

## Diasporic Identity and War Trauma: A Traumatic Study of Red Birds

Ahmed<sup>1\*</sup>, Dr. Rasib Mahmood<sup>2</sup>

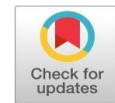
<sup>1</sup> M.Phil. Scholar at Islamia College Peshawar. Email: amuradi616@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup> Assistant Professor at Islamia College Peshawar. E-mail: drrasibm@gmail.com

**Abstract:** This study looks into the psychological impact of war trauma and diasporic identities resulting from the complexities of war. This research explores how characters grapple with the feelings of diaspora by applying concepts like mimicry, hybridity, and ambivalence. The novel depicts the survival of characters in a harsh burning desert in the merciful hands of segregated locals. This devastating experience forces them to witness life from the perspective of those they may have previously seen as “the Other” and to confront their own identity. This exposure creates a rich platform for applying Homi K. Bhabha’s theories and reader-response theory to understand the protagonist’s evolving sense of self in this war-torn world.

**Keywords:** Diasporic Identity, War Trauma, Ambivalence, Hybridity, Mimicry..

Received: 26 October 2024 / Accepted: 25 November 2024 / Published: 29 December 2024



### INTRODUCTION

Identities are no longer fixed to specific territories but are fluid and adaptable, shaped by various social and cultural factors. As a result, traditional notions of diaspora, which often tie understanding to territorial belonging, needed to be rethought to account for this increased fluidity and complexity (Cohen, 1997). The narrative revolves around the protagonist Ellie, an American pilot whose plane crashes near a refugee camp. Disoriented and injured, he finds himself in the care of a resourceful teenager named Momo and his family after severe suffering in the scorching sun. Ellie’s interactions with the camp’s inhabitants, including Momo, a doctor with radical ideas, and a group of cynical refugees, challenge his assumptions and force him to confront the realities of the conflict. The protagonist finds himself engaging in a new culture. The new culture creates a change in the life of the protagonist although the sense of belonging to the homeland is in the mind of Major Ellie. (Hanif, 2018)

This research aims to extract the feelings of diaspora using reader-response theory. The diasporic identity outcomes social, cultural and lingual changes. It creates ambivalent feelings. The researcher uses Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of hybridity and mimicry which results from diasporic identity and war creating ambivalent feelings. Red Birds plunges the reader into the desolate heart of a war-torn desert. Here, amidst the ruins and the ever-present threat of violence, unfolds a darkly comic and thought-provoking story. Hanif’s writing is known for its sharp wit, dark humor, and unflinching portrayal of war’s devastation. He tackles political and social issues with a critical eye, often employing satire and magical realism to highlight social norms and destruction. (Nayeri,

---

\* Corresponding author: Ahmed  
†Email: [amuradi616@gmail.com](mailto:amuradi616@gmail.com)

2018). Magic realism adds another layer to the narrative. Talking birds and the reappearance of the dead create a sense of unease and blur the lines between reality and fantasy, mirroring the characters' fractured mental states to create ambivalence.

### **Significance of the Study**

The reader will learn how diasporic identity stems from the threads of a person's ancestral background and the new environment they find themselves in, creating a blended lifestyle. How it embodies the person's cultural, social, economic, and religious beliefs which are constantly measured and shaped against the norms of the host society. How diaspora creates a mental disorientation and sense of unease when forced to adapt to a new host culture. Migration, whether a voluntary pursuit of opportunity or a desperate escape from hardship, requires adopting new customs and navigating unfamiliar social customs. How this process leads to feelings of ambivalence (mixed emotions) as the individual grapples with reconciling their old identity with the pressures to conform. How it also fosters a hybrid identity. A unique blend of the person's native cultural background and the adopted elements of the new society, as explained by Homi K. Bhabha's theory.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

There are many books and studies that explore the ideas of national and ethnic identity. These studies are written by sociologists, who are expert in studying how people think and behave in groups. It is always difficult to relate it to a single definition. Cohen identified five types of diasporas, or groups of people who have migrated from their original homeland: Victim diasporas: Forced to leave due to persecution or violence. Labour diasporas: Moved to find better jobs and economic opportunities. Trade diasporas: Migrated to establish new trade routes and connections. Imperial diasporas: People who moved to serve or maintain empires. Cultural diasporas: Groups that migrated in stages, often following family or friends. (Cohen, 1997).

Tyson Brown states that people who live far from their homeland often maintain strong connections to their culture and community. These connections help them feel like they belong to their ancestral group. They may participate in traditional customs, speak the language, and celebrate holidays. They may also stay in touch with family and friends back home. At the same time, they participate in and form connections within the larger culture where they migrate and live. They learn the language, adopt local customs, and make friends with people from the local community. This can create a sense of belonging to both their ancestral culture and the larger culture where they live. (Brown, 2023).

*Red Birds* is an evident indictment of war and its lasting effects. Mohammed Hanif in *Red Birds* employs dark humor and satire to illustrate the physical and psychological devastation inflicted upon individuals caught in the war zone. Using ironic tone masterfully, Hanif highlights the double standards of the US, the corruption of the locals, power imbalance and he clarifies the misconception of power dynamics. The novel opening in an unnamed desert setting, ravaged by bombings, becomes a powerful symbol of the enduring scars of conflict. The novel is a clear presentation of war trauma causing mental disorientation. The characters, particularly Major Ellie, the American pilot, grapple with survivor's guilt, disillusionment, and the fragmentation of identity caused by war (Nazir, 2023). Asim Karim writes that Hanif's sharp wit exposes the hypocrisy and misunderstandings on both sides. The US appears overconfident in its supposed superiority, blind to the cultural insensitivity of its interventions. Meanwhile, the Muslim society grapples with the challenges of modernization while holding onto traditional beliefs. Through satire, Hanif exposes the flaws of both sides, urging readers to move beyond simplistic stereotypes and recognize the shared humanity beneath the cultural differences. (Karim, 2020)

Soldiers and civilians across the globe face the constant threat of war and conflict. The trauma experienced during these events can have lasting negative impacts on mental health and well-being. The negative impacts include the emotional distress, suffering, and displacement caused by violence (Fielding, 2023). A 2019 World Health Organization report found that 22% of people living in conflict zones, war areas or red zones suffer from mental health disorders, with 9% experiencing moderate to severe symptoms of anxiety and depression (Charlson & Fiona, July 20,

2019). The character of Dear Mother in the novel suffers from anxiety as minor and trivial things trigger her. She is tied-up in her domestic issues that she does not have time for her mental health. When Lady Flowerbody comes to treat her depression, Momo says, she does not need any treatment, all she needs is her son back to home. The ongoing mental sufferings may seem due to the separation of her son.

Children living in war zones are exposed to horrific violence. They may be forced to participate in dangerous activities like combat, training, or labor. Many children witness or experience torture, killings, and gender-based violence. These experiences can cause severe physical and mental harm. These can damage their relationships with family and friends (UNICEF, 2021). While PTSD is the most common mental health disorder linked to war trauma, Schizophrenia and Bipolar disorder can also develop. These conditions may occur separately or in combination with PTSD. Military sexual assault is particularly associated with depression. Momo, a teenager in the novel, adopts several defense mechanisms to cope with the war trauma. Excessive adaptation of defense mechanisms or multiple defense mechanisms is abnormal human behavior. Bro Ali suffers from nightmares and Mutt is a physically impaired dog. The war has directly affected the normal living of individuals resulting a hybrid and ambivalent lifestyle (Ahmed, Dr. Mahrukh Shakir, Dr. Rab Nawaz Khan, & Qureshi). The researcher aims to extract all these effects prominent in *Red Birds*.

*Red Birds* is a compelling exploration of war's enduring trauma and its impact on individuals and societies. Hanif's novel, with its unconventional narrative and dark humor, challenges readers to confront the complexities of conflict and its aftermath. (Khan, Shehzad, & Roohi, 2021) While some may find the execution uneven, the novel's unflinching portrayal of war's devastation and its lasting effects on the human psyche makes it a significant contribution to contemporary war literature. Further studies delve deeper into the novel's connections to magical realism, the influence of Hanif's Pakistani background on his critique of global power dynamics, and the exploration of diasporic experiences and the enduring wounds of war.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This research paper is purely qualitative. The researcher has solely based this article on the interpretation and analysis of the text, data collected from the articles, library and e-resources to validate this research. This research employs a hybrid methodology that integrates Homi K. Bhabha's theories and Reader-response theory to explore war trauma and diasporic identity. By combining these theoretical frameworks, the study aims to provide a nuanced and multifaceted analysis, considering both the textual and interpretive dimensions. The researcher uses the lens of Homi K. Bhabha and the Reader-response theory to extract the feelings of diasporic identity in the novel *Red Birds*, considering the character's displacement and constant negotiation of identity within the war zone. Homi K. Bhabha's hybridity theory offers a valuable lens for examining the intersection of cultures and identities. Hybridity posits that cultural encounters are not merely about the clash or fusion of distinct entities but rather about the creation of new and complex hybrid forms. Homi K. Bhabha in his book *The Location of Culture* states:

“Hybridity is the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects. It displays the necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination. It unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power but reimplicates its identifications in strategies of subversion that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power. For the colonial hybrid is the articulation of the ambivalent space where the rite of power is enacted on the site of desire, making its objects at once disciplinary and disseminatory - or, in my mixed metaphor, a negative transparency.” (K.Bhabha, 1994)

Mimicry highlights the ways in which colonized subjects negotiate their identities and resist colonial domination. Bhabha defines mimicry as a "double articulation" where the colonized subject imitates the colonizer while simultaneously subverting and challenging their authority. Mimicry is a complex process involving both repetition and difference, producing a hybridity that destabilizes colonial power structures. Homi K. Bhabha states:

“Mimicry reveals something in so far as it is distinct from what might be called an itself that is behind. The effect of mimicry is camouflage . . . . It is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled - exactly like the technique of camouflage practised in human warfare.” (K.Bhabha, 1994)

This theoretical framework is particularly relevant to cultural hybridity, mimicry and ambivalence because war causes dispersal resulting in many cultures living in a same society. As Stephen King says, “Description begins in the writer’s imagination, but should finish in the reader’s.” (King, 2000) So, the researcher is also using reader-response theory, known as reader-response criticism as well, which is a school of literary theory that focuses on the reader's experience and interpretation of a text. It argues that the meaning of a text is not fixed and objective, but rather arises from the interaction between the text and the reader. Unlike traditional criticism that emphasizes the text itself or the author's intention, reader-response theory views the reader as an active participant in creating meaning. The reader brings their own experiences, background knowledge, and expectations to the text, shaping their interpretation. The text is seen as a set of possibilities rather than a single, fixed message. Different readers will focus on different aspects of the text, leading to multiple valid interpretations. The focus is not just on the "what" of the text (the plot, characters, themes) but also on the "how" of the text (the reader's emotional response, thought processes, and engagement with the narrative). As Stanley Fish argues that the reader's interpretive community (shared cultural background and literary expectations) shapes their understanding of the text.

The impact of war on diasporic identity resulting ambivalent feelings is the primary focus of the researcher in this research. The ambivalent feeling is shaped by constant interaction of the individual with the host society resulting a hybrid culture. Mohammed Hanif in this novel creates scenarios where the characters grapple with ambivalent feelings. The characters mimic host culture and adopt their living standard voluntarily or involuntarily. There are hybrid cultures in the novel, first the mimicry of colonizers by the colonized. Secondly, the American protagonist starts liking Eastern cultural norms and traditions. Reciprocally, the impact of war on diasporic identity resulting ambivalent feelings, hybridity and mimicry is the same the other way around as extracting ambivalent feelings, hybridity and mimicry resulting diasporic identity. Either way, using Homi K. Bhabha’s theories first to highlight ambivalence, mimicry and hybridity or Reader-response theory to mention diasporic identity gives the same outcome. The outcome of a hybrid culture with ambivalent feelings mimicking others with the feeling of belonging to the native culture or the finding of diaspora in the novel uncovers hybridity of the character especially Major Ellie, mimicking the host culture creating ambivalent feelings in the character.

### **Research Questions**

1. How have hybridity, ambivalence and mimicry been represented in the *Red Birds*?
2. What is the impact of war trauma on diasporic identity in the *Red Birds*?

### **Objectives**

- To examine the hybridity, ambivalence and mimicry of individual in the *Red Birds* using Homi K. Bhabha’s lens.
- To examine the feeling of diasporic identity in the *Red Birds* using reader-response theory.

### **Textual Analysis**

The definition of the term diasporic identity is shaped by the perception of the surrounding world. It includes cultural, social, economic, and religious beliefs of the individual as compared to the host society. When a person is forced to move to a new place, he along with himself brings all of his beliefs to the host society and he has to accept the beliefs of the host society as well. When a person directly migrates to a host country it becomes really difficult for him to adopt changes. The migration can be either voluntary or involuntary resulting in the residing of the individual

in a new host land where he has to adapt to a new culture resulting in ambivalence and hybridity in the personality of the individual. According to the theory of Homi K. Bhabha,

*"Hybridity...describes the turn in the constitutive ambivalence of colonial representation...that ensures that the meaning of cultural representations is never fully under control; indeed, always open to negotiation and contestation." (The Location of Culture, 1994)*

Ambivalence is a key element woven throughout the fabric of Mohammed Hanif's *Red Birds*. The novel has three parts starting with the desert. The desolate desert landscape itself reflects the ambivalence of war. What is war according to the colonizers is explained by Colonel in the novel when Ellie recalled the words of Colonel, *"There is a war on and what is a war if not an opportunity, an opportunity to make up those extra points."* (Hanif, 2018.p.6). But the opposite side of the war according to the colonized, it is destruction and devastation, wars and worries, killings and bloodsheds. As Mother Dear says,

*"First they bomb our house, then they take away my son and now you are here to make us feel alright."* (Hanif, 2018.p.48)

The desert is a vast expanse that can be both breathtaking in its emptiness and unforgiving in its harshness. This stark contrast mirrors the way war can strip away beauty and leave behind only devastation. Yet, amidst the ruins, there can also be a strange kind of resilience, a testament to the enduring human spirit. The desert's vastness can evoke a sense of insignificance in the face of war's grand machinery, but it also offers a sense of freedom and escape from the suffocating confines of the conflict. The ever-present sun can be a symbol of hope and perseverance, for the desert dwellers who have adapted to its harshness and for those who dream of a brighter future beyond the war zone. However, the relentless heat can also be a reminder of the harsh realities of survival, a constant struggle that becomes even more brutal under the relentless sun. The use of ambivalence creates a more complex and emotionally engaging reading experience. They are thrust into a world where morality is ambiguous, loyalties are conflicted, and the purpose of the war itself is constantly under question. This complexity reflects the real-life experiences of war, where soldiers often grapple with the psychological trauma of violence, civilians struggle to survive amidst the chaos, and the lines between right and wrong become blurred. Mutt says, *"Sometimes between dropping bombs they used to drop these slabs of salt, pink hewn and white, and they floated down to little umbrellas."* (Hanif, 2018.p.30). Hanif compels readers to engage more critically with the narrative, to question their own assumptions about war, and to confront the emotional weight of its consequences.

Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity and mimicry takes center stage in Mohammed Hanif's *Red Birds*. Homi K Bhabha says, *"a difference that is almost the same but not quite."* The war-torn camp becomes a "third space," a place where cultures clash, identities become fragmented, and new social dynamics emerge. Traditional binaries like soldier/civilian or colonizer/colonized begin to break down. The characters, all displaced from their familiar lives, find themselves thrown together in this hostile environment, as Mutt says, *"I am from the times when there were houses instead of this Camp."* (Hanif, 2018.p.26). They must learn to co-exist, forming a new and precarious social order built on the fragments of their past lives. In the chaotic world of the war zone, characters adopt a hybrid approach to survive. They blend past experiences with the demands of the present, creating new identities and coping

*Ahmed. - Diasporic Identity and War Trauma...*

mechanisms. For example, Momo, raised in a traditional household, develops a keen sense of business. He barter and trades goods scavenged from the wreckage, a skill his parents never envisioned him needing. Momo's "*I Heart NY*" (Hanif, 2018.p.51). and Momo's first appearance in front of Ellie is the perfect example of hybrid culture where Momo wants to dress like colonizers, Ellie says,

*"He is wearing a soccer shirt, white shorts and spikey boots..... He seems like someone dressed for a soccer game rather than someone looking for his beloved dog in the desert."* (Hanif, 2018.p.77).

Secondly, Ellie started liking their culture. Ellie says about summoning for the prayer,

*"I had actually started liking it. It seems the person calling out to the people has been dragged out of bed and wants to get back to sleep."* (Hanif, 2018.p.140)

Similarly, the doctor, accustomed to the sterile environment of a hospital operating room, must learn to improvise with limited resources. He combines his medical knowledge with whatever tools he can find to treat the wounded. These characters are forced to become resourceful and adaptable, drawing on all their experiences to navigate the challenges of the war zone. This hybridity, however, comes at a cost. The constant negotiation of identity and the blurring of lines between past and present can lead to a sense of rootlessness and alienation. By examining hybridity, the researcher gains a deeper understanding of how *Red Birds* portrays the complex identities of characters caught within the war zone. Their struggle to adapt and survive highlights the lasting impact of conflict and the blurring of lines in a world forever changed by war.

The diasporic identity of an individual is the result of hybridity and mimicry which creates ambivalence. There is the two characters, Ellie and Lady Flowerbody, which the researcher can relate to study of diasporic identity using reader-response theory. The researcher does not get a detailed picture of Ellie's life before the war, but hints suggest that he might have joined the military with a sense of idealism and patriotism. Ellie finds himself stuck in a harsh, unfamiliar desert landscape. The vastness and unpredictability of the environment challenge his sense of control. He lacks the knowledge and experience to navigate this hostile land effectively, making him reliant on the locals for survival in a new and strange environment. The first feeling of an outsider is that he feels disconnected with the host land as they discriminate between their natives and the outsiders. When Momo first sees Ellie, he treats him badly, even he honors his dog more than Ellie. Momo says,

*"You steal my dog. Can't you see he is injured? You brute. Rot in Hell. You are already rotting in hell. God has punished you."* (Hanif, 2018.p. 77).

Social discrimination hurts Ellie emotionally. The natives respect even their dogs or animals, not this American outsider. Ellie says, "*this Mutt is getting love. I haven't even been asked my name.*" (Hanif, 2018.p. 88). As Major Ellie spends some time within new culture he adapts and gets used to their culture but still there is a longing for the home as it is one of the characteristics of diaspora. Ellie desires to dress like natives and wants to speak Arabic. Unfortunately, he cannot speak more than five words of Arabic including Arabic itself. The character is always nostalgic, nostalgic about going back to home. Major Ellie says, "*I have a feeling that I am being treated lie a refugee.*

*I feel insulted. I feel homesick.*” (Hanif, 2018,p.123). But when he is at home with his beloved partner he does not feel at home. He has spent his most of time at the war zone so the Camp, the war field and even his own home do not feel like home to him. Ellie says,

*“Fuck this, I told myself. I need more missions. I am going to sign up for that extension. She doesn't need to know that it's optional. I am going to volunteer for more missions just to get away from another romantic fucking dinner. Bring on the war.”* (Hanif, 2018,p. 165)

Major Ellie's indecision and internal conflict, marked by his longing for the thrill of war and the peace of home, reveals a fractured identity shaped by the traumatic experiences of war. The escapist Major Ellie runs away from home to avoid any boring interaction with his beloved but later in the host land he finds himself in a miserable condition where he expresses his longing desire for the home. He imagines while interpreting Momo's facial expressions,

*“look at yourself now. You're seven thousand miles away from your home base, you have lost your plane, you are at the mercy of the very people you came to kill and you are still worried about trouble at home.”* (Hanif, 2018,p. 184)

The nostalgic feeling of the character and belonging to the native culture is the prominent feature of diaspora. (Fernandez, 2009) A diasporic identity feels connected to his own native land. Major Ellie and the other outsiders in the camp, Lady Flowerbody, reveal feelings of belonging and nostalgia throughout the novel. The notable line highlighting the diasporic identities in the novel is uttered by Lady Flowerbody. She says,

*“and he has got a bike and he has got fuel. I should ask him for a lift and ride out of here as soon as I can.”* (Hanif, 2018,p. 253)

## **CONCLUSION**

All in all, the novel *Red Birds* by Muhammad Hanif continues to spark discussions about war, trauma, and the complexities of the modern world resulting in mimicry, hybridity and ambivalence. The feel of belonging and diaspora is easily traced in the novel. The protagonist finds himself helpless in the harshness of the desert and later he is rescued by the natives. During the process, the airman went through much observation about minor and major things in his life. Hanif has successfully portrayed the image of a colonizer in the colonized land as well as the emotions and feelings of colonized for the colonizers giving a steady platform to apply the theory of Homi K. Bhabha and to extract the feelings of diasporic identity by using reader-response theory.

## **REFERENCES**

- Ahmed, W., Dr. Mahrukh Shakir, Dr. Rab Nawaz Khan, & Qureshi, D. W. (n.d.). Post-traumatic Stress Disorder: A Critical Study of *Red Birds*. *Al-Qantara*, 344-356.
- Brown, T. (2023, Oct 19). National Geographic Society. Retrieved from National Geographic: <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/diaspora/>
- Charlson, & Fiona. (July 20, 2019). New WHO prevalence estimates of mental disorders in conflict settings: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *The Lancet*, 240-248.
- Cohen, R. (1997). *Global Diasporas An Introduction*. Taylor & Francis.
- Fernandez, J. (2009). Framing the Diaspora: The Politics of Identity and Belonging. *Diasporas: Critical and Inter-Disciplinary Perspectives*, 2009, 29-39.
- Fielding, S. (2023, August 08). War Trauma: The Psychological Consequences of War. Retrieved from Charlie Health: <https://www.charliehealth.com/post/war-trauma-psychological-consequences-of-war>
- Hanif, M. (2018). *Red Birds*. London: Bloomsbury.
- K.Bhabha, H. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. Routledge.

- Karim, A. (2020). Mohammed Hanif's Red Birds: "Anti-colonial textuality" and beyond. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 747-760.
- Khan, M. E., Shehzad, A., & Roohi, S. (2021). Post-traumatic Stress Disorder in Hanif's Red Birds. *Global Social Sciences Review*, 59-67.
- King, S. (2000). *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*. Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Nayeri, D. (2018, October 10). *The Guardian*. Retrieved from *The Guardian*: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/oct/10/red-birds-by-mohammed-hanif-review>
- Nazir, F. (2023). *How is a wound put into words?* Routledge India, 70-80.
- Portes, A., & Rumbaut, R. G. (2021). *Legacies: The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation*.
- UNICEF. (2021, December 22). *Children recruited by armed forces or armed groups*. Retrieved from UNICEF: <https://www.unicef.org/protection/children-recruited-by-armed-forces>