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**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Feminist Dystopia and Indigenous Models of Subjection: A Feminist Critique of Hanif Mohammad's *Red Birds***

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper explores the indigenous women's portrayal as agency and subjection by attempting to determine the extent to which these women become representations of third world women in comparison to white women in the context of the new Orientalist theory in the postcolonial literary discourses. The selected text, *Red Birds* Hanif Mohammad, has been read under the lens of orientalism and new orientalism particularly relevant to the portrayal of Lady Flower Body, Mother Dear and Cathy. *Red Birds* though runs on the theme of the war on terrorism and its devastations in its narrative but while doing so, it projects multiple levels of identities of women of the west as well as the third world women who constantly experience agency as well as subjection. The study reveals that the third World women are experiencing feminist dystopia because white women have failed in sharing the fruits of the feminist movement.

**KEYWORDS** Agency and Subjection, Feminist Dystopia, Neo-Orientalism, Post 9/11 Narratives, Third World Women, War on Terrorism

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**Introduction**

Postcolonial literature has been characterized as the voice of the formerly colonized people as a part of the resistance that it inherently projects and especially the voice of the doubly colonized subalterns. As such it becomes also the agency of the women in the third world territories but not without its inherent subjection. Third world women and their status in the context of the western feminist movement cannot be deemed as empowered or emancipated but instead, it becomes a dystopia when investigated through the lens of postcolonial feminism and new orientalism. Postcolonial fiction portrays her voice as well as subjection, almost simultaneously, especially in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century digitalized global world. Women have been represented in two ways: as a domestic entity engulfed by the traditional belief system of being a good woman and on the other hand, a person who is not willing to accept the traditional dominance of man over state affairs and wanted to challenge and shake off the image of being a docile creature. So, there are agentic voices of women as well as the silencing representational roles as well. The latter aspect of women's life has gained more currency because of the increased level of interaction with the globally connected world via digital devices. It has been observed upward mobility in the imagination of women that they would love to be emancipated and empowered in the recent post 9/11 literature in almost every part of the globe. So, these voices urge that there should be an enquiry conducted to find the extent to which the agentic voices of women have prevailed as

portrayed through the fiction produced by the Pakistani writer while recording their responses to social development under a constantly stifling voice of the Other.

The feminist movement of the west seems at work in the narratives emerging from the formerly colonized countries and gives them agency, especially from south Asia. Yet while doing so it speaks of subjection as well because of the domination of patriarchal models. Besides, it also brings into discussion the images of good ideals of sacrificial mother and wife which complicates the interaction of feminism with the postcolonial theory and narratives about women in this context, like the Mother Dear in Hanif's *Red Birds* who according to Ahsan knows very little about the world and her rights but when the matter of rescue of her son arises, she "turns out to be capable of leading a blazing revolutionary charge to get her son back" (Ahsan, 2019, para. 10). "The omnipresence of women's issues in South Asian political and historical discourses can nevertheless assume an attempt to 'speak for' women, and thus to reduce them to silence" (Castaing, 2014, p. 2). The complexity moves towards its solution as well when the narratives about or for women of colour are examined because the western feminism that speaks for women of privileged middle-class women in the west does not speak about them and the western feminist discourses create a utopia-like environment where the third world women or coloured women do not find any place for their voice. "the 'sorority' claimed by the main feminist wave of the 1970s, which called for solidarity within a common struggle against male oppression, can be seen not only as utopian but also as a negation of the differences against which the 'third feminist wave' rose up on a massive scale (Castaing, 2014, p. 3). Thinkers and Philosophers of postcolonial studies agree with the notion that the western feminist discourses leave the voices of women from third world as others even while claiming the universalization of western feminist discourses. For example, Spivak while reading Julia Kristeva's essay on Chinese women, criticises many aspects of French feminism which leaves the women of colours as 'Others'.

The colonized discourses employed by the Western scholarship have also been criticised by Mohanty (1991) who believed in the deconstruction of these discourses and that the heterogeneity of experiences of the third world women must be recognised because in the absence of this recognition and because of using the universal western concept of feminism, it does not recognize the differences of borders of women of third world. It also needs to be considered that discourses of or about postcolonial feminism still represent women in the traditional light of being docile and submissive against the power of patriarchy. Castaing (2014) recommends that instead of looking at the feminism of third world women from a universal angle, the differences in culture of the postcolonial women pointed out by the scholars of postcolonial feminism should be recognized.

### Literature Review

Postcolonial scholars have also debated the intersectional status of women in postcolonial societies, especially in decolonized times. According to Schwarz and Ray (2000), "the relations among women of different castes, classes, and religious communities, were "recast" under colonial modernity, chiefly by way of the colonial state's reformist legislations" (p. 61). They emphasize the continuity of this debate because post-independence nationalism and feminist trends of freedom movements could not reconcile with each other and the relationship of society with women, especially that of marginalized women was recast.

Shaheed (2017), while attempting to locate the meanings of the feminist movement with reference to women's activism, interprets the reason why Feminism has acquired multiple meanings for women of indigenous activism and posits it in the cultural differences. The postcolonial states, could not maintain that spirit of freedom as was the case with Pakistan and instead became battlegrounds for the conflicting ramification about the freedom of women especially those of minorities (Schwarz & Ray, 2000). It means feminism would be understood not in the sense of the universality of women's struggle but rather in the sense it is being used by the indigenous women for their struggle for emancipation and empowerment against the dominant ideologies in their culture. Shaheed, therefore, urges a pluralistic attitude to postcolonial feminism. Similar patterning has been found in the application of feminist theories regarding doubly marginalized women in South Asia and other parts of the world. The Dalit women, for example, in India are doubly marginalized in their own country because of their maltreatment at the hands of in-house patriarchy and secondly as a result of outside home patriarchy. Western feminism is silent in this regard and has no visible supporting patterning. Bell Hooks in her statement in 1984 pointed out this issue which was further emphasized by "Kimberle Crenshaw's (1991) assertion that feminist theory addresses only one form of marginalized identity (gender) and neglects the intersection of multiple operational identities. As a result, there are many girls and women for whom feminism remains remote and abstract" (Sharmal & Geetha, 2021, p.1).

### Theoretical Underpinnings

When viewed through the angle of western homogenization of south Asian women in the western discourses, the representations of women in the Pakistani discourses seem to be of contradictory in nature because these representations show "diverse female characters

ranging from traditional, passive and suppressed to liberal, assertive and agentive" (Kanwal, 2018, p. 19) depending on the kind of socio-political circumstances in which these discourses are being produced. Although Mohanty has suggested that many women at the elite level have control over their bodies yet western discourses tend to portray women as a monolithic new-orient image is mostly that of a suffering and oppressed woman. This is because of the predominance of the universal patriarchy and its influence as is suggested by Judith Butler and also by Mohanty who links feminism with "larger, even global, economic and political frameworks" (Kanwal, 2018, p. 71).

The claims and the performance of western feminism seen in the light of the above statements become evident and visible through three women characters as portrayed in the novel *Red Birds* (2018) by Mohammed Hanif. These women are: Cathy, Lady Flower Body, and Mother Dear, are portrayed from different angles and situations. Cathy is an American living in America and Lady Flower Body, an Americanized woman working in a war-torn area, somewhere in the middle east and Mother Dear is an indigenous woman living in the same war-torn area in a refugee or camp for displaced people. Among all these three, the life of Mother Dear is totally disturbed, financially, socially and politically, while she lives in the refugee camp, a homeless life, depending on the droppings by the American planes. Mother Dear is, from a feminist perspective, a woman as a mother, wife and warrior, inhabiting and facing a patriarchal society in a post-war ravaged country. She is a mother "who has lost her one son to war and her country to the destruction of terrorism. However, she is unconcerned with international politics and would spend her energy on the service of her family and to bring her lost child back home" (Ahmed, 2021, para 6). When looked with the feminist angle, she seems to have achieved no rights or any facility rather mental agonies and

physical pressures are the things which she gets after the American warplanes return with so-called establishing of peace in the area and removing all terroristic activities from there.

There are three women characters in the novel *Red Birds*. Each character has its own chemistry, lifestyle and role being played. The only common thing among them is that these are women. Each one of them is in a different life cycle that the writer makes us see by placing them in their respective sphere. Cath, for example, is portrayed as American and so enjoying all the privileges of being an American independent woman for whom her own person, her worries and happiness are more significant as compared to any other thing of the world. The man with her is a partner and has nothing to make her under control and subjugation. She is a working woman and so no matter of dependency on her man and can there survive alone if time is like that. She loves her family and can have her own mood swings and for this, she does not need to get any permission. On the other hand, Lady Flower Body is again a working woman for Americans, she is not a housewife and is independent in her views about women, men, job, love and way of life. she makes a successful stay at the improvised home of Momo and Mutt but does not let anyone have any control over her. She takes interest in everyone and talks and discusses matters while keeping her position in view. She is the part of the American team that makes America engaged and successful anywhere. She works like father dear but Father Dear is not as important as is Lady Flower Body. According to Nayeri, Lady Flowerbody is daringly using the war-torn community as her laboratory for testing the hypothesis regarding collective memories and cultural capital. This lends more power to her character which seems eerie enough because of the Trumpian hypocrisy she exhibits (Nayeri 2018).

Both these women are the models of independence and rightful beneficiaries of the feminist Utopia and its fallout and belong to a world where their capability to assert themselves is guaranteed by rights and the constitution of the state. But Mother Dear is not enjoying any of these privileges because the fruit of western feminism has not reached her and she is still a third world postcolonial subject who by default is supposed to suffer and so the feminist Utopia is just turned out to be a feminist Dystopia.

## Material and Methods

### Textual Analysis

The textual analysis is done of the selected pieces of text with angles provided by Mohanty and Judith Butler to find out the extent to which women of the orient have been kept aside from the benefits of feminism because of the western monolithic approach to women of the orient and the socio-cultural restrictions on the women of the Orient.

Mother Dear seems to be powerful yet she is one who is the worst sufferer of the system. She is restricted to the kitchen only and is always on her guard for providing food for her family. Her life is more tied to her kitchen than the world outside. Even she cannot manage to bring salt for her cooking. Moreover, like any traditional wife, she is to bring water by carrying it from far off distance and has to observe all covering systems of the body in the strictest possible manner. She is expected to observe all marital rituals and serve her husband. She has no mobility, no education, no money in her pocket, no outside world contact and her only concern is to bring her lost son back to her home. "Mother Dear was still trying to start a fire, tears in her eyes, when he sat on Father Dear's motorbike and went away." (Hanif, 2018, pp. 41-42). Mother Dear was told that the remedy for so many issues of the orient was in education and so schools were

established for education. But she could not manage to do so because she was too occupied with her duties as a woman and a female. "Education, they said. Education gonna solve all our problems ... Newton, science teacher said, sat under an apple tree. I drew pitchers, I thought about Newton" (p. 43). Her mind remained stuck in water pitchers that she carried for bringing water. Domestic chores were prioritized in her mind as compared to education which could change her life.

Mother Dear has two strains that make her position at home precarious: one is the mention and memory of her son handed over to the Americans and the second is the arrival of another young and beautiful woman, Lady Flowerbody. She does not accept her arrival not because her family life would get disrupted but because she would not tolerate another addition at her place where already salt and food is scarce. She takes her husband to the kitchen to have a word with him as to why he has brought another woman. She would not agree with her man until she is threatened with divorce. So, her life is tied to divorce risk even after she has lived so many years in this marriage and she has raised her kids to young men. For Lady Flowerbody, this fight is only a domestic argument and soon would be over. So, she only keeps on "eyeing up dried-up plants in clay pots, admiring the green glass shards covering our boundary wall" (pp. 103-104). This way the serious domestic trouble and psychological trauma of Mother Dear is taken by Lady Flower Body as a mere domestic argument because she is more confident about her socio-political status. Mother Dear misses her son badly and wishes to play and love him and his articles and feed him in the best possible manner. She is sad because she has no knowledge about him and cannot reach him. She is not only a frustrated wife but also a frustrated mother. She thinks about foreign invaders that "They bomb us because they assume we are 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" (p. 150).

The writer frames Mother Dear exactly in the one suggested by Huggan, Lou, Said and Mohanty when father dear is angry with her and ridicules her for her incapacity to bring salt from her father's home especially when he owned salt mines. The male here is assuming that procuring the flavour of food is not his responsibility, and rather it is that of the woman, whatever she does for this or she may get back to her family. "If you don't like it here go live somewhere nice. You can go back to your salt mines" (p. 242). It is a clear case of tradition-bound society and the patriarchal set-up where a woman is supposed to bring dowry, love and essentials and keep bringing these if she wanted to survive in her husband's world. This is the place where the third world woman is still standing and waiting for her emancipation. There is however a very strange situation where women are shown to possess special qualities bestowed by nature that make them survive better in the harsh realities of the world than men. For example, the writer claims that 'Maybe women have superior navigation skills. Maybe they are not foolish enough to venture into it without first mapping their route' (p. 251).

It is because, probably, of the new orientalism, that mutation, where orientalism begins to recognize the indigenous characteristics of women but still places them in the frame of women as marginalized beings under the threat of social criticism. In a similar tone, the writer has shown the power of women but only in the sense that they are recognized as beloveds in the matter of love, not as professional independent women and declares that "Taj Mahal, I remember, they built that white palace for a dead princess. Seventh or sixth wonder of the world or some such nonsense. ..." (p. 335).

But the orient is still the 'other' at the core because the latent orientalism would never change as it is in the form of an ideology. If any change is possible, it comes only

in manifest orientalism. The writer declares that the orient woman is still waiting for the miracle to happen for the solution to her matters and fulfilment of her desires while the western women believe in practicality and believe in struggle and work. Hamid, as a post-9/11 Pakistani writer, criticizes this thinking of the orient women by telling them that "Miracles don't happen when your existence is tied to your stove and when you spend your days thinking" (p. 472). The advice is available for Mother Dear from a westernized woman, Lady Flowerbody that she should not wait for miracles to happen and instead of remaining sad, she should be courageous and "let things take their own course, turn my grief into my strength, put my loss into a global perspective. She wants me to be a strong woman who makes her own decisions (p. 473). But the tools of Mother Dear are not valid enough to fight with the society she lives in. For example, the Salt dagger knife, in possession with her, serves only as a symbol of a weapon to fight with, which is just an ornamental knife. However, it does reflect Mother Dear desire as an Orient woman to fight with for her objectives of life and this is the very change in her as a new orient woman.

Another dimension of Mother Dear's character portrayed by the writer is her compliance to the established tradition to exercise control over the mind and body of women even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For example, Mother Dear says that she started to cover her head as her husband proved that her covering means a matter of honour for her. "I was covering my head and becoming respectable, but I still had to bring water from the pond" (p. 495). The matter of covering is connected with the honour of the man and if she does not cover it would mean the man could be dishonoured. So, her husband felt exalted at her care but the woman had to go out for work and mostly it would result in the slipping and drifting of her dupatta that would cause embarrassment to the husband and sometimes it became a matter of joke. The woman had to cover her head one day with her shirt because she had lost the head cover. The husband had to face humiliation, as he says in the novel because the arms of his woman were bare. And naively enough woman stressed that she was ordered to cover her head and her arms were not talked about for covering. She says, "I realized that day that I am stuck with a confused little husband. Here's my man who will go around licking the boots of every white man he can find, who will grovel in front of an office file, yearn for an insulting cable from his Headquarters, but my exposed arms bring him shame" (p. 565). So, the matter of shame and honour is associated with one's woman and her covering properly. The dress choice of an orient woman is not her own, it is rather based on the sense of shame and honour of the man she lives with.

And lastly, a comment from the writer that Mother Dear even after having many qualities of head and heart was leading a life of misery because of the place she was born in. for example the writer comments that "If she had been born in another place, she would be a socialist leader ruling a mid-sized nation with an iron hand. But here she is just a mother with a plastic rosary" (pp. 183-184). This comment reflects again the difference that comes in women because of the places they are born and bred. Mother Dear had a poverty-stricken plus an uncountable life because of being a third world woman.

In comparison to this third world woman portrait, Lady Flower Body has not to care about her skin visible or not, including her hair. Her mole is a subject of debate and she wears her dress so that one can see the skin but she never bothers about this and instead blame anyone gazing at her skin to be horny. Instead of thinking about such things, she has a business-like air and would prefer to be treated as an equal business partner rather than a woman to be exploited. She would often say, "It doesn't matter whether you are in a relationship with a local or a foreigner, the basis should be simple;

pay me my fees on time, honour my contract, respect my culture, stay out of my physical space unless I invite you in" (p. 565). Lady Flowerbody resembles less with the Third world woman and associates herself with western emancipated and empowered women because she can work and can assert that even the males of the third world would shed their patriarchal prejudices for her and would willingly accord her a status not be reckoned so easily. This is the result that she is taken a different woman. "Lady Flowerbody is a crazy lady. She is a spy but there is nothing to spy on. So, she has become a welfare organization worker and a surveyor of Young Muslim Minds. She keeps hoping for more raids so that she can study more Young Muslim Minds, but nobody" (p. 394). In her appearance and work and as per her image, she is close to Cath, rather than Mother Dear, which surely shines a light on the fact how Third world women are left marginalized in their position even if feminism has worked wonders for the women, in the west or for the western-backed women.

Another woman in the novel is Cath, the American wife of Elie, who is dominantly assertive and has her will in working, playing, and house management. She is educated and has her job. She takes her husband not as her guide but as her partner in equality. She can question and she can say NO whenever she likes to. Elie has to make her request and manage the part of the home as he is supposed to. She is an equal human, not a subservient human. Elie thinks that "I could be over Mosul at lunchtime but I'd be home to take out the trash, cook dinner or at least help clean up after. She must be worried sick" (p. 369). This clearly shows the difference in dealings of men with their women in the third world and the developed world.

### **Results and Discussion**

The portrayal of women given in the text of Hanif Mohammad is not only that of the western, or westernized but also that of a third world woman. The third world woman is portrayed with such vigour that she seems to be the main protagonist of the story and the rest of the world of women circles around it. Though there is no name but whatever the name the writer has accorded her is indicative of her status as well as that she is known, recognized and performs the role of a mother only. It means she is a domestic woman and is known as a loving mother and a furious wife. She has no valid education and no practical job other than performing home chores which are not paid to her. She is all the time managing her kitchen sometimes with salt, and without salt and feeding her family and the guests of the family. She is shown to be generous at heart and has to show her generosity even when she is not called for. She willingly takes in the American pilot after some fuss she has to make because she is unable to manage the home and food for the people living already and the same happens when Lady Flowerbody enters. In most matters, she talks to her husband but the argument of the husband mostly wins.

Mother Dear is also living the life of a refugee and a displaced person who is always busy finding new territorialization. One part of herself has reconciled with the situation and the condition in which is living but one part of her wishes to come out of this. She falls a direct victim to the war on terror and its consequences and so unable to change her life. It is her motherly passion which has been invoked again and again to prove her a good mother. This is one of the ways oppressive and exploitative forces keep women sacrificing and engaged in the struggle for their sons and ignoring their well-being just to be called good mothers.

The second woman in the novel, Lady Flowerbody is accorded an element of respect from the very introduction of her as she is named a lady. The world lady

immediately distinguishes her from the common women and places her at a little higher level than the common women. This very level demands automatically a space for her where she has the full power to restrict anyone to enter. It is because of the work she is doing and the independence assigned to her character. She is also connected with the western power because of her work and so qualifies as a partner which automatically attaches a few privileges of western feminism to her. Lady Flowerbody is shown interest in her work and engages with both men and women in a business-like manner and not as a female body. The writer has therefore developed this character in a favourable light and given her the dimension of an independent and free spirit. She is shown in the war zone, not as a displaced person but as a person who enters that area out of her own choice.

A clear-cut demarcation is exhibited in the case of Cathy or Cath who is fully empowered woman in America. She has decided to marry Elie on her own and can survive on her own because of her salary and the work she is doing. She has the power to give birth to her children and also to bring them up. She can get angry with her husband and can say things to him as an equal being that the husband is also careful in dealing with her. It is up to her to give to her man or simply refuse if she is unwilling. Cath can ask her man where he has been and can turn him down at any moment. So, it is the man who has to exhibit his love rather than the woman. So, Cath is accorded all privileges that the western feminism helped women to achieve. Though she has her own psychological issues, she seems far more empowered than Mother Dear so much so that Cath is known by her name and so possesses a recognizable identity and pity the Third world woman who has no name but is known with reference to her social and moral obligations.

### **Conclusion**

Pakistani postcolonial narratives even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, are portraying women of the postcolonial states are living in feminist dystopia which means that they have not been able to benefit from the fruit of western feminism and have been at a loss in comparison to the western women because of their colonial heritage. Schwarz & Ray (2000) enunciate this complication by making the colonial background responsible because the colonizer installs modern infrastructure and disrupts the traditional cultural set-up in the name of modernization in such a way that the colonized people remain unable to go back to their original culture to claim complete freedom and so they neither become modern citizens of the modern world and get benefit from this modernity, nor they revert back to their original sustainable values. Hanif's narrative enunciates this by portraying three comparative women characters living under the postcolonial feminist condition. Cath, an American white woman enjoys empowerment and independence because of the western feminist movement. The same is the case with Lady Flowerbody who too feels liberated enough because she is re-living the American culture in the middle east. But the woman of the indigenous third world, Mother Dear has no access to empowerment and liberation and lives under oppressive conditions. For her, western feminism has been unable to render service for her emancipation and empowerment and so western white feminism has mostly turned out to be a dystopia for third world women because of their colonial heritage.



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