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Orientalist Stereotyping by Major Ellie in Muhammad Hanif's Red Birds

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Abstract

This study aims to uncover the orientalist stereotyping of orientals in the novel *Red Birds* by Muhammad Hanif. The researcher has used Orientalism by Edward Said as a theory to investigate the orientalist underpinnings in the novel. The researcher has specifically focused on Major Ellie, a US plan fighter who came to bomb an unknown place in the Middle East. The researcher has thoroughly studied the text and uses the theory of Orientalism to explore and analyze it. After critically analyzing the text, the researcher has concluded that Major Ellie has used the same stereotypical and orientalist discourse which Edward Said has talked about in his book. In the current study, the researcher has found that Ellie has stereotyped the orientals as 'uncivilized, goatherd, motherfuckers, and bad people', which has a historical roots in the production of knowledge on orientals.

Keywords: Edward Said, Red Birds, Orientalism, Representation, Postcolonial study, Muhammad Hanif, Stereotyping, Orientals

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1. Introduction

This chapter builds a fundamental framework for the rest of the study. It documents the background context, research questions, and objectives, significance, and limitations for readers' understanding.

1.1. Background

Literature is a broader term that cannot be defined easily as it encompasses so many diverse themes. It discusses a long range of topics from feminism to social and political injustices. Literature is "pieces of writing valued as art, especially novels, plays and poems" (Languages, 2011). To dig out these themes from any literary piece, critical study of that piece is required. In order to critically evaluate any literary work, researchers need to study it from specific angles or lenses called theories. In this study, the researcher has chosen Edward Said's *Orientalism* to evaluate *Red Birds* by Muhammad Hanif (2019) critically.

Edward Wadie Said's *Orientalism* was published in 1978. This book is an account of how the West represented and stereotyped the East. *Orientalism* as a theory was popularized by Edward Said's *Orientalism* in which he talked about the methods and processes through which Orient was and continued to be constructed and represented in European thinking. Orientalists in different professional disciplines such as languages, history, and philology were working on this

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topic; however, for Edward Said, Orientalist discourse was more than just a 'European Thought'. For Edwards Said, it was a pattern of thought based on 'the ontological and Epistemological distinction between the "orients" and the "occident" (Said, 1978). In fact, Said seems to look at it as a corporate institution which is dealing with orients 'by making a statement about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the orients'. The fact still persists that "Orient was essentially an idea, or a creation with no corresponding reality."

Orient was not an insert reality; rather, it was a creation of western thought. It has resulted from the 'generations of intellectuals, artists, commentators, writers, politicians and, more importantly, constructed by the naturalizing of a wide range of orientalist assumption and stereotypes (Ashcroft *et al.*, 2007). The West put the Orient or the East as the significant images of the 'Other'. The 'Other', in this case, was in binary opposition to 'Us'. The 'Other' could be understood and identified through its opposition to the West. Being contrast to the West, the East or Orient were depicted as other and inferior by the Western mind and intellectual thought.

This kind of orientalist discourse on the part of colonizers, which has a generation's long history, gave certain traits, attitudes, demeanor, and stereotypes that represented who really an oriental was. These one-sided, Euro-centric, and binary knowledge generalized and presented Orient in a certain way. East was seen as 'a place of romance, exotic beings, and hunting memories (Said, 1978). For instance, the common Orient was lustful, exotic, imbued with romance and eroticism (Said, 1978). Furthermore, the specific stereotypes associated with orients are barbaric, untrustworthy, strange, inhuman, bad, inferior, irrational, exotic, cunning, mysterious, uncivilized, lazy and intrigue, etc.

Muhammad Hanif was born in Okara and joined Pakistan Air Force as a pilot but eventually left to pursue his carrier as a journalist. He is a renowned writer who has won many literary awards and collected appreciation. He has written three novels. *A Case of Exploding Mangos* (2008) is his award-winning debuted novel. His second novel was *The Lady of Alice Bhatti* (2012). The novel the researcher has chosen for his research is *Red Birds*, published in 2019. This novel is set in an anonymous place, probably a Muslim country that is heavily war-torn and divested. Major Ellie, an American pilot who came to bomb the place, crashes in the desert and is rescued by a teenage boy, Momo, accompanied by a philosopher dog, Mutt. Momo's brother Bro Ali is lost in the nearby American Camp, which Momo wants to find out. In the meantime, a white philanthropist appears to psychologically help these desert people by conducting research on 'young Muslim mind.' Momo taking advantage of these foreigners, tries to search for Bro Ali.

The Pilot Ellie, in this novel time and again, uses words and phrases which depict how western people think about and stereotype eastern people, especially Muslims.

However, this representation and stereotyping of 'orients' is not a new phenomenon rather a continuation of old western biases towards the east. So in order to dig out such representation of orients, the researcher will critically analyze the Character Major Ellie in the novel, who represents Western thinking. The researcher will use Said's *Orientalism* as a model and try to dig down and analyze the orientalist remark about Eastern by Major Ellie.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

While reading the novel *Red birds*, the researcher came across many instances where he felt the Eastern people were stereotyped. The main objective of the researcher is to figure out those instances where oriental representation can be found. After successfully accumulating data about stereotyping, the researcher aims at debunking all those stereotypes logically with pieces of evidence through its historical creation.

1.3. Research Objectives

- To show how orients are stereotyped in the novel.
- To show how Orientalism is still a part of western society.

1.4. Research Questions

- How are Orients stereotyped by the character Ellie?
- What are the orientalist techniques used by the author in the 'us' versus 'them' dichotomy?

1.5. Rationale

This research is conducted in order to show the readers the relationship between the West and the East. In order to understand the binary relationship between the two, one must understand the historical building of the dichotomy. Theorists like Edward Said researched this topic and wrote *Orientalism*, which later became a theory itself. This book

talks about the historical background of how the Orient is the 'product of the western mind'. The dichotomy is deep rooted in western society and has a long tradition of European thought. From the last seven centuries, orientals are assigned certain stereotypes by the poets, writers, novelists, historians, and philosophers of the West, which became a corner stone of the identity of who Orient was.

This research aims to dig down those long traditions of European thought about Orientals that have no scientific basis. In this novel, *Red Birds*, Major Ellie is focused on showing the stereotypical discourse he uses. The researcher expects the reader to consider all these elements to understand the truth behind the racist and binary language used in the novel. This research will have a clear effect on the thought pattern of the reader about the orientals and their historical Orientalism.

1.6. Theoretical Framework

Edward Said published his book '*Orientalism*' in 1978, where he conceptualized and criticized the orientalist representation of orientals in western academia. The Western academia, thinkers, writers, poets, and travelers have created an image of the East that is untrue and stereotypical. This image and representation of orientals are based on the dichotomy between the East and the West, Orient, Occident, and uncivilized and civilized. In fact, Said seems to look at it as a corporate institution which is dealing with orientals 'by making a statement about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the orientals'. East is represented as 'barbaric, uncivilized, savage, untrustworthy, lazy, exotic and other' through this method.

The researcher will apply this concept to the orientalist representation of the character Major Ellie in *Red Birds*. Major Ellie is a pilot who comes to bomb a refugee camp in an unknown Arab country. However, his plane crashes, and he is rescued by the people he was about to bomb. The researcher will analyze his discourse and his misconception about Eastern people in the light of Orientalism.

1.7. Significance

The significance of this research is to show how orientals are stereotyped as despotic, clannish, exotic, and barbaric. Furthermore, the researcher will try to elucidate that all these attributes of Orientals result from either Western ignorance or arrogance. Otherwise, this overt generalization is not only incorrect but highly offensive.

1.8. Area of Study

The area of study in this research deals with literature only. Literature, in its essence large area of study, includes poems, novels, short stories, plays, and essays. However, in the current study, the text is limited to a novel where only one character will be analyzed and critically studied. The researcher will use *Orientalism* by Edward Said as a theory to analyze and critic the character Ellie. Orientalism is a field in Postcolonial Studies that deals with the historical representation of orientals throughout colonization. This study will help the researcher and the readers understand the stereotypical representation of Orientals by occident. Thus the area of research is the exploration of the historical representation of Orientals in literature.

1.9. Delimitation

The research will limit his study only to the orientalist stereotyping of orientals in the novel *Red Birds* by Muhammad Hanif. The research will use Edward Said's *Orientalism* as a theory to pinpoint the stereotyping done by the character Major Ellie within the novel. However, the researcher will not be answerable to any other possible aspect of the novel but only focuses on orientalist stereotyping in the selected work.

2. Literature Review

This chapter provides different analytical studies conducted on the same topic previously by different researchers. They offer a historical perspective to the topic that shall be discussed. Furthermore, these studies present a direction for the research to be conducted now. Researchers such as Cancerio (2015), Saideh and Bahman (2014), Ensieh Shabanirad and Seyyed Mohammad (2014), Saeed (2013), Rukmana (2003) and Ullah *et al.* (2021) researched the similar topic, which the researcher has reviewed below.

Cancerio (2015) discussed the imperialist discourse of Europeans in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. In this novel, Robinson Crusoe (European) embarks on a journey in a sea, gets shipwrecked, and finds a place on an isolated island where he meets a native named Friday. As Arif describes, Defoe portrays Robinson Crusoe as good, well-mannered,

religious, conqueror, civilized, and a hero in the novel. While on the other hand, Friday (Native) is stereotyped as irrational, immoral, uncivilized, savage, and cannibal. The researcher concludes the article by saying that Defoe has placed European as superior and have the right to control the native (inferior). Throughout the novel, an orientalist stereotyping of the people can be found in Daniel Defoe Robinson Crusoe.

Saideh and Bahman (2014) observe the Orientalizing of Indians represented in the novel *A Passage to India* by Edward Morgan Forster. He discussed that the characters are victims of colonial representation. These characters are portrayed with attributes such as a primitive, unreliable, genital, and dangerous race who must be kept away from civilized English. This colonial stereotyping of characters leads to misunderstanding, which results in the central conflict.

Furthermore, Ensieh Shabanirad and Seyyed (2015) conducted a research on George Orwell's *Burmese Days* to find out the orientalist representation of females of the east. They found out that consciously or unconsciously, Orwell has 'Repudiated his own views and treated foreigner as others'. They concluded that Orwell has followed the traditional orientalist views of Europeans and had depicted and stereotyped oriental women as 'mistresses, sexual objects, submissive and voiceless'.

Nourin Binte Saeed discussed a similar topic in her research article. She conducted thorough research on the *Colonial Representation in Robinson Crusoe, Heart of Darkness, and A Passage to India*. She analyzed these three novels critically through a Postcolonial lens. She found different types of stereotypical representations of Orientals. While talking about Robinson Crusoe, she concludes that 'the narrator creates the dichotomy between uncivilized and civilized, savage and Christian and slave and master.

Furthermore, she comments about Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* that darkness symbolizes 'evil, violation, unknown, ancient, exotic and impenetrable'. In fact, she asserts that *Darkness* represents moral darkness of the inhabitants of the Congo and the evilness'. In her analysis of *Passage to India*, she concludes that India is represented as 'wild' 'mysterious' and Indians are represented as 'exotic, fearful and evil type'.

In her study, Rukmana explored and analyzed the encounter between Western and Eastern people in *Macro Millions*. She observed that this encounter is shaped by social, political, cultural, and historical events. Western people have created their own opinion of the East and its people, which Edward Said calls Orientalism. The researcher analyzes and concludes that Western people have attached certain stereotypes to Eastern people, such as uneducated, crazy, irrational, and irresponsible. These stereotypes were created, as Rukmana states, 'to place the Eastern people in lower position'.

Ullah *et al.* (2021) researched Rudyard Kipling's novel, *Kim*. They studied and analyzed this novel and specifically the character Kim. They observed and concluded that the picture portrayed of the subcontinent is too blurred with negativity. Furthermore, they are of the opinion that the people of the subcontinent are uneducated, uncivilized, and devoid of any human feelings. They are no less than barbaric animals. The main crux of the research can be summed up in one sentence that is 'if there is any negative and inhuman feature, it means that there is orientalism'.

3. Research Methodology

In the previous chapter, the researcher has viewed various existing literary texts from the new historicist perspective. This chapter sets the methodological framework for the analysis of data.

3.1. Introduction

For the detailed analysis of the data, two main strategies are commonly used: qualitative and quantitative methods. The difference between the two methods is that quantitative research is concerned with facts, numbers, and conclusions are derived in the light of those facts and figures, while qualitative research is the one in which theoretical framework is applied, and results are obtained by using a literary theory into the research.

3.2. Research Design

The mode and method are completely based on literature. No numerical or visual data has been used except written scripts. This research is qualitative, not quantitative, so the researcher has used only textual data to support his arguments and ideas. The focus here is on the novel's closed and keen textual analysis to explore and understand the character Major Ellie, a fallen pilot in the desert. Our focus will be on the orientalist stereotyping of Orientals, and the aforementioned purpose, evidence, and textual references will be taken from the novel *Red Birds*.

3.3. Instruments and Participants

This research thesis is qualitative in nature. The research instrument is a method or tool to collect the related and relevant data to the current research. The main research instruments are the book by Edward said *Orientalism*. Apart from this, the researcher will read different articles and books to understand the topic's social, political, and historical perspectives.

In this research, the participant may include the author of the short story himself and the history of the time in which the text is written.

3.4. Subjects and Participants

The subject and participants of this qualitative research include the discourse of the character Major Ellie. Major Ellie is a US plan Pilot whose plane crashes in place near the enemy's camp among all the characters. The researcher will instigate the discourse of Major Ellie to see if he has stereotyped orients. For this purpose, the researcher has used *Orientalism* as a theory presented by Said (1978).

3.5. Target Population

The target population of this current study is the different characters in the novel *Red Birds*. The researcher will specifically deal with the character of Major Ellie, who is a pilot. The researcher will try to investigate the stereotypical representation of orients by the aforementioned character.

3.6. Sampling Techniques

The sampling technique in this current study is the non-probability sampling technique, specifically purposive sampling, because, in this technique, the researcher selects the subject based on his judgment to represent the population. Thus, the study sample is one of Muhammad Hanif's novels, "*Red Birds*", investigated from the perspective of *Orientalism* presented by Edward Said.

3.7. Data Collection

The data for this research is collected from both primary and secondary sources.

3.7.1. Primary Sources

Primary sources constitute the books written by the authors as a firsthand account of the topic. The primary sources for data collection are the novel *Red Birds* by Muhammad Hanif and Edwards Said's *Orientalism*.

3.7.2. Secondary Sources

Secondary Sources are the scholarly work done on a particular topic by not participating firsthand in the topic studied by them. The secondary data tools internet, library, research articles, books, and other means which can, directly and indirectly, influence my understanding of the text.

3.8. Data Analysis

Data analysis, one of the most crucial parts of research, systematically analyzes and interprets a mass of data to get meaningful insights and information. It helps in providing the researcher with a detailed and in-depth analysis of the subject matter.

In this current research study, the researcher has used *Orientalism* by Edward Said as a theoretical ground for analyzing the novel *The Red Birds* by Muhammad Hanif. The researcher has specifically considered the character Major Ellie to investigate the stereotypical comments in the light of Postcolonial Orientalism. Since the research is a subjective analysis of non-statistical data with an exploratory methodology, it is qualitative in nature.

4. Data Presentation and Analysis

In the previous chapter, the data collection tools, methodology, and sampling techniques of the study were announced, leading to the actual analysis of the data. The researcher also gives a brief concept of the analysis process of research objectives. The present chapter analyzes the novel *Red Birds* qualitatively applying Edward Said's *theory of Orientalism*, which has already been discussed in the first chapter.

Edward said begins in his book *Orientalism* with the 'assumption that the Orient is not an inert fact of nature (Said, *Orientalism*). He tries to state that *Orientalism* has a long history of being categorically and systematically created. The

West created Orient through different mediums such as literature, history, and art. It was not just there. Rather, Orient has a long history of thought, imagery, and vocabulary. West assigned certain stereotypes to the Orient, which aimed at depicting the East as inferior to the West. This kind of racist and orientalist discourse is still at play, and different writers repeatedly use that to the hegemonic relationship between the East and the West through their writings.

In the novel, Major Ellie, *A US Plan Fighter*, uses the same orientalist discourse that Edward Said and other Postcolonial critics have referred to. East is considered an alienated and hunting place by the Occident (West), as pointed out by Nourin Binte Saeed as 'wild' and 'mysterious'. After the plane crash, Ellie talks about the place he was about to bomb, says: "so this camp at the end of the world, a hideout for some of the worst human scums". This statement was the continuation of that same stereotypical discourse about orients, depicting them as 'not human'. On the same page, while talking about the 'mysterious' place, he says it was a "real bad place for really bad people. You can smell the evil from the skies".

The Europeans have created a dichotomy between East and West, uncivilized and civilized and inferior and superior. They considered East as 'other', as pointed out by Nourin Binte Saeed in her research on Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. The novel uses the same stereotypical language about Orients; "if the goatfuckers had shot me down, they would be all over the place trying to hunt me down". This statement is self-contradictory. Ellie was trying to depict them as uncivilized for shooting him down while he himself was there to bomb them. He travelled thousands of miles to bomb them in their own place, and still, he calls them 'goatfuckers' to justify his act of barbarism.

This kind of discourse is identical to how historical orients are stereotyped. This dichotomy of 'Us' vs. 'Them' recurs in the novel. Ellie calls the people living in the camp in the desert 'goatherds' and believes that these people have 'never walked beyond the village well.' In fact, Ellie considered them primitive, lazy and called them animals when he says "you couldn't make civilization out of screwing sheep." The racist and Eurocentric comments continue to appear in the novel. On the next page, Orients are stereotyped as 'cannibals' as discovered by Saeed in *Robinson Crusoe*. Ellie, while talking about how these 'goatfuckers' will treat you when they capture you, he asserts: "In the end, he'll butcher you like he butchers one of his goats, and before that, he will bugger you."

This kind of oriental discourse is used to justify colonialism and imperialism. The fact that Major was on a colonial mission to capture and bombard nations is entirely ignored, and he justifies his offensive mission by saying that "this is the kind of place where evil festers" and calling the place "an existential threat to our great nation." Jonathan Crush has described such kind of discourse as a "spatial reach of power and control and management of other peoples, territories, and places". However, to refute the charges of invading a foreign place, Ellie again says that no one cares for a 'bunch of goatherds' and 'abandoned Hangar'. Ellie still refuses to recognize these people as human beings by calling them 'goatfuckers', 'goatherds', and 'worst human scums'.

Orientalism is what Said's called the idea of Europe, which has no legs to stand on. It was shaped by 'writers among whom are poets, novelists, philosophers and political theorist.' This has nothing to do with reality—such stereotypical depiction of orients place occident alienated from them and their history. As shown by Ellie in the novel in her discussion with Lady Flowerbody, he asks her, "They call themselves Muslims, and still they don't speak Arabic. Why don't they speak Arabic?" This comment shows how little Ellie knows about the orients himself.

Edward Said, in his book when talks about *Orientalism* he says that it was a 'reiterating European superiority over Oriental backwardness.' This feeling of superiority for 'self' and inferiority for others is depicted as;

"They also keep telling me that they are proud people. What does that even mean? Having a blue plastic sheet over your head, a little gas cylinder tethered to a small stove by a chain and lock. [...] I have seen homeless folks back home who were better fed than this lot. And they only asked for loose change, did not wave their pride in your face."

This statement has a clue about the mentality of a European about the Orient. He considers him lesser, inferior, and evil.

In short, the character Ellie uses orientalist discourse which is not only stereotypical but racist in nature. The character's language has its historical bases in the European tradition of thought about Orients. Through this type of language, the 'Us' vs. 'Them' dichotomy is created. This method also shows that the West is civilized and superior while the East is uncivilized and inferior.

5. Conclusion

The researcher used Edward Said's *Orientalism* to investigate and interpret the novel *The Red Birds* by Muhammad Hanif. The researcher tried to investigate the deep-rooted stereotypes associated with Orient by Occident. The researcher selected a character in the novel, Major Ellie, a US plan fighter who came to bomb a mysterious place somewhere in the Middle East.

The researcher has successfully analyzed the novel and, specifically, the character Ellie through the *Theory of Orientalism*. Orientalism, through this method, the East is represented as 'barbaric, uncivilized, savage, untrustworthy, lazy, exotic and other'. After analyzing the novel, the researcher came across different instances where the character Ellie has assigned and stereotyped the orientals in certain ways in which Edward Said discusses them.

The character repeatedly refers to the people he was about to bomb before as 'goatherds', 'goatfuckers', and 'place for really bad people'. These types of comments about orientals by the character Ellie depict the long tradition of stereotyping the orientals. The researcher concluded that Major Ellie has stereotyped the occident in many ways in the novel by calling them as Edward Said Puts 'uncivilized, barbaric, and exotic'.

6. Recommendation

This study concentrated on the critical analysis of Major Ellie's character in Muhammad Hanif's *Red Birds* through Edward Said's theory of Orientalism. This study will hopefully help further researchers to investigate other works where orientalist stereotyping could be found. Postcolonial studies and Orientalism is a comparatively newer field of study; I recommend the critical study of different works through the theory of Orientalism.

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Dedication

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