



ADVANCE SOCIAL SCIENCE ARCHIVE JOURNAL

Available Online: <https://assajournal.com>
 Vol. 05 No. 01. Jan-March 2026. Page#6178-6185
 Print ISSN: [3006-2497](#) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](#)
 Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22066222>

**Borders and In-betweenness in Hanif's Red Birds: A Postcolonial Study****Jaafar Hussain**

M.Phil. English Literature, Riphah International University, Faisalabad Campus Faisalabad.

Jaafarhussain733@gmail.com**Prof. Dr. Muhammad Saeed Akhter**

Department of English, Riphah International University, Faisalabad Campus Faisalabad.

msaeed.akhter@riphahfsd.edu.pk**ABSTRACT**

This paper reads Muhammad Hanif's Red Birds as a study in what postcolonial theory has, since Homi K Bhabha, called hybridity: the condition in which identity is not simply defended or lost under external pressure but continually renegotiated in the contested space between them. Set in the aftermath of the United States' War on Terror, the novel follows a family and a downed American pilot through the wreckage of an unnamed conflict, and this paper argues that its central achievement is to show hybridity not as an abstract cultural condition but as a set of concrete, often humiliating survival strategies adopted by people with few other options. Using qualitative document analysis grounded in Bhabha's concept of the Third Space and mimicry, alongside Robert Young's account of hybridity as itself an unstable, contested term, the paper traces how the novel's three central figures the entrepreneurial teenager Momo, his complicit father Father Dear, and the American aid consultant Lady Flower Body each embody a different register of hybrid identity: aspirational, transactional and instrumental. The analysis situates Red Birds within existing scholarship on the novel's treatment of trauma, biopolitics and magical realism, and argues that Hanif's satire is directed less at any single culture than at the systems, on both sides of the conflict, that convert vulnerable people into resources to be managed. The paper closes by considering the novel's implications for how humanitarian and educational interventions in conflict zones can themselves become instruments of soft control.

Keywords: Hybridity, Postcolonialism, Identity, Muhammad Hanif, Red Birds, Imperialism, Trauma, Mimicry.

1. Introduction

The literature that emerges from formerly colonized regions carries, almost without exception, the imprint of the systems that shaped it: the economic dislocation, the cultural fracture, and the peculiar psychological condition of belonging partly to a tradition one has inherited and partly to a world one has been made to answer to. Pakistani fiction in English has engaged with this condition extensively, and Muhammad Hanif's Red Birds (2018) is among its more unsettling recent contributions, precisely because it refuses to locate the damage of empire solely in the actions of the occupying power. The novel is interested, instead, in what happens when local

actors begin to profit from their own subjugation when survival under occupation starts to look, uncomfortably, like collaboration.

Red Birds is narrated across an unnamed war zone associated with the United States' post-9/11 military interventions in Muslim-majority regions, and it interweaves the perspectives of an American pilot shot down in the desert, the teenage son of a local family with entrepreneurial ambitions, and an aid consultant conducting psychological research on young Muslim men. Hanif's satire moves between black comedy and genuine grief, and this paper takes that tonal instability as significant rather than incidental: it is precisely because the novel refuses a single register that it can show how thoroughly violence, bureaucracy and self-interest have become entangled in the world it depicts.

1.1 Muhammad Hanif and the Novel

Muhammad Hanif was born in Okara, Pakistan, in 1965, and worked for some years as an officer in the Pakistan Air Force before turning to journalism and, later, fiction. He is best known for *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* (2008), a satirical novel built around the unexplained plane crash that killed General Zia-ul-Haq, Pakistan's former military ruler, and for *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* (2011). Hanif has also written extensively as a journalist, including columns for international outlets, and his fiction is consistently marked by a satirist's willingness to implicate every side of a conflict rather than allocate blame in one direction only. *Red Birds* continues that pattern, and it is worth noting for the record that Hanif should not be confused with Hanif Kureishi, the British author of Pakistani descent whose autobiographically inflected fiction on hybrid British-Asian identity (notably *The Buddha of Suburbia*) belongs to a related but distinct literary tradition; this paper is concerned exclusively with Muhammad Hanif and *Red Birds*.

1.2 Theoretical Orientation

The term hybridity entered postcolonial criticism partly by way of Mikhail Bakhtin's work on the novel, where it described the disruptive effect of multiple, unreconciled voices within a single linguistic or narrative space. Homi Bhabha's subsequent development of the concept, most fully in *The Location of Culture* (1994), is the paper's principal theoretical anchor. For Bhabha, cultural meaning is not produced by two discrete, self-contained cultures meeting at a boundary; it is produced in what he calls the Third Space of enunciation, an ambivalent zone in which the very idea of a 'pure' originary culture becomes untenable. Mimicry, in Bhabha's account, is a related but distinct mechanism: the colonized subject's imitation of the colonizer that is never quite complete, producing a resemblance that is, in Bhabha's phrase, 'almost the same, but not quite' a partial likeness that unsettles rather than confirms colonial authority. Robert Young's contribution, developed in *Colonial Desire*, complicates this picture usefully by observing that hybridity is itself a hybrid idea, borrowed from nineteenth-century racial science and horticultural grafting before being repurposed as a term of cultural analysis; Young's point is a caution against treating hybridity as a straightforwardly liberating or celebratory condition, and this paper follows that caution by reading the hybrid identities in *Red Birds* as costly rather than simply adaptive.

1.3 Rationale for the Study

Countries across the postcolonial South have continued to experience forms of external pressure political interference, economic dependency, cultural marginalization and, in the case of the War on Terror, direct military intervention long after the formal end of colonial rule, and many Muslim-majority states have borne a disproportionate share of this pressure in the twenty-first century (Anjum, Rehman, & Samad, 2021). *Red Birds* is valuable as a case study precisely because it does not treat this pressure as something imposed from outside onto a passive population; it shows local actors adapting to, profiting from, and in places actively reproducing the logic of the system that has damaged them. This is a more difficult and more useful story than one of simple victimhood, and it is the story this paper sets out to trace.

1.4 Statement of the Problem

This study examines how *Red Birds* represents the psychological and cultural costs of prolonged external intervention, with particular attention to the ways characters negotiate rather than simply lose or retain their identities under pressure. It asks how the novel's use of religion, humanitarian discourse and education figures into the broader machinery of influence the novel depicts, and it considers what the novel's satire ultimately holds each side of the conflict accountable for.

1.5 Objectives of the Study

The study pursues three objectives: first, to examine the events and themes of *Red Birds* within the broader context of imperialism and its aftermath; second, to investigate how the novel portrays the erosion of local socio-economic structures, identity and cultural authority under external pressure; and third, to explore how the novel's central characters navigate competing cultural and social identity markers, with particular attention to hybridity as a survival strategy rather than a fixed condition.

1.6 Research Questions

Three questions guide the analysis that follows: what strategies does the novel depict imperial power using to establish and sustain economic and political control over a war-affected society; how does militarized intervention feed into the exploitative structures the novel represents; and how does the novel position religion, humanitarian aid and education as instruments through which that control is extended and naturalised.

2. Synopsis of the Novel

Red Birds unfolds in and around a refugee camp adjoining a military installation referred to as the Hangar, in an unnamed desert region marked by an unspecified but clearly War on Terror-inflected conflict. An American pilot, Major Ellie, crashes in the desert after a bombing run and is eventually taken in by the family whose home sits near the Hangar: Father Dear, an entrepreneurially minded patriarch eager to rebuild his fortunes through reconstruction contracts; his teenage son Momo, who dreams of business success on an American model; and Momo's older brother, Bro Ali, who has vanished after taking work at the Hangar under circumstances the family comes to understand as a form of disappearance rather than employment. Around this family circulates Lady Flower Body, an American aid consultant and doctoral researcher whose stated purpose is humanitarian and psychological support for the community, but whose research agenda and personal entanglements complicate that framing

considerably. Hanif moves between these perspectives, along with that of the family dog, to build a narrative that is at once a satire of reconstruction-industry humanitarianism and a meditation on grief, disappearance and the private costs of occupation.

3. Literature Review

Scholarship on *Red Birds* has developed quickly since the novel's 2018 publication, clustering around several related concerns. A substantial body of work examines the novel's treatment of trauma and its psychological aftermath. Ahmad, Shakir, Khan and Qureshi (2023) offer a sustained reading of post-traumatic stress disorder across the novel's characters, while Saadia (2023) focuses specifically on how the text represents the psychological toll of war on those who survive it, and Nazir (2022) examines Hanif's use of magical realism most evident in the sections narrated by Ellie after his apparent death as a formal strategy for representing trauma that resists straightforward, realist articulation. A related strand of scholarship reads the novel through the lens of human rights and ambiguous loss, situating Bro Ali's disappearance within the broader phenomenon of enforced disappearance in conflict zones (Ahmed, Muhammad, & Nasir, 2022). A second cluster of scholarship approaches the novel through frameworks of power and governance. Ali and Asif (2020) draw on Foucauldian biopolitics to examine how populations in the novel are managed and regulated at the level of the body and the population rather than through direct coercion alone, while Karim (2020) develops the concept of 'anti-colonial textuality' to describe how the novel's narrative structure itself resists the interpretive frameworks that colonial and neo-imperial discourse would impose on it. Anjum, Rehman and Samad (2021) examine the novel's representation of Muslim characters specifically, arguing that Hanif deliberately populates the text with a range of Muslim perspectives and dispositions that unsettle monolithic or stereotyped depictions common elsewhere in Western-authored War on Terror fiction. Akram, Divaya and Javed (2021) offer a speech act analysis of the novel's dialogue, showing how characters' utterances frequently perform functions assertion, evasion, self-justification that diverge from their apparent surface meaning, a finding consistent with the pattern of hypocrisy and self-deception this paper traces below.

Taken together, this scholarship establishes the novel's engagement with trauma, bio political control and narrative resistance in considerable depth. What remains comparatively under examined is a sustained account of hybridity specifically as it operates among the novel's local characters not simply as a condition imposed on them, but as a strategy some of them actively adopt, with real costs, in pursuit of survival or advancement within a system they did not design. This is the gap the present study addresses.

4. Methodology

This study employs qualitative document analysis, treating the primary text of *Red Birds* as the principal object of investigation, supported by secondary scholarly literature on the novel and by the theoretical framework of hybridity developed in Section 1.2. Passages were selected purposively for their relevance to the study's research questions, with particular attention to moments in which characters articulate, perform or negotiate identity under pressure from external actors. Analysis proceeds through close reading informed by Bhabha's concepts of the Third Space and mimicry, attending to the gap between what characters say and what their

actions reveal, and to the points at which local characters' language begins to echo the market and management vocabulary of the occupying power.

5. Discussion and Analysis

The analysis that follows is organised thematically around the novel's three central figures, each of whom embodies a distinct register of hybrid identity: Momo's aspirational hybridity, modelled on an imagined American entrepreneurial self; Father Dear's transactional hybridity, built on decades of accommodation with the occupying power; and Lady Flower Body's instrumental hybridity, in which humanitarian language provides cover for a research and influence agenda. A closing section considers what the novel's satire ultimately holds each side of the conflict responsible for.

5.1 Momo and the Entrepreneurial Self

Momo, the novel's most persistent narrating consciousness among the local characters, imagines his way out of occupation through business rather than resistance. He describes his ambition in frankly transactional terms, wanting, as he puts it, to become 'people of independent means' through a business built on 'rescue and rehabilitation' (Hanif, 2018, p. 19) language that borrows directly from the humanitarian-industrial vocabulary of the Hangar itself. This is, on the reading offered here, the novel's clearest instance of mimicry in Bhabha's sense: Momo does not reject the occupying power's framework so much as attempt to occupy a position within it, adopting its language of enterprise and service provision as his own. His declared ambition to eventually 'own' the world (Hanif, 2018, p. 40) pushes this logic to its most exposed point, revealing an aspiration that has stopped distinguishing between escaping domination and simply inheriting it.

Momo's hybridity is aspirational rather than comfortable; the novel repeatedly signals its cost. His self-justifying insistence that he is not a 'post-war profiteer' or 'black marketer' (Hanif, 2018, p. 17) reads less as confident self-definition than as a rehearsed defence against an accusation he has already, on some level, accepted as accurate. What the novel dramatizes through Momo, in other words, is not simply a young man corrupted by proximity to American money, but the specific psychic work required to hold together an identity built from borrowed ambitions and a home that ambition requires him to hold at arm's length.

5.2 Father Dear and the Complicity of Local Leadership

Father Dear represents a more advanced and more compromised stage of the same negotiation. Where Momo is still constructing his hybrid identity, Father Dear has already made his accommodation with the Hangar and its occupants, and the novel treats his eagerness he is described waving at an approaching American plane as though greeting an old friend (Hanif, 2018, p. 97) with a satirical precision that borders on pity as much as condemnation. His running commercial venture, 'Sands Global,' built on selling the one resource the desert offers back to the reconstruction effort that devastated it (Hanif, 2018, p. 65), captures the novel's central irony most economically: local complicity is not always coerced outright but is frequently monetised, offered back to the occupying power as a service.

The novel is careful, however, not to reduce Father Dear to simple villainy. His diminished credibility with his own community reflected in his family's mounting distrust of his motives and

his inability to account honestly for Bro Ali's disappearance suggests a man who has hybridized himself into a role he can no longer fully inhabit or escape. Read through Bhabha's Third Space, Father Dear belongs neither fully to the community he nominally leads nor to the power structure he serves; his authority survives only in the ambivalent zone between the two, which is precisely what makes his leadership hollow rather than treacherous in any straightforward sense.

5.3 Lady Flower Body and the Instrumentalization of Care

The character of Lady Flower Body extends the novel's critique of hybridity into the terrain of humanitarian and educational intervention. Introduced as a USAID consultant conducting research on 'post-conflict resolution strategies' involving local histories and folklore (Hanif, 2018, p. 43), she is simultaneously pursuing doctoral research on what she calls the 'Teenage Muslim Mind' (Hanif, 2018, p. 44). The juxtaposition is deliberate: the language of care, research and reconstruction operates throughout the novel as a parallel, softer register of the same control the military apparatus exercises more directly. Her sex-education work with local teenagers, presented within the narrative as therapeutic and progressive, functions in the novel's satirical logic as a further instrument of influence over precisely the demographic youngmen whose loyalties the occupying power has the greatest interest in shaping.

Flower Body's own hybridity is arguably the most ambivalent in the novel. Her admission that she cannot decide 'whose side' she is on, oscillating between personal attachment and professional mission (Hanif, 2018, p. 178), marks her not as a simple agent of empire but as someone whose humanitarian identity and instrumental function have become genuinely difficult for her to distinguish which is, in this paper's reading, close to the novel's broader point: that in a sufficiently thorough system of soft power, sincerity and instrumentality stop being reliably separable, even to the people enacting them.

5.4 War, Disappearance and the Erosion of Trust

Beneath the novel's satire of entrepreneurship and humanitarianism runs a harder register concerned with disappearance and loss. Bro Ali's vanishing after beginning 'contractual employment' at the Hangar, understood by his family only belatedly as a form of kidnapping (Hanif, 2018, p. 19), anchors the novel's engagement with the broader phenomenon of enforced disappearance under military occupation, consistent with the human-rights-oriented reading offered by Ahmed et al. (2022). The family's turn to religious appeal in the absence of any other recourse described through Momo's increasingly urgent prayers for his brother's return (Hanif, 2018, p. 39) registers the practical exhaustion of every other channel of accountability available to them. This is where the novel's comedy is most clearly a means rather than an end: the surrounding satire of business schemes and reconstruction contracts throws the family's underlying, unresolved grief into sharper relief rather than displacing it.

5.5 Major Ellie and the Hybridity of the Occupying Subject

It is worth noting that hybridity in the novel is not confined to the occupied. Major Ellie, the American pilot, experiences his own version of identity strain, admitting a loss of conviction in his mission and describing his adherence to protocol as something closer to performance than belief (Hanif, 2018, p. 57). His confessed reluctance to complete his deployment, tied to concern

for his wife's depression (Hanif, 2018, p. 106), and his later, bitter observation that a fighter pilot's ostensibly world-spanning mission can amount to little more than domestic irritation once he is home (Hanif, 2018, p. 109), suggest that the occupying apparatus produces its own casualties of coherence, even among those who nominally benefit from its power. This detail matters for the paper's overall argument: Hanif's critique targets the systems that manufacture hybridity under pressure, not any single national or cultural group exclusively.

5.6 Reading Hanif's Satire: Whose Story Is Being Told

A fair critical question, and one the present researcher considers worth raising directly, is whether *Red Birds* distributes its satire evenly. At points the novel can seem to concentrate its harshest comedy on local complicity Momo's greed, Father Dear's flattery while treating the occupying power's violence with a more absurdist, less personally implicating comic register. This is a legitimate line of critique, and it is consistent with broader debates in postcolonial criticism about whether satire authored from within a diasporic or internationally circulating literary position can inadvertently reproduce the very asymmetries it sets out to expose. The present paper's reading, however, is that the novel's harsher treatment of local complicity is best understood not as exoneration of the occupying power but as a refusal of an easier, more comfortable narrative in which local actors are purely victims. Read this way, the discomfort the novel produces around figures like Father Dear and Momo is doing genuine critical work: it insists that domination is sustained not only by the dominant but also, painfully, by the accommodations of the dominated, without this insistence requiring the reader to conclude that the two are therefore equally responsible.

6. Conclusion

Red Birds resists a tidy allocation of blame, and this paper has argued that this resistance is the source of its critical force rather than a weakness in its politics. Through Momo's aspirational mimicry, Father Dear's transactional complicity, and Lady Flower Body's instrumentalized care, Hanif traces a spectrum of hybrid identity formed under sustained external pressure, none of which offers its bearer real security. Read through Bhabha's account of the Third Space and Young's caution against treating hybridity as a simply celebratory condition, the novel emerges as a study of identity under duress: not a binary choice between resistance and surrender, but a continuous, costly negotiation in which characters borrow, perform and ultimately lose parts of themselves in circumstances few of them chose. At a moment when scholarship continues to grapple with the long psychological and political aftermath of the War on Terror, *Red Birds* offers a case study in how fiction can hold a system accountable without absolving any of the individuals operating inside it, and the novel's treatment of humanitarian aid, education and reconstruction as extensions of that system deserves continued critical attention alongside its more widely studied engagement with trauma and disappearance.

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