colonialism, imperialism, neo-imperialism, and hegemony being presented in *Red Birds*?
2. What intrigues a person to question the dominant narratives in *Red Birds*?
3. How/and why do the characters of *Red Birds*, particularly Momo and Mutt, question the social, political, and academic set-up they live in?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Foreign dominance has plagued the world for centuries and its effects have been very profound and far-reaching. It proved disastrous for the ‘Other’ nations resulting in the annihilation of their culture. Those who survived this tyranny of foreign dominance could not get rid of its consequences to date. The end of colonialism was expected to restore native pride in their culture and history. Ironically, this did not happen. The native societies continued to suffer due to the formation, formulation, and new tactics of control from the old powers. Charney (1987) argues that the “survival of the colonial system” continued “despite formal recognition of political independence in emerging countries which become the victims of an indirect and subtle form of domination by political, economic, social, military or technical means” (Charney, 1987, p. 48) and “practices of domination...by old colonial powers” (Freund, 1984, p. 235). Hanif (2018) highlights the situation in his novel *Red Birds*, emphasizing characters, dialogues, and the overlooked theme of hegemony and resistance explored by scholars.

Aslam (2018) documents an interview with the author of the novel, “Mohammed Hanif says *Red Birds* is set in a war-torn and half-forgotten place located in his head” through *The Hindu*. He documents the reactions of the author about the social and political landscape sketched in the novel, besides the approach the author has adopted to infuse the novel with his personal experiences of the war and conflict-torn societies like his own, into the text. In a striking comment he explains the uncertainty of a conflict-ridden society where everyone is a participant and a victim:

But we are perpetrators, collaborators, and victims of this war. But sometimes, when we are sitting in the safety of our homes in Lahore or Karachi, it’s easy to forget that there is a war—but maybe we are living off that war, maybe we have made our fortunes from that war. (Aslam, 2018, para. 12)

Farhan (2019) in a book review titled “*Red Birds* by Mohammed Hanif”, claims that the text is a greatest accomplishment for it has successfully blended the diverging prospects—comic and tragic offers a narrative of prose with “no ornamental frills and no redundant fancifulness” but “engaging style and the gripping narrative [that] make it an interesting” (Farhan, 2019). There are reviews like, “‘*Red Birds*’: Mohammed Hanif’s most sorrowful novel is swallowed up by its grief” by Nair (2018), “Mohammed Hanif’s *Red Birds*: a Wildly Satiric, Piercingly Real and Darkly Humorous Narrative” by Saha (2019), “Mohammed Hanif’s *Red Birds* brims with anger at the absurdity, ugliness and human cost of war” by Tripathi (2018), “‘*Red Birds*’ is blistering—and funny—critique of America’s military meddling” by Athitakis (2019), and “A New Novel Stars the Dupes, Villains, and Victims of America’s Forever War” by Sehgal (2019), written about the novel. But all of them give a general understanding of the text. However, there are some serious studies conducted recently on the text, which are detailed in the following way.

In his article “Mohammed Hanif’s *Red Birds*: ‘Anti-Colonial Textuality’ and Beyond”, Karim (2020) elaborated on this point of US-dominated neo-imperialist academic and research practice through which the Muslim world is defined, marked, and labeled as the exotic and incomprehensible Other. Even though the novel is full of symbolic connotations on various levels, the precarity of the existence of such a

wasteland ensures that the signifiers do not reach their intended signified. We find how characters frequently end up misconstruing or misinterpreting various signs. As Veyret puts it, “Beyond the failure of signs, the failure of our ethics of precariousness is suggested” (Veyret, 2021) by the book. “Representing Muslims: A Postcolonial Study of Mohammed Hanif’s *Red Birds*” by Anjum et al. (2021), gives a very debilitating account while adopting an inductive and exploratory approach as a research methodology to study the text. They claim that as an Orientalist piece, *Red Birds* serves the narrative of the Neo-Orientalists. For, it’s a ‘mouthpiece in depicting and representing Muslims as backward and savages’. The study supposes that the novel despite promising its readers to challenge and question the imperialistic, cosmopolitan, and US-centric (mis)representation of the Muslim as the Other, ironically ends up criticizing Islam itself as a backward religion that is incapable of admitting any flexibility and change (Anjum et al., 2021). “American Imperialism, Third World, and the Politics of Violence and Decolonization: A Fanonian Reading of the Colonial World of *Red Birds*” by Naz (2022) argues that the novel offers an understanding of the process of decolonization as a natural outcome of the subversive effect of colonial violence. The paper discusses the book given the precepts of Frantz Fanon about colonization and decolonization. She claims that:

The colonizer’s violence not only helps maintain his power but also precipitates the process of decolonization—in tandem exacerbates the aggressive vitality of the incarcerated subject in much greater strength and force than that of the colonizer to counter the violence of oppression. (Naz, 2022, p. 49)

“Benevolent Violence: Bombs, Aid, and Human Rights” in Mohammad Hanif’s *Red Birds* by Sadaf (2022) elaborates that the novel highlights the absurdity and futility of war and violence that fractures the lives of people across boundaries. It underlines how the text offers a dystopic and paradoxical society, where violence is ever-present in various forms to act out a drama of the “global civilizational clash”, in which you are simultaneously a victim and perpetrator repetitively and cyclically. It asserts that the novel offers a larger existential message as “the novel’s uniqueness lies in the characters’ prolific observations about the inevitability of this business of life and this business of war, ...and the ongoing colossal contradiction—that we can be at peace when there will always be some people who continue to get bombed” (Sadaf, 2022, pp. 14-15).

While we notice a good deal of studies have been conducted on the text, hardly any of them have dealt with the idea of the imperialist hegemony and its repercussions on the subject space and the following resistance. Some of them have elaborated on the idea of colonialism, but the idea of imperialist hegemony and its subversion has evaded their discussions. However, they have not diluted the criticism of the US-dominated worldview which is being advanced as the only authentic worldview according to some characters as the American Woman named Cath.

3. METHODS

The study employs the Postcolonial method to explore the text. It is qualitative research that utilizes textual references related to the cultural, social, and political

context of the subject under study to analyze the discourse that surrounds Western hegemony in the erstwhile colonies in the East or Africa. Being interpretive in nature, it seeks theoretical insights from the arguments of Orientalism by Edward Said (1993), and the theory of hegemony by Antonio Gramsci (1971) to explore how the novel *Red Birds* foregrounds a cultural milieu of a postcolonial Muslim society, under Western neo-imperialism, with stories, characters, voices, images, traditions and history of people, who are normally misrepresented or excluded from the dominant literary conventions. It discusses the ideas of colonialism, orientalism, and imperialism what's the primary focus of the Postcolonial method to glean a fabric of textual references from the novel under study, to underline how it offers a counter-discourse that is critical of the Eurocentric notions and Western hegemony.

This paper aims to look at the experiences of the people caught in the limbo of American imperialism through the prism offered by Orientalism and Gramscian theory of hegemony. It is especially interested in the study of the cultural legacy left by colonialism and imperialism and the aftermath. It sketches an ideological response to notions put forward by imperialism. It studies the political and social narratives surrounding imperialism and aims at the understanding of the power relations that sustain colonial and neo-colonial practices. It focuses on the politics of knowledge and tries to explain how the cultural knowledge about the colonized was applied to subjugate them. It endeavors to underscore how the theories of the 'center' by which the subjugated world is perceived, known, and understood are destabilized by the resistance of the local/native knowledge and understanding. In short, it aims at balancing the imbalanced binary power relationship between the colonizers and the colonized people by creating intellectual spaces for the subaltern people to raise their voices.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Colonialism, Imperialism, Neo-Imperialism, and Hegemony

Resistance to imperialist hegemony is a natural reaction induced by the operations and practices of a hegemonic space. Cudjoe (1980) claims that "resistance is an act, or a set of acts, that is designed to rid a people of its oppressors, and it so thoroughly infuses the experience of living under oppression that it becomes an almost autonomous aesthetic principle" (p. 186). It involves both violent and non-violent ways. Reflecting the effectiveness of non-violent resistance, Chenoweth and Stephen (2011) claim that it has proved more effective than violent resistance over the past century to attain political goals. In this regard, Gramsci (1971) says, the "consciousness" of a human being is a "historical process". So, to defy the hegemony of power, "[T]he first thing to do is to make such an inventory" of your cultural traces- that helps you to understand "historical process" and the product of the process- your 'consciousness' (pp. 335, 356-365). Throughout this paper, it tries to prove that the selected text challenges the new imperialism, by sketching oriental characters speaking their own consciousness and their own historical situation that has been based on their troublesome life experience. They defy the narratives of the powerful. The characters put up a very effective resistance to the new imperialistic forces.

Neo-colonialism and the resistance to it are most spectacularly witnessed in current-day Muslim societies for certain reasons. On the one hand, the West is trying to subjugate and manipulate their rich economic resources. On the other hand, they are important for their geographic location to weaken the adversaries of the West. Most significantly, Muslim culture or Islam, [Huntington \(1996\)](#) identifies in the last century, as one of the “challenger civilizations”, and a center of a major shift of economic, political, and military power from the West in the post-Cold-War period, is going to defy the values of the Western “universalism” (pp. 102-120, 183-185). To truly appreciate the challenge that Islam poses to the Western worldview, one may cite [Said's \(1997\) *Covering Islam*](#), in which he points out the myriad of ways in which the Western academia has continuously misrepresented and misinterpreted Islamic worldview. According to [Said \(1997\)](#), “Islam represents not only a formidable competitor but also a late-coming challenge to Christianity” (p. 4). [Gordimer \(1973\)](#) says that if one wants to know the facts about the Moscow retreat of 1812, history books will help him. But if one is interested in knowing the horrors of this war and the pain and turmoil through which the people of that time passed, he should read *War and Peace* by Tolstoy ([Gordimer, 1973, p. 7](#)). *Red Birds* presents an excruciating picture of conflict and turmoil that brews only the miseries of the ordinary people in Muslim societies without giving any respite to their torn lives. He underscores this intensity through the choice of words, he chooses to describe the horrors of the war-torn society in the book in the following way: “I feel these are not words, these are tears of blood” ([Aslam, 2018, para. 20](#)).

Imperialism is divided into two eras—the old, colonial imperialism and the new one- neo-imperialism. The division is based on differences in time only. Both forms have the common objective of acquiring control of foreign territories followed by their exploitation. American neo-imperialism has its roots in the idea of American exceptionalism which emphasizes its difference from other expansionist countries. Its primary focus is Western hegemony and economic subjugation of the natives through psychological operations of ‘manipulation’ without the physical presence in the native countries ([Akbar, 2003, p. 269](#); [Tilwani, 2015, p. 131](#)). Thomas Fried while examining American neo-imperialism in the current era is successful because the US military is safeguarding the economic interests of their nation ([Fried, 1999](#)). According to Said, western neo-imperialism and subjugation have been possible because of orientalism. Said argues that the work of Orientalists about the Eastern people was political in nature and it served the imperialist agenda facilitating the justifications of the Western dominance in the Orient. It molded the Western academic world and influenced their cultural imagination. Out of this, there emerged a public policy that proved lethal to the Orient. The Orient was constructed as the opposite of the Western world ([Said, 1978](#)). [Said \(1993\)](#) comments, “[T]he novel [any orientalist text that presents a western version of reality] as a cultural artifact of bourgeois society, and imperialism are unthinkable without each other” (pp. 70-71). *Red Birds* offers a remarkable consciousness and understanding of the presentation and representation of the Orient through the characterization, plot, and setting of the novel.

Orientalism offers a remarkable approach to examining how Western epistemic control and domination have paved the way for Western intervention and hegemony in the politics of the Orient ([Said, 1978](#)). [Gramsci \(1971\)](#) furthers the idea by claiming that hegemony is a geo-political method used to gain indirect imperial military dominance of a city-state over another city-state, to exercise power over the colonized

people by the hegemon. Dominance is maintained through ideology instead of using means like economic force, violence, or coercive strategies (Sassoon, 1991). The norms and values of the dominant culture are propagated to the extent that they become 'natural' and 'common sense' (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 419-424). The novel draws characters who are well aware of their surroundings and are hardly appropriated by the Orientalist characters of the novel.

The strategies of imperialism have also become subtler in the current times. Instead of using brute force like their colonial ancestors to subjugate the 'Other', the new masters use soft power. Now countries are invaded in the name of democracy, human rights, and intervention (Sugirtharajah, 2011). Momo is very critical of their divine civilizing mission. When imperialists say that education is going to solve all their problems, he feels skeptical. He questions that how just a few elementary principles of science and works of art can make them stand equal to the colonizers. He says:

- (1) "Education, they said. Education gonna solve all problems... Maybe you can get all your science and all your art education and then become a waiter on those boats". (Hanif, 2018, p. 21)

Momo, the central character of the novel, is a wisecracking teenager and a self-proclaimed entrepreneur with delusional schemes to turn his misfortune into profit. Harboring world-weary suspicion, he lives in the refugee camp with his feckless father, grieving mother, and nerd brother, Bro Ali. Though he may seem to us a devil-may-care sort of person deep down in his heart simmers a quiet hatred for the Americans for their nasty hypocrisy. He tells Ellie:

- (2) [T]his place may look poorer than Afghanistan, and more violent than Sudan, but thank God there's no ideology at stake. Not for them, not for us. They bomb us because they assume we're related to bad Arabs. We steal from them because that's all we can do. They take our boys because they think that's all we have. And to lure the boys they sent out their tallest soldiers, their shiniest vehicles. (Hanif, 2018, p. 52)

Red Birds is set against the backdrop of a US bombing in an unnamed Middle Eastern country where the action begins when an American Major Ellie crash-lands near a refugee camp in a war-ravaged desert. It is the imperialist bomber of the invading American army who is seen crash-landing on the very site he was sent to bomb. Also, quite naturally, the issues of displacement, trauma, and disillusionment with war are inextricably tied with the narrative. The three sections of the novel are named The Desert, The Camp, and The Hangar—an American military facility, which are also the names of three locations where the action of the novel is set, and these locations further contribute to the circularity and repetitiveness in the novel. However, the narrative goes beyond its immediate depiction of the pangs of claustrophobia and disillusionment especially through such imageries as red birds rising and flying upwards in the sky, and mirages appearing and disappearing, etc. In an interview, Hanif says that although the novel seems symbolic, particularly, in its setting of the Camp, but:

- (3) The situation is surreal at times... At the center of the novel is a house destroyed and a missing brother. I don't think there is anything symbolic there. Sometimes we look for symbols when there are none. Sometimes we wish there were symbols instead of bombs, or missing boys were

allegories for something, but they are not. I am sure we have all had a glimpse of a refugee camp or an abandoned army base. Yes, ordinary life can be surreal at times. (Aslam, 2018, para. 14).

4.2 Underling the Dominant Narratives while Sketching a Social, Political, and Academic Set-Up

In Butler's *Precarious Life* (2006) and *Frames of War* (2009), we get a vivid picture of how the military and administrative machinery of the USA has deliberately attempted to downplay the enormity of the collateral damage that their invasion of Middle Eastern countries has inflicted on the collective psyche of the people. Several Pakistani English novelists have portrayed the aftermaths of the US invasion of the Middle East and USA-led 'War on Terror' in and around areas of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border and their role in the subsequent rise in the homegrown Jihadist attacks on UK and European soil. Kamila Shamsie's (2017) *Home Fire*, Nadeem Aslam's (2008) *The Wasted Vigil*, *The Blind Man's Garden* (2013), and *The Golden Legend* (2017), strive to portray the effects of such vicious geopolitical turmoil on the marginalized Muslim population. Mohsin Hamid's *Moth Smoke* (2000) and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) also depict the relentless marginalization, otherization, and consequent disillusionment of the protagonists with the Western culture. Hamid's (2017) *Exit West* concerns itself with the problems of emigration and refugee problems. Mohammed Hanif's *Red Birds* is a scathing critique of the United States' anti-humanitarian War on Terror in the Middle East where the US armies have only rained countless bombs on various villages and border areas and thus destroyed and uprooted a huge number of families and societies. Farhan (2019) writes in his review: "The most essential and noticeable feature of Hanif's writing is the description of the brutal aftermath of war... The novel is a scathing yet wry critique of American war policies and coercive US involvement in the Middle East" (para. 3).

The novel opens with Bro Ali's missing status. Ahsan (2020) describes Bro Ali's situation succinctly in his essay: "Momo's older brother, Bro Ali, has been seduced away from his grieving family into a nearby US Hangar (an American military facility, capitalized for maximum ominous effect) with no prospect of ever returning" (Ahsan, 2020). He went to the Hangar and never returned. He was an informant to the Americans giving them bombing targets. Momo wants to figure out the riddle of Bro Ali's disappearance. With Ellie and the American academic and aid worker nicknamed Lady Flowerbody, Momo hatches a plan to bring his brother home.

One of the strategies through which imperialism establishes and consolidates itself is through maintaining epistemic control. The dominated societies are first studied and then defined in the light of racial prejudices. All the positive attributes are given to the dominant while the dominant is described in negative stereotypical terms. Though Momo criticizes his people for their little acts of thievery and their failure to retrieve the missing boys, he does not fail to notice the corruption and hypocrisy of the USA. He blames them for being the biggest thieves of all, their immaculate and flawless paperwork proves to provide school, electricity, and water reservoir to the refugee camp but on the ground, there is no such thing. He says:

- (4) The international-aid types, nice-smelling do-gooders who were the biggest thieves of them all. But they did their paperwork. Do you see that crater there? That was gonna be a dam for a water reservoir. Do you see that pile of shining steel poles tied down with chains and locks? That was gonna be electricity. Do you see that shack with two buffaloes in it? That's my alma mater. For

every wad of cash being pocketed, for every sack of grain or sugar being stolen, there is a pile of paperwork to prove that it's not being stolen. (Hanif, 2018, p. 19)

In this way, he deconstructs the myth of occupier's positive 'Self' image i.e., their claim of being superior beings and on a divine mission to bring civilization to the uncivilized corners of the world through the work of paper and pen.

Hanif (2018) provides an instance of abrogation of epistemic control through the way Momo deals with Lady Flowerbody. Lady Flowerbody has arrived at the camp to work on post-conflict resolution strategies and to study the trauma of the 'Young Muslim Mind'. Being the subject of different research since he was 11, he is aware of the motives behind such research. He terms the refugee camp as a destination for foreign tourists and derides the foreign academics. For, they come into the refugee camp to conduct surveys, take interviews, and then sitting in the comforts of their homes publish books about the desert people and the 'Young Muslim Minds'. He says:

- (5) It was simple, they bombed us and then sent us well-educated people to look into our mental health needs. There were workshops called 'Living with Trauma' for parents, and there was a survey about 'Traditional Cures in a Time of Distress and Disorder'. Our Camp was a tourist destination for foreign people with good intentions. (Hanif, 2018, p. 39)

He thinks that under the garb of advocating God's sacred mission, she might be taken as a sort of service provider. He feels skeptical about such academics and decides not to cooperate with them anymore. Rather he plans to somehow include Lady Flowerbody in his rescue mission for the safe and secure retrieval of Bro Ali. In this way, he plans one step ahead of the imperialists. Momo demonstrates the appropriation of power from the victimizers. He understands things in Marxian terms. To him, the strategy of shedding tears and cursing the enemy is not going to work. If the residents of the refugee camp want Bro Ali and other boys back; it would be through the use of force. He criticizes the lethargic attitude of his people who have just one ideology—make *moolahs* and thank your Creator. He says:

- (6) This whole nation's brains are fried. You live in this compound; your brains are fried. We can train them all their life and then when it comes time to put it into practice, they going to forget their training and go back to God. When it's time to run to the trenches or evacuate in case of a fire or even form a simple queue to get their rations, half of them start shouting God is great, and the other half start cursing each other's ancestors. Their sons keep going away and they keep waiting for them hoping they will return one day bearing goody bags from a better world. (Hanif, 2018, p. 39)

As a representative of the Western occupying forces, Major Ellie seems to be harboring a deep-rooted dismissive attitude towards even the essential Muslim practices and culture. So, he describes it mysteriously, as Said says. When he doesn't understand the things he simply judges it negatively. When he hears the *Azan* (the Muslim call to prayer) from Momo's house, he reacts in the following way:

- (7) "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)

He then even wonders:

- (8) "...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)

While his commentary shows his ignorance of the culture, he turns it to his credit as a typical orientalist imperialist by describing it in negative terms. Hanif shows how this worldview is shattered by Momo again and again through the plot of the novel.

The character of Momo is an ambivalent one. He dislikes Americans but at the same time, he wants to be like them to defeat them. He is the one very displeased with his native place for it does not offer any business opportunities necessary to sharpen his entrepreneurial skills. He is fond of watching Nat Geo shows and dreams that one day he will be able to launch massive global projects. His native place is too humble to offer opportunities. This causes dissatisfaction in him, and he yearns to be like the white people for whom life is full of opportunities. But at the same time, he harbors feelings of hatred and resentment towards them. He calls them thieves and usurpers and is fully determined to take revenge upon them. He wants to equip himself with the resources and the position of the white people to use them against them.

Hanif (2018) reverses the roles of the powerful and the powerless in the novel. The relationship between Momo and the Americans also undergoes a shift and swipe of roles. It is no longer the conventional one where the white people are the masters, and the native people are their slaves—the deaf and dumb ones who are devoid of rationality. He fully understands the cunning tactics of the white people and knows how to abrogate and appropriate the frame of power from them. He knows that his people have been exploited a lot by the imperialists and it is his turn to take revenge upon them by seizing the helm of affairs from them. This attitude becomes evident when we analyze his relationship with two characters i.e., Lady Flowerbody, the foreign researcher working on her Ph.D. thesis, and Ellie, the lost American pilot.

Being the subject of several foreign research, surveys, and workshops, Momo has the realization that their relationship is not more ennobling than the relationship between a quivering rat and the scientists conducting experimentation on it (Hanif, 2018, p. 55). This ignoble and dehumanizing relationship is not acceptable to Momo, and he is ready to subvert it by abrogation and appropriation. The moment Lady Flowerbody enters their house, the whole house becomes skeptical and weary of her presence among them. Momo recalls the time when their refugee camp was a tourist destination for foreign researchers. He mocks them that they first wrought havoc on them by bombing their land and then they send their highly educated people to study their mental health needs (Hanif, 2018, p. 38). When Lady Flowerbody calls him for a preliminary interview, he thinks that he must know her intentions before it. He says:

- (9) [W]e shall see who is going to interview who. (Hanif, 2018, p. 52)

- (10) Similarly, when Flowerbody briefs Momo about her research plan, Momo replies: "I have been the subject of many studies since I was eleven. 'Growing Pains in Conflict Zones'. 'Tribal Cultures Get IT'. Even 'Reiki for War Survivors'...I get PTSD, she gets a per diem in US dollars" (Hanif, 2018, p. 66).

Hanif (2018) offers a bitter criticism of Western research and knowledge. This is due to the role it has played in the subjugation of Oriental nations and the propagation of the imperialist agenda. In studying the factors that gave imperialism a global success, one cannot ignore the role of research and knowledge. Every aspect of

the non-western nations was very meticulously studied, verified, and classified. Then the same knowledge was used to invade and colonize them. In this way, various fields of knowledge and research helped imperialism in the achievement of its goals (Said, 1993). In this regard, Said argues that even those departments of culture like critical theory and literature that were otherwise considered neutral became biased and prejudiced when they were employed in the service of imperialists. They interpreted the subordinate and weak cultures in the light of Eurocentric notions and the result of this epistemic control was a myriad of negative stereotypes attributed to the natives (Said, 1993).

In the American imagination, the refugee camp is considered the place where evil flourishes and where you can smell the evil even from the skies. The camp offers a practical shape of the Western imagination, exposed by Said, as evil, bad, or a human wasteland. It is Hanif's introduction of supernatural and paranormal entities such as the "ghosts" and the inexplicable presence of the "red birds" that further problematize the Western attempt to classify, categorize, and appropriate the exotic orientalist knowledge of the Other. Towards the end, even a hardboiled materialist and rationalist Lady Flowerbody is compelled to accept the presence of the ghosts that seem to respect no notions of man-made boundaries of culture and society and easily hop from one place to another:

- (11) "I don't believe in ghosts but here they are jumping from wall to wall, completely oblivious to local culture and traditions". (Hanif, 2018, p. 111)

The ghosts seem to symbolize the repressed unconscious of the Otherized oriental subjects and also remnants of the trauma from continuous and prolonged war, besides the inner desire of the refugees to escape their tragic condition of being stuck in a limbo-like state between war and peace, and between life and death. The Western narrative proves too one-dimensional to capture the crux of the 'exotic' Other.

Hanif (2018) seems to have shattered the ideological structures, Western academia through its Eurocentric notions about the Orient has produced negative stereotypes and the hierarchical distinction between the 'Self' and the 'Other'. He explains that Alatas contends that native people have been considered indolent and unproductive in comparison to other races, particularly the Europeans, in complete contrast to what they indeed are with glorious civilization, culture, and literature (Alatas, 1977). Momo does not fall for the white people's honey trap and manages to have his own uninfluenced thinking and decisions. He rejects the stereotypical representation of his people as bad, evil, and uncivilized. Through his experiences with the white people, he reaches the truth that the white people are not infallible creatures. They are fraudulent thieves.

Normally, imperialist forces remain cautious about the transfer of knowledge to the natives. They don't import knowledge but discourse and polemics. Because they keep in mind that the 'education' imparted to the natives should create slaves mentally from the natives and ready them to serve the colonizers rather than equipping them to challenge the hegemony and control of the West. Momo does not accept the education that is based on a few scientific principles. It is enough to make him a servant of the white people just like Father Dear which is unacceptable to him. He wants to be equal to the white people (Hanif, 2018, p. 21). The characters who show an attitude of compliance towards the colonizers are described by the other characters in very

derogatory terms. First Dear who has a servile attitude towards the colonizers is not liked by Momo and Father Dear. He is considered a lazy and petty bureaucrat who licks the boots of white people and who can trade off his son for the wealth of the world. He is suffering from the disease of the love of white people (Hanif, 2018, p. 75). Hanif (2018) sketches him in terms of Gramscian “consciousness”, which, attaches one to a specific social group, it influences moral conduct and the direction of the will, with varying efficacy but often powerfully enough to produce a situation in which the contradictory state of consciousness does not permit of any action, any decision or any choice, and produces a condition of moral and political passivity (Gramsci, 1971, p. 333).

However, Hanif (2018) draws another character, a female foil to First Dear to successfully subvert the myth of the Western mode of woman empowerment and emancipation when he portrays the character of Mother Dear in her full glory. By the end of the plot, when all the characters arrive at the Hangar, we see how desperate she is to find her son, Mother Dear orchestrates a daring rebellion against the enemy forces. She appears as a much more powerful and independent woman than Cath or Lady Flowerbody. Another character is Momo’s anthropomorphized dog named Mutt who got half of his brain “fried” and now reflects on situations either comically or with a sarcastic and pungent irony. Mutt seems to be defying the Western colonial master’s uncompromising emphasis on logic and reasoning as the only means for attaining worldly knowledge and he is not a product of Momo’s imagination either. Mutt even reflects on his pathetic condition in this war-ravaged wasteland where actual war continues to force him to apprehend that he might starve to death or “roast under the sun” in the place God has left “a long time ago” if he doesn’t take some action against it (Hanif, 2018). In this way, the selected work highlights the resistance offered by the subjugated people and shows that, unlike the colonizers’ representation of the colonized world, the native populations are very active and much more responsive against oppression. In addition, they know the white man’s strategies of violence and misrepresentation of the culture.

5. CONCLUSION

This study attempted to show how the marginalized others under neo-imperialism are centered in *Red Birds* to ventriloquize their own understanding of the historical setting they are placed in and not dictated by the foreign powers. Like Orientalism, it highlights how the imperialist West views and treats the othered East through the metonymical encounter of the characters in the novel from the East and the West and how the subjugated East resists, negates, and belittles the Western presentation of the East. In *Red Birds*, we find how the employment of a multi-narrative technique helps us recover the voices thrust earlier into the periphery, and with the introduction of multi-character viewpoints, the narrative gains in diversity and plurality which then challenge the Western colonial master’s hegemonic discursive practice. Also, by incorporating even the perspective of such a non-human Other, as Momo’s pet dog–Mutt, Hanif (2018) seems to stress the inclusive nature of the multi-perspective narrative mode of Bakhtinian ‘carnavalesque’ kind in which a variety of voices are allowed to interact to break down conventions and enable genuine dialogue that consequents the chance for a new perspective and a new order of things. In this

way, it not only deconstructs the colonizers' myths about the natives but also constructs the world from the point of view of the periphery. It shows that under the European garb of elevating and enlightening missions of knowledge, there were lurking dark and evil forces that ripped the natives of their pride, respect, and wealth.

This study is an attempt to offer an insight into the subject of imperialism and counter-strategies, elaborated by the theory of orientalism and hegemony, adopted by the colonized subjects to undermine the workings of the hegemon, through the exploration of *Red Birds*. It has been realized that the marginalized are centered on drawing on their knowledge about the Western ways of violence and misrepresentation of the Orient to infuriate and oppose the imperialist, with the consciousness of their cultural, social, and political setting sketched in a narrative mode that's typical to the Orient. Some writers chose subjects related to feminism or socialism, etc., to write about, keeping in view their concern for, and interest in, the issues their society deals with. Mohammed Hanif chooses to write about the subject in his award-winning fictional work, *Red Birds*, seemingly, because of the proximity to the times and space of Afghanistan and Pakistan that has been bombarded with bombs and negative portrayals through media, when he would have been writing the novel. The subject discussed is very dear and unavoidable to the current day intellectual schools of the world for practical implications. The study was limited to a literary analysis of Western neo-imperialist attitudes and resistance to it sketched in *Red Birds*, which comprises the primary text of this study. It does not explore the subject in a large number of works across the genres and disciplines to reach the generalization that can be approximately more accurate. In addition, it is necessary to mention that, although this work is ideologically rooted in some historical periods, as we discuss colonialism, imperialism, and neo-imperialism, it has not been a historical study. Therefore, a historical study, combined with a postcolonial approach across genres and disciplines, would enhance the study. This study is further confined to a post-colonial reading of a single text, lacking assumptions or results from alternative methodologies. Further research should explore recent works and approaches to critically analyze neo-imperialism and assess how texts respond to different methods.. In addition, resistance to the dominant ethics and the traditional modes of narration is a subject of scope for further exploration.

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