



ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTION

## Negotiations Between the Center and the Margin: Hanif's *Red Birds* as a Transcultural Contact Zone

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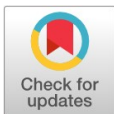
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**Abstract**— In *Red Birds*, Hanif utilizes transculturation within the contact zone to navigate between Western and non-Western perspectives, repurpose Western materials for self-representation, and critique Euro-American hegemonic discourses. This examination uses Mary Louise Pratt's concepts of the contact zone and transculturation as its theoretical framework. It aims to analyze how Hanif employs transculturation in *Red Birds* to negotiate, appropriate, and transform cultural narratives, challenging Eurocentrism and interrogating the binary of Western self versus Muslim other in the context of 9/11 and the War on Terror. *Red Birds* is analyzed qualitatively as a transcultural dialogue between American and Muslim subjects. The study reveals how Hanif appropriates postmodern rejections of hegemonic metanarratives to construct self-representations from a marginalized perspective, offering a critique of Western dominance. The research utilizes Catherine Belsey's method of textual analysis, crucial for understanding texts within their specific historical and cultural contexts. Belsey's approach acknowledges that textual analysis can provide new insights based on its historical moment and cultural specificity, and is applied to interpret *Red Birds* within the post-9/11 milieu. Framing *Red Birds* as a contact zone, this study explores the complexities of cultural interactions, power dynamics, and resistance depicted in the novel. It underscores how Hanif inverts the conventional conflict of the War on Terror, transforming it into a space for imagining coexistence between Americans and Muslims. The paper highlights the disruption of Eurocentric global security discourses and the Western/Muslim binary, suggesting that Pakistani Anglophone fiction has transcended the limitations of 9/11 narratives and offers a more nuanced perspective on cross-cultural engagement and resistance.

**Index Terms**— Transculturation, Contact zone, War on terror, Post-9/11 Anglophone Pakistani fiction, Marginality

**Received:** 30 November 2023 ; **Accepted:** 20 January 2024; **Published:** 28 March 2024



### Introduction

Hanif (2018) presents the contact between the Americans and the Muslim refugees in the backdrop of War on Terror. In recent times, the contact between Muslims and Westerns is often constrained because of the growing divide between the West and the Islamic world as "while Sharia groups argue that the 'West is at war with Islam,' far-right anti-Islam groups claim that 'Islam is at war with the West'" (Toguslu & d'Haenens, 2023, p. 36). Mirrlees and Ibaid pronounce that a vast majority of Americans perceive Muslims through five stereotypes "Arab, foreign, violent, terroristic, and anti-American" (Mirrlees & Ibaid, 2021, p. 35). After 9/11, the Muslims are frequently framed as a global security threat through media representations and literary discourses of the west (Morey & Yaqin, 2011). We argue in this

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research that the antagonism between the Muslims and the Westerns is driven by imbalanced power relations that construct us/them binary to keep the West as central and the Muslim world as peripheral in global politics. Humanities in general and Anglophone Pakistani fiction has the capacity of disrupting the power-driven binary by envisioning the possibilities of negotiation between the westerns and the Muslims. We assume that *Red Birds* performs this crucial negotiation and intend to examine how *Red Birds* addresses the west from the position of marginalized Muslims. This research is significant in Pakistani and global contexts because it examines how Hanif problematizes the Eurocentric discourses of national security and international peace that have been employed by the western (neo)imperial forces to vilify Islam, Muslims, and their culture and to justify their military interventions into the political, social and cultural life of the Muslim world through War on Terror. Post-9/11 War on Terror and anti-Muslim racism constitute a relation of mutual reinforcement. If Islamophobia demonizes Muslims living in the West and constructs them as a security threat, the War on Terror transported this racism across borders to target the Muslim world and subsequently constructed the image of savage Muslims to import it back into the Western world. The image of a savage Muslim feeds Islamophobic discourses by creating the binary of Western 'us' and Muslim 'them.' Claire Chambers and Sairish Hussain examine the mechanisms of the Western publishing industry to suggest that "the representation of people of color in film, television, and literature is simultaneously scarce, stereotypical, and negative, offering reductive or sensationalized narratives of already marginalized people" (Chambers & Hussain, 2023, p. 287). However, they also express that novelists with Muslim heritage demonstrate the capacity to transcend cultural, ideological, and political constraints in their novels. This paper validates Chamber's and Hussain's faith in the potential of English fiction by Muslim writers, and, on the other, extends their insights to analyze *Red Birds* as a transcultural contact zone. We intend to suggest that academia needs to read Anglophone Pakistan fiction as a contact zone that goes beyond the discursive fixations of 9/11 and War on Terror.

### Literature Review

The emergence of Anglophone Pakistani fiction as a valuable literary genre is closely linked with 9/11 and War on Terror. Being written against the backdrop of growing dissent between the Western and the Muslim worlds, post-9/11 Anglophone Pakistani fiction is often studied for exploring the representations of Islam and Muslim cultures. During War on Terror, Pakistan remained entangled between the antagonistic demands of secular and religious ideals because of its political connections with both America and the Taliban. The world academia often studies Anglophone Pakistani fiction to explore whether it supports religion or secularism, and infers that Pakistani Anglophone novelists criticize the dominance of religious discourses in Pakistan. Faisal Nazir calls post-9/11 Anglophone Pakistani fiction a form of re-orientalism that "serves the interests of new imperialism" (Nazir, 2020, p. 233) by demonizing Islam and Pakistani culture. Karim (2018) argues that Anglophone Pakistani fiction "restricts Islam to conservatism, irrationalism, and orthodoxy" (p. 39), and Anglophone Pakistani novelists write for Western readership as they are not "concerned with a desire to bring about some type of national movement back home" (p. 46). Pakistani readers often think that Pakistani Anglophone novelists construct "a reductive, stereotypical, and inauthentic portrayal of Pakistan for the consumption of Western readers" (Bilal, 2020, p. 414). Kamal (2023) appreciates Bhutto's *The Runaways* for its disruption of Islamophobic perceptions but expresses that "until the material conditions of the industry transform, the postcolonial writer will continue to be positioned as a cultural spokesperson, and the postcolonial novel will engage in production for western consumption" (p. 310). It has become almost routine to perceive Pakistani Anglophone fiction as a cultural artifact that transmits a complicity with Euro-American expectations, but this article reads *Red Birds* as a transcultural creative voice that resists the demands of the Western publishing industry. Anjaria (2018) studies the fiction of Shamsie, Hamid, and Hanif to suggest that "the events of 9/11 brought Pakistan...into a global light...largely through negative representations" but Anglophone Pakistani fiction writers contest the stigmatization of Pakistan by representing the history of "global power inequalities" (p. 49). This paper extends Anjaria's argument to investigate how Hanif foregrounds power inequalities between the Muslims and the Americans rather than religion as the cause of growing dissent between them.

Masood Ashraf Raja's essay 'Competing Habitus' alludes to the complexity of Anglophone Pakistani fiction by contextualizing it within "the nationalistic and cosmopolitan habitus" (Raja, 2018, p. 350). He explains that "a habitus both produces the system of judgments and provides a classification, or hierarchy of these judgments" (p. 349). Nationalistic habitus demands a bright picture of Pakistani culture in novels, but cosmopolitan habitus requires a dark picture. Raja argues that both national and cosmopolitan interests pressurize Anglophone Pakistani writers. National habitus "forces the reader not just to dwell on the text, but to ponder more over what the text does. What does it normalize?" (p. 351), and cosmopolitan habitus makes the writers follow "metropolitan publishing industry and its financial and artistic imperatives" (p. 350). However, this paper extends Raja's ideas to explore how Hanif's *Red Birds* introduces 'transcultural habitus' by transcending national and cosmopolitan habitus demands.

Hai (2022) notes that a large bulk of post-9/11 fiction is Eurocentric as it "often ends up reinforcing negative stereotypes and prevalent Islamophobic notions about Arabs and Muslims" (p. 01). Morey, in *Islamophobia and The Novel*, expresses that "during the war on terror, it was necessary to create a 'spectacle of fear' around Muslims and Islam to bolster support for an illegal imperialist foreign policy" (Morey, 2018, p. 13). Western media and fiction have been vigorously maligning Islam and Muslims since 9/11. Discursively constructed

images portray Islam as a religion of violence and Muslims as terrorists. Morey is critical of such pictures as he believes that "artistic and cultural forms can reinforce Islamophobia" (p. 28). However, he suggests that artistic forms "can also expose [Islamophobia], dramatize its inconsistencies, or outright oppose it" (p. 28). This paper intends to explore how *Red Birds* responds to Eurocentric discourses that stigmatize Muslims as potential terrorists. Sadaf (2019) asserts that "an examination of how Pakistani Anglophone literature speaks to the global reader is not only timely but valuable for its insights" (p. 138). She opines that Post-9/11 Anglophone fiction has performed three valuable tasks: it has emerged as a "valuable counter-narrative to 9/11 writings in the West", it has acquired a significant "position in War on Terror debates," and it envisions "a future beyond recent events" (p. 141). Anglophone Pakistani fiction situates itself in the middle space to "write back and write beyond 9/11" (p. 141). One of the objectives of this paper is to highlight those features of *Red Birds* that shift the debate from post-9/11 conflict to War on Terror contact between the West and the Muslim world.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The presence of contact in various social, political, economic, and cultural forms has always been a significant aspect of human existence. Pratt defines contact zones as "social spaces in which different cultures intersect, clash, and grapple with each other, often in imbalanced relations of power" (Pratt, 2007, p. 07). These zones highlight the conflicts and power dynamics between diverse cultural groups. In the context of this paper, the War on Terror is portrayed as a form of power dynamics between the Western and Muslim worlds. This research aims to examine how Hanif presents the War on Terror in *Red Birds*: does he illustrate it as a political conflict between Western dominance and Muslim subordination, or does he reverse this pattern by depicting the war as a type of cultural interaction? The idea of domination and subordination situates cultural individuals within the contact zone, positioning some at the center and others at the periphery. Anglophone literature authored by writers from the peripheral third world creates a literary contact zone where Western centrality encounters, clashes, and engages with third-world marginalization. Pratt further suggests that any aspect of human life, from family to creative art, can serve as a contact zone, indicating that the importance lies not in whether a particular paradigm fits the model but in the insights gained by considering it within the framework of contact zones (Pratt, 2022, p. 126). This paper utilizes Pratt's theory to analyze *Red Birds* as a textual contact zone, demonstrating the implications of real-world interactions between Western and Muslim cultures during the War on Terror. Pratt's concept of transculturation is also essential to this analysis. She defines transculturation as "the processes through which members of marginalized groups select and adapt materials transmitted by a dominant or metropolitan culture" (Pratt, 1991, p. 36). Through transculturation, marginalized writers resist Western hegemony by selectively appropriating Western materials for their own purposes. Pratt views transculturation as "the phenomenon of the contact zone" (p. 36), as it disrupts the power-based binary of the center and periphery, enabling marginalized voices to confront Western centrality. This paper employs Pratt's conceptualization to investigate how Hanif utilizes transculturation in *Red Birds* to reflect on the consequences of interactions between Western and Muslim individuals during the War on Terror, from a position of marginalization.

### **Methodology**

The research utilizes Belsey's textual analysis method to analyze *Red Birds*. Belsey emphasizes the importance of textual analysis in studies focusing on texts or aiming to comprehend the representation of culture within artifacts (Belsey, 2005, p. 160). This approach is highly relevant to this study as it acknowledges that textual analysis takes place within specific historical and cultural contexts. As Belsey points out, "a specific textual analysis is made at a particular historical moment and from within a specific culture... the analysis is not exhaustive: it does not embrace all the possible readings, past and future... it is able to be new" (Belsey, 2005, p. 169). This paper employs Belsey's method of textual analysis to interpret *Red Birds* in the specific historical context of the post-9/11 War on Terror. The goal is to examine the various textual meanings that emerge during the imaginary interaction between American and Muslim characters in Hanif's narrative. By viewing the text as a contact zone, the study illuminates the complexity of cultural interactions, power dynamics, and resistance within the novel.

### **Textual Analysis and Discussion**

*Red Birds* represents the inversion of conflict into contact between the Americans and the Muslims in the anonymous settings of a war-ridden refugee camp located somewhere on the borders of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Hanif employs the tropes of missing persons, young Muslim mind, post-traumatic stress disorder, and the so-called rehabilitation of war-victims to question the reliability of American claims of liberal humanitarianism. He articulates the story of war-ridden Muslims who are either bombed, arrested, detained and killed in War on Terror, or left dependent on USAID after the war. The novel narrates the contact of a Muslim family with Americans in a U.S.-funded refugee camp on the borders of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Momo, one of the main narrators of the novel, considers USAID for natives' rehabilitation a war tactic, and says that "first they bomb us from the skies, then work hard to cure our stress" (Hanif, 2018, p. 67). Though

a boy of fifteen, Momo is less inclined to "discuss problems of growing up" and more concerned with "find[ing] solutions to the problems that grown-ups have" (p. 17). Hanif presents Momo as a young Muslim who believes that he can redress his mother's miseries by bringing his brother back. Momo's elder brother Ali leaves his family to work with Americans but never returns home. Ali's disappearance from the camp constitutes the primary motif of the novel that links American interventions into the Muslim world with the domestic loss and cultural annihilation imposed upon the war-stricken Muslims. Momo's father, characterized as Father Dear, is an admirer of Americans and not only works for them but also sends Ali to work in the American military base referred as Hangar in the novel. Momo thinks that his father's "employment and his love for his employer is the source of all [their] troubles" (p. 19) as he believes that his father has sold Ali to Americans. Father Dear brings Lady Flowerbody, an American PhD scholar who wants to study young Muslim minds, to the camp. Flowerbody's arrival is followed by Major Ellie's coming to the camp. Ellie is the second narrator in the novel and narrates the futility of war that he experiences during his military service. The novel begins with the crash of Ellie's plane while he was flying to bomb Momo's camp. Ellie ejects from the jet and strives to survive in the desert surrounding the camp. He is rescued by Momo and his dog called Mutt, and brought to the camp. Mutt, the philosopher dog, is the third and the most important narrator of the novel. Mutt is Momo's dog and Hanif employs Mutt's narrative voice to offer a nuanced critique of War on Terror, Americans, and Muslims. Momo's interactions with Ellie and Flowerbody represent the post-war contact between Muslims and Americans. Through their contact, Hanif not only dramatizes the destructive aspects of war but also problematizes post-war American programs of reconstruction. The camp becomes the contact zone in *Red Birds* where Muslim and American sensibilities meet in asymmetrical power relations, and the narration of the contact appears as a transcultural voice that originates from the perspectives of war-wounded marginalized. Momo is the direct victim of war as he has always been on the receiving end of aerial bombardments, but Hanif disempowers Ellie by depriving him of his jet to make him wonder about the paradoxes of American military policy. Momo and Ellie offer their subjective thoughts on Muslim and American sensibilities, respectively, but Mutt's narratives present an ironic juxtaposition of both Momo's and Ellie's outlooks. Mutt appears as Hanif's transcultural voice that perceives from both Muslim and American perspectives and speaks from the position of marginality to enlighten not only the Muslim but also the western readers.

Transculturation, as defined by Pratt and also being used in the context of this research, refers to a third-world writer's appropriation of western literary techniques, themes and motifs to speak back to the first world. Though, a transcultural writer is never constrained by ideological borders as Tasneem Shahnaaz states that being transcultural means a search for "a space that helps reconceptualise human interaction beyond their sociocultural or political fixities and constraints" (Shahnaaz, 2022, p. 238), but he foregrounds indigenous perspectives in his representations and shifts the axis of reference from the first world to the third world. Hanif perceives and represents the repercussions of war by prioritizing the standpoints of those Muslims who are firsthand victims of War on Terror, and downplays the western viewpoints that are not grounded into the real conditions of distant wars fought in third-world territories like Afghanistan and Pakistan. Ellie's personal involvement in War on Terror makes him mock American self-righteousness by differentiating between the textual and the actual realities of War on Terror. Muslim as an enemy of the west is largely a textual/discursive construct, and Ellie foregrounds this discursive textuality when he says, "in a world of uncertainty, if you can nail them down on paper map, the enemy's existence becomes more real" (Hanif, 2018, p. 07). A large corpus that discursively constructs Muslims as a threat to global peace provides rationales for launching advanced "remote control drones" that can be operated from Houston by "someone who can fight a one-handed war while dipping his fries in barbeque sauce" (p. 05). Ellie's observations after the crash of his flying jet allude to his disenchantment with American discourses of national security and global peace, and Hanif pitches Ellie's insights to question the legitimacy of American military policy from within. It is pertinent to mention that Hanif presents Ellie's contact not with terror-manufacturing-Muslim radicals, but with common Muslim refugees who are displaced from their homes and compelled to live on USAID in a "godforsaken desolation" (p. 05). Ellie is quite critical of USAID and articulates his disillusionment with war and post-war reconstruction by expressing that "war has been condensed to carpet-bombing followed by dry rations and craft classes for the refugees" (p. 32). It seems Hanif has intentionally avoided the inclusion of any Muslim terrorist in his fictive representations to foreground the distress of the dispossessed Muslim refugees.

The Muslim refugees in *Red Birds* do not cherish affiliations with combating terrorists, but they are the immediate victims of a war in which their urge to live on is categorized as "nihilistic resistance" (p. 32). They are the unacknowledged recipients of aerial bombardments who can be killed with impunity and penned down in the list of collateral damage. Hanif does not mention the geographical and cultural origin of refugees in the novel, but there is an explicit statement about their pre-war existence as the refugee camp is populated by "people who had not left their hamlets for centuries, goatherds who believed in nothing but grassy fields and music, women who had never walked beyond the village well" (pp. 32-33). The omission of refugees' origins but an explicit projection of their traditional lifestyles are significant features of Hanif's transculturation because he transcends geographical and cultural constraints and does not let them overshadow the difference between pre-contact and post-conflict existence of refugees. Displaced from their native homes and meadows, the refugees are cornered into a desert where they paradoxically experience the taste of foreign life style for the first time as they "live in US tents, eat exotic food donated by USAID and burp after drinking fizzy drinks" (p. 33). The refugees are neither the adherents of any political ideology nor agents of any nationalism, but common people who have become naked bodies upon which impacts of conflicting ideologies and nationalisms are engraved. Ellie's concerns were political before his encounter with the refugees, but once he is deprived of American

privileges, he comes to confront the real existential threat in forms of thirst, starvation and homelessness. Both Ellie and the refugees are displaced from their homes for opposite reasons, but Hanif presents their contact to stress that what sounds as an exceptional condition to a war-perpetuating specialist has been thrust like a daily routine on the common people. Ellie faces real existential threats and comes to realize that no amount of USAID can compensate the loss of those war victims “whose only possessions are a crutch, and a Quran and the memory of a missing limb” (p. 181); and no rehabilitation program can succeed because, after erasing their homes to the ground and displacing them to the camps where their futurism does not go beyond the next meal, “you cannot give them drip irrigation and tent schools and hope them to become civilized and accomplish the next millennium goals” (p. 33). Ellie regards not only the war-time-destruction but also the post-war-reconstruction programs as self-congratulating humanism that serves no immediate human purpose and results only in drainage of life, energy and resources. He wonders, “we used to have art for art’s sake; now we have war for the sake of war” (p. 32). Through Ellie’s speculations, Hanif problematizes the legitimacy of American self-righteousness on one hand, and on the other hand, he demonstrates that art can serve an ethical purpose by highlighting the miseries of the downtrodden whose existential concerns found little space in aesthetics. This inclusion of ethical component in the aesthetics of a novel is a significant feature of transculturation as it carves space for envisioning the possibilities of transformation. Ashcroft (2022) emphasizes that transculturation is “a zone of mutual transformation” (p. 23), that not only transforms the fictive characters but also makes the readers revisit their preconceived notions. Transcultural reading is always a critical thinking that negotiates between antagonistic perspectives by making the reader “think independently outside [his] own cultural assumptions” (Boone, 2022, p. 93), but it is also pertinent to remember that being transcultural does not mean a rejection of the indigenous perspectives but a blend of both domestic and foreign perspectives.

Hanif foregrounds the perspectives of Muslim refugees in *Red Birds*, and employs Momo’s narratives to showcase the impacts of foreign intrusions on Muslim life. Momo used to be a religious person who “could pray with such intensity that [he’d] get a proper fever”, but the disappearance of his elder brother disillusioned him from religion to such an extent that he starts thinking “no Bro Ali, no God. Simple as that” (Hanif, 2018, p. 38-39). Instead of portraying religion as a refuge for Muslim refugees, Hanif presents Muslim disenchantment with religion because the heavenly codes of consolation are no more applicable in face of earthly mechanisms of war. The tragedy of being deprived of religious belief is further intensified when Momo perceives that the substitutes of religion in forms of USAID and rehabilitation programs are equally dysfunctional because they cannot bring his brother back. Bro Ali’s disappearance is a litmus paper that tests not only divinity but also the integrity of those American “nice-smelling do-gooders who would give [refugees] powdered milk and ask [them] about their feelings” (p. 42) on losing their sons and brothers. Momo is highly critical of American-sponsored workshops like “Living With Trauma” and surveys called “Traditional Cures in Time of Distress and Disorder” (p. 44) as he assumes these activities nothing else but an additional insult to the refugees’ injuries. He believes neither in Flowerbody’s research nor in her good intentions, and records how his mother rebukes Flowerbody; “Are you here to make us feel heroic for losing our son?” (p. 48). As discussed above, refugees have no concern with heroic nationalism or glorified religiosity, so any humanitarian research that studies them to manufacture discursive insights on native cultures is bound to downplay their immediate existential preoccupations. Mother Dear knows nothing about nationalism or native culture, and the only thing she wants is her son. Flowerbody, on the other hand, says that “I intend to use this community as a laboratory for testing my hypothesis about how our collective memories are actually our cultural capital” (p. 44). Hanif suggests an ironic juxtaposition between Flowerbody’s humanitarianism and American imperialism as the former wants to test her research hypothesis once the latter has tested its missiles on common Muslims. Mother Dear is neither concerned about collective memories nor with cultural capital, but Flowerbody intends to convert the actual human loss into a textual construct that will ultimately establish that the refugees were in need of bombardments for their own good. Moreover, the refugees remain the recipients of western interventions; first in form of bombs and latter in form of anthropological gaze that perceives Momo as “a lab rat” (p. 135) handy for studying the workings of young Muslim mind and Muslim culture.

Hanif emphasizes the binary of American subject and Muslim object in Momo’s narratives, but dismantles this binary through Mutt’s speculations as Mutt criticizes both Americans and Muslims. Mutt appears as a transcultural spokesperson who not only questions American self-righteousness by speculating that “what’s worse than somebody unilaterally defining your own good for you?” (p. 132), but also accuses Father Dear of being the “logistics man [and the] local guy” of Americans (p. 28). Before blaming Americans, Mutt blames Father Dear, whose one-sided love for Americans resulted in Ali’s departure from the camp. Mutt states, “you don’t sell your sons even if you are being paid in dollars” (p. 29), and thus he transcends the familial associations to pinpoint the causes of his family’s troubles. This transcendence of individual affiliations is the prime feature of transculturation and suggests a bidirectional critique of human faults and follies. Mutt not only considers Momo’s business plans foolish but also mocks Bro Ali, who used to guide Americans about when and where to drop bombs. Mutt considers it ironical that despite Father Dear’s and Bro Ali’s being the local guys of Americans, their house is bombed. He ridicules Ali’s going to work at Hangar by contemplating that Ali left his family “as if the bomb demolishing our house was not a senseless aerial attack but a job offer” (p. 99). If Momo blames Americans for his people’s sufferings, Mutt’s contemplation takes a different route as he thinks that “when my folks don’t have a real explanation [of their miseries], they blame it on war. As if before the war we were all a brotherhood” (p. 83). Mutt thinks about the real causes of human misery and instead of unleashing his anger on Americans only, he is equally angry with his own people who facilitate Americans in their war pursuits. For Mutt, both Father Dear who “likes the

taste" of "licking white man's boots" (p. 97) and the man who "sells Allah's vegetables and chicken and wants a US visa" (p. 176) are traitors. It is significant to mention that it is Mutt who notes the presence of red birds flying in the air. He states, "when someone dies in a raid or a shooting or when someone's throat is slit, their last drop of blood transforms into a tiny red bird and flies away" (p. 84). For Mutt, everyone whether a Muslim or an American is a victim of war and everyone's existence is significant. Thus through Mutt's narratives, Hanif transcends religious and national configurations to speak for humanity, and Mutt becomes the transcultural representative of humanity who is capable of criticizing the futility of war that produces red birds.

War separates families as War on Terror has separated Ellie and Cath in the novel. Another couple that suffers from marital crisis because of war is Momo's father and mother. Mother Dear hates Father Dear's love for Americans as she believes that "love of white people is a special kind of disease" (p. 228) that makes one commit crimes even against one's own family. Both Mother Dear and Cath blame war for disintegrating their families, but it is pertinent to distinguish between their anguish. The later craves for a baby while feeling bored by the luxuries of American life, the former desperately needs her son back while trying to survive in a war-ridden refugee camp. Hanif constructs a parallel between two marriages to highlight that it becomes imperative to highlight the difference in the nature of suffering because War on Terror has affected the two parties differently not only in degree but also in kind. Despite apparent similarities in Mother Dear's and Cath's situation, their agonies are different in kind as war and the subsequent existential threats are impositions for Mother Dear but Cath does not face such existential crises. Their troubles are different in degree because Mother Dear has lost both her son and husband but Cath has lost only her husband who can return home once the war is over. Mother Dear can only hope against hope for her son's return. Moreover, Ellie's and Cath's deprivations are temporary as compared to Mother Dear's perpetual grief over the loss of her home and people. Hanif draws these inherent differences in apparently similar human conditions to emphasize that though a global conflict affects humanity across borders one cannot place those who suffer from the immediate consequences of war and those who perpetuate war into the same categories. Both of them suffer in the end, but one must differentiate between their sufferings to recognize the actual victims of global conflicts. This emphasis on the sufferings of Muslims – through a juxtaposition between two families – is a transcultural critique of war from the perspective of the oppressed.

Ellie and Flowerbody are agents of destruction and reconstruction respectively, but Hanif ironically highlights the interdependency of their roles by blurring the distinction between the mechanisms of destruction and reconstruction. The former comes to the camp because he has nowhere else to go but the later comes "as a spy but [on finding] nothing to spy on" (p. 179) starts spying on the young Muslim minds to "shed light on the global plight of Muslim" (p. 181). Ellie destroys young Muslim terrorists but Flowerbody reads the minds of young Muslims who can be the potential terrorists. Ellie asks Flowerbody, "why can't we all just stay home", and Flowerbody replies, "I volunteered to come here after you forced these people out of their homes. You should have stayed home" (p. 181). The pertinent question is, whether Flowerbody is going to suggest to her American fellows that young Muslims are worried for their missing brothers and fathers, or she is going to propose that young Muslims are planning to attack American forces? The text is silent about this question, and Hanif keeps the question open for the readers. However, he makes it clear that neither Ellie nor Flowerbody can provide a solution of local problems because they themselves are the source of natives' problems in the first place.

Transculturation transcends cultures through art in presence of competing cultural ideologies. It cannot operate in absence of cultural binaries because it needs a contact zone where antagonistic cultural sensibilities meet and clash with each other. However, Hanif presents Muslim culture through its absence, and highlights the impacts of American militarism on native cultures. Instead of pitching competing cultural sensibilities against each other, he raises a question what sort of cultural sensibilities one can expect from USAID dependent thieves? Ironically, he demonstrates that the people like Ellie and Flowerbody assume the deprivations of refugees as the essence of their Muslim culture and transport it back to their western world where Muslims are already perceived to be backward, savage, and corrupt. Hanif seems to be suggesting that the Americans destroy living cultures first and later start asserting that native cultures lack integrity. Momo is quite right when he says "how're you gonna keep your integrity in a place where thievery is not only accepted but also expected?" (p. 16). He further expresses, "these people; my people, they are nothing but thieves with tears" (p. 20). The camp can be a site of cultural impositions carried out through USAID but not a place for cultural examination because it is populated by those who have been deprived of culture in the first place. Thus, Hanif's transculturation encompasses not the transcendence of indigenous culture but a concern for its absence. His transculturation questions cultural assumptions of the west that make Ellie doubt "the sanity of a culture where people start doing stuff [after praying to] a desert god when the stars are still shining" (p. 141). Hanif seems to be asking how one can decide the sanity of a people who have nothing else but wounded pride and religious rituals at their disposal to bear the brunt of American militarism, and whose miseries have made them pray simultaneously for the return of USAID planes and missing brothers. Ellie asks Flowerbody about the refugees, "They call themselves Muslims and still don't speak Arabic. Why don't they speak Arabic?" (p. 199), and thus he represents the western misperception of perceiving every Muslim as an Arab. Neither all Muslims are Arabs nor all Arabs are Muslims, but the western essentialism tends to homogenize them into a single category.

War changes both geographical and psychological landscapes. Hanif presents the geographical and psychological chaos throughout the text, but he highlights the impacts of war with more emphasis in the last part of the novel. Redbirds – the ghosts of the people who die in war – which only Mutt and Doctor see in the first two parts of the novel, are visible to everyone in the last part. The geographical space

shrinks to a closed Hangar and the psychological space broadens to perceive the impacts of war on the existence of both the Americans and the Muslims. Everyone sees red birds on the roof of the Hangar, and their concerns seem to converge for the first time in the novel as they do not discriminate between the Muslim and the American red birds. Thus, Hanif's transculturation disrupts the American/Muslim binary in the settings of Hangar as it becomes a metaphor to describe how war hangs life and spares neither the powerful nor the powerless.

Hanif presents Hangar both as a literal geographical place and a metaphoric mental space in *Red Birds*. Hangar as a geographical place is the military base from where Americans launched their war programs, and as a metaphoric space it refers to the traumatized human consciousness that is the end product of American militarism. Ellie thinks and talks about his wife Cath who lives in America, but Hanif imports Cath's into the ghosts-ridden Hangar by utilizing the potentials of the metaphoric space that can be extended beyond borders. He presents Cath's perspectives on war and problematizes the discourses of American humanitarianism by making Cath express, "[think] of the children, they say, think of all the starving, dying children in the world, and thinking of the children they go and drop tons of bombs on some godforsaken place" (italics in original p. 260). Though there is a bidirectional critique of Americans and Muslims in the narratives of Momo, Mutt, and Ellie; but it is Cath whose narrative unilaterally blames America for bringing chaos in the world. She does not suffer from the immediate consequences of war in forms of displacement, poverty, and death but suffers nonetheless as war has resulted in alienation between her and Ellie. She converts her personal grief into a collective perspective and exposes the paradoxes inherent in the discourses of War on Terror by asserting that "[they] start a war and after a few millions have died then suddenly remember the young ones. *Think of the children, they say. All the wars in the world are an afterthought about dead children*" (italics in original p. 260).

Mother Dear appears as a transcultural spokesperson of humanity at the end of the novel. She arrives at Hangar to fight with Americans and to bring Bro Ali back, but the red birds make her rise above the status of Bro Ali's mother to the mother of all humanity as she says, "I am looking at these ghosts and my heart melts, because they all look like lost sons" (p. 242). She does not want to use her dagger, and utters God's names on her rosary to stop Momo from shooting the already dead Americans. Momo keeps on saying, "[not] the rosary, Mother Dear, not the rosary please" (p. 246) but Mother Dear decides "to stand between Momo and [dead Americans]" (243). Momo believes that "plastic beads on a nylon string are not going to win us victories" (p. 246), but Mother Dear intends to "ensure order and avoid unwanted casualties" (p. 243) by invoking God's mercy. Though Mother Dear's reliance on her faith seems irrational in the environment of Hangar, but Hanif dramatizes Mother Dear's sentimental uttering of God's names to question those rationales that perceive religion as the source of divide between the first and the third worlds. The west constructs discourses of global peace and security to launch wars against the perceived Muslim savages but culminates in manufacturing ghosts and red birds. Religion, on the other hand, becomes the only refuge that may provide a temporary shelter to the victims of War on Terror. In *Red Birds*, the war manufactures Hangar and its inhabitant ghosts, but religion makes Mother Dear think that the ghosts are neither Muslims nor Americans but the emblems of a wounded humanity that deserve God's mercy.

### Theoretical and practical implications

The study's theoretical implications revolve around the applicability of transculturation and postmodernism as frameworks for comprehending cultural interactions in literature. Transculturation involves appropriating Western materials to present non-Western viewpoints, challenging the dichotomy of center versus margin. This approach disrupts Eurocentric assumptions and promotes a more collaborative and interconnected perspective of global and local cultural dynamics. (Rizvi, 2022, p. 361) statement that "self-contained entities are possible only where the local never links to the global" emphasizes the significance of transcultural exchanges in overcoming isolationist viewpoints. Hanif's utilization of transculturation in *Red Birds* demonstrates how non-Western writers can engage with and contest Western discourses without outright rejection. By assimilating postmodernism, Hanif engages in a critique of Eurocentric narratives of the War on Terror, aligning with Linda Hutcheon's observation that marginalized voices can contest dominant power structures even within their confines (Hutcheon, 1988, p. 197). Hanif's micro-narratives challenge the metanarratives of the War on Terror, emphasizing existential concerns over epistemological ones. This approach highlights the existential struggles of refugees, offering a critique of American militarism and humanitarianism without succumbing to anti-American rhetoric. The study demonstrates the postmodern emphasis on plurality and multiplicity, as outlined by (Best & Kellner, 1991, p. 286), and how this pluralism enables diverse and contextual politics. By presenting multiple perspectives and avoiding the construction of a new center, Hanif's narrative aligns with Dagnino's view of transcultural perspectives as "constantly shifting and dynamic" (Dagnino, 2015, p. 09). This theoretical perspective suggests that transcultural literature can offer new ways of understanding and negotiating cultural and political tensions. The practical implications of this study have significant implications for literary analysis and cross-cultural understanding. Hanif's approach in *Red Birds* illustrates how literature can operate as a contact zone, where diverse cultural perspectives engage in dialogue rather than conflict. For scholars and critics, this requires a reassessment of traditional narratives and consideration of how literature can reveal intricate interactions between marginalized and dominant cultures. Educators and literary practitioners can use Hanif's work as a template for exploring postmodern and transcultural themes in literature. By focusing on the plurality of perspectives and the negotiation between cultural centers and margins, educators can foster a more nuanced understanding of global conflicts and cultural exchanges. This approach encourages

readers to engage with texts from multiple viewpoints, promoting empathy and critical thinking. Additionally, Hanif's narrative technique emphasizes the importance of including diverse voices and perspectives in literary discussions, moving beyond binary oppositions to explore possibilities for coexistence and reconciliation. This has practical implications for writers, policymakers, and activists who seek to address global conflicts and cultural tensions through inclusive and collaborative frameworks. Overall, the practical implications suggest a shift towards recognizing and valuing the complexities of cultural interactions, encouraging a more integrative and dynamic approach to literature and cultural studies.

### Limitations future research

The study on Hanif's *Red Birds* delves into transculturation and postmodernism but has limitations. Focusing solely on this novel in the context of the post-9/11 War on Terror may restrict the applicability of the findings to other works and periods. Relying solely on textual analysis may not fully capture the complex nature of cultural interactions and power dynamics. Interpreting Hanif's work through theoretical frameworks may overlook the author's intentions and the diversity of reader responses, potentially limiting understanding. Future research could overcome these limitations by conducting comparative studies of other post-9/11 Anglophone Pakistani fiction. Expanding the methodological approach to include interdisciplinary perspectives could provide a more nuanced understanding of cultural narratives. Integrating additional theoretical frameworks, such as global citizenship or cosmopolitanism, may offer new insights into transcultural literature. Exploring the impact of reader interpretations and authorial intent could enrich the analysis and reveal how various audiences engage with transcultural narratives. These future directions promise to deepen the understanding of how literature negotiates global power structures and offer a broader perspective on transcultural interactions.

### Conclusion

Transculturation is not an outright disregard for the west but an appropriation of western materials to project non-western perspectives. It envisages co-presence and collaboration by making the center and the margin transcend their self-referential cultural cum political assumptions, as Rizvi suggests, "self-contained entities are possible only where the local never links to the global" (Rizvi, 2022, p. 361). Hanif links the local with the global by appropriating postmodernism to contest Eurocentric discourse of War on Terror in *Red Birds*. Linda Hutcheon opines that "[those] in power control history. The marginal and ex-centric, however, can contest that power, even as they remain within its purvey" (Hutcheon, 1988, p. 197). As discussed throughout this paper, Hanif contests the metanarratives of War on Terror by projecting the micro narratives of his fictive characters –Momo, Mutt, Ellie, Mother Dear, Cath – who are the victims of war. Postmodernism prioritizes micro narratives over metanarratives and focusses upon ontological rather than epistemological concerns of humanity. Hanif's narrators mock American militarism and humanitarianism from the position of marginality and highlight the disparities between the claims and actions of the Americans. Hanif highlights the existential concerns of the refugees instead of constructing an anti-American rhetoric to prioritize the ontological over the epistemological. He does not favor one narrator over the other and presents the existence of the refugees from multiple viewpoints. His pluralism is postmodern in its essence and invites readers to participate in the process of meaning-making. Steven Best and Douglas Kellner state that "postmodern celebration of plurality and multiplicity facilitates a more diverse, open, and contextual politics that refuses to privilege any general recipes for social change or any particular group" (Best & Kellner, 1991, p. 286). The postmodern multiplicity of perspectives is a significant feature of transcultural novels because they make readers perceive from multiple standpoints, as Dagnino expresses that transcultural perspective is "a constantly shifting and dynamic approach" (Dagnino, 2015, p. 09). Multiplicity of perspectives in *Red Birds* serves two purposes: it problematizes western hegemonic discourses without making the margin a new center, and it carves space –a contact zone– for negotiation between the center and the margin. Both Momo and Ellie condemn American militarism and Muslim stoicism, but neither Momo expresses grudge against common Americans nor Ellie manifests hatred for common Muslims. Despite their religious and cultural differences, their contact shows that there is a possibility of coexistence if the ideological pressure does not instill antagonism between them. The epistemological discourses originating from the west and the Muslim world often predict unavoidable conflict between the westerns and the Muslims, but the ontological concerns that Hanif displays in *Red Birds* envisage the possibilities of reconciliation.



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