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"We Are More Often Driven Than Driving": Trauma, Eco-Anxiety and Existential Void in Hanif's *Red Birds*

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Abstract

This article examines Mohammad's Hanif's novel *Red Bird* (2018) using a multidimensional theoretical framework that synthesises eco-anxiety, trauma and existential void. It contends that the main characters of the novel experience eco-anxiety and psychological trauma at the same time. These simultaneous but distinct psychological issues are caused and intensified by the war, which badly affects the human as well as non-human life in the narrative. Terror and ecological disaster are so overwhelming that the characters are left in a void. This void is an existential crisis that mars their actions and choices, and they are unable to regain their agency and freedom. This is how eco-anxiety and trauma further intersect with existential philosophy. This synthesis of three different theoretical domains is significant at various levels. First, it contributes to the field of literary research and analyses by showing that the combination of diverse lenses helps identify and explore deeper and more enriched meanings of the texts. Secondly, the interconnection of eco-anxiety, psychological trauma and existential philosophy equally contributes to all of these combined perspectives at their individual level.

Key Words: Eco-Anxiety, Psychological Trauma, Existential Void, Terror, Ecological Disaster

1. Introduction

In our contemporary world of ecological disruption, climate change and environmental degradation, the relationship between humans and the natural environment has been badly disrupted. This disruption further results in emotional, psychological, and existential consequences and challenges. These impacts or consequences generate various forms of psychological distress and anxiety that affect individuals' sense of belonging, security, and

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control over their lives. So, eco-anxiety has emerged not only as a fear of an uncertain ecological future but also as a response to the past ecological losses and the ongoing environmental disasters. Glenn Albrecht's concept of psychoterratic syndromes and Panu Pihkala's interdisciplinary and inclusive view of eco-anxiety offer valuable perspectives for understanding and examining various ecological emotions. However, these ecological emotions often intertwine with psychological trauma that results from violent events, including wars and conflicts. Contemporary fiction that deals with environmental issues and wars often deals with this interconnected perspective of eco-anxiety and trauma. The present article takes Mohammed Hanif's novel *Red Bird* (2018) as a primary text. The novel mainly projects war and conflict that affects both human and non-human life. In this way, it projects complex experiences of the characters who confront ecological distress and traumatic experiences simultaneously. In this context, the study requires a synthetic framework that combines different theoretical positions. Along with Albrecht and Pihkala, Cathy Caruth's trauma theory is utilised for the analysis of psychological trauma.

The third interconnected perspective is existential void, or, in other words, an absence of existential choice. These three interconnected perspectives constitute a unified and coherent framework for the analysis of the text. In this way, the analysis done in the light of this unified framework justifies the main argument of the study: eco-anxiety and trauma coexist and interconnect in the experiences of the same characters whose existential void further intensifies these experiences and mars any possibility of recuperation and growth. In contrast to this existential void, existential choices have the potential to heal these issues and lead to personal growth. For the analysis of this existential perspective, Jean Paul Sartre's existentialism is taken into consideration. This analysis is significant because no pervious study is found that focuses on this synthesis of eco-anxiety, psychological trauma and existential perspective in *Red Birds* (2018). So, the present study fills in this gap by investigating a nuanced and multi-dimensional perspective.

So far the selection and rationale of the primary text are concerned, Mohammed Hanif's *Red Birds* (2018) provides a significant space for examining these interconnected psychological and existential challenges. Set against the backdrop of conflict, military intervention, displacement, and war, the narrative projects human life shaped by the forces that exceed individual control. The characters live in a world where traumatic experiences, ecological insecurity, and the uncertainty of existence interconnect. Consequently, they produce a sense of alienation, helplessness, and existential emptiness. The article's title, "We Are More Often Driven Than Driving," reflects the condition of diminished human freedom and agency and suggests that individuals in conflict zones and marginalised spaces are often subjected to political, historical, environmental, and psychological forces. In fact, such a condition is an existential void that disables them for exercising meaningful control over their lives and circumstances.

1. Eco-Anxiety in *Red Birds*

Though the novel *Red Birds* (2018) is primarily a war narrative that satirises the hollowness of armed conflicts and exposes the hidden inhumane intentions of the neo-colonial

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powers, it equally articulates the impacts of these atrocities and violence on the non-human world. This disrupted and damaged natural world causes emotional and psychological challenges. These various ecological emotions, or psychoterratic syndromes, can be viewed as various forms of eco-anxiety. According to Michelle Bastian (2012), humans have failed to respond to the ecological and environmental challenges because they are "out of synch" (p. 24). All major characters in the novel are 'out of synch', as they cannot do anything to ward off the disaster going on in the desert around them. The ecological and environmental issues, according to Grose, have become the biggest reality of our times (A Guide, 2020). The same is the case in the fictional world in the novel *Red Birds* (2018), where characters witness the disaster of the desert which used to be a feeding stream. It provided water, plants and vegetation. American ruthless bombing has ruined these sources. It has been transformed into a wasteland as the war, a form of "geographical violence" (Said, 1979, p. 225), is destructive for the natural world along with the human inhabitants of the desert.

Three protagonists of the novel, Momo, Mutt and Major Ellie, confront ecological distress because all of them pass through the consequences of that ecological crisis in the desert. Constant bombing has not only destroyed natural sources, but it has also badly polluted the pure and fresh air and the whole natural environment. In Anoucka Grose's (2020) words, "the very air" they breathe has turned against them, and it has become hostile (A Guide). This dreadful destruction is the outcome of human activity that revolves around the attainment of power and control. America's paranoia and lust for control, wealth and power have caused this disaster. It is important to notice how neo-colonial powers and the most civilised nations, who launch campaigns worldwide to save the earth, ironically keep on destroying it with both their hands. As a result of this damage, Major Ellie and the other two protagonists experience psychological burden and pass through an emotional toll. Major Ellie, an American pilot, comes to bomb the desert, but his plane crashes. Ellie survives and wanders in the desert at its mercy. This is where he realises the importance of natural sources and badly needs them for his survival. In this way, the damaged and destroyed natural sources pose an intense psychological pressure. Momo and Mutt also feel this pressure because they know that the desert is the only feeding stream and the basic cause of their survival, "above all, dignity" (Fanon, 2004, p. 9).

So, the disasters of the natural sources, including water and vegetation, are the main factors which cause ecological anxiety that manifests in various forms. The protagonists cannot help feel the impact of the dreadful environmental catastrophe that is bound to come. The desert has turned fully barren with no vegetation, water and animals except some bushes and goats. This disaster makes them fearful and panicked. Particularly, water is the major source and cause of life in the desert, and its absence is a dreadful thing. Without water, the survival is not possible. In a similar way, the disaster of plants, grass and vegetation is a clear end for the animals. These are the sources which produce food for the inhabitants. These conditions make their future grim and dreadful. Eva and Robert (2016) maintain that distress and grief related to the impending ecological damage and change, such as ecological worry and "eco-anxiety," (p. 292) have been on the rise, especially in such marginalised and war-hit zones. This is what

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Hanif weaves into the tale of a war. His characters intensely respond to the ongoing ecological and environmental devastation of their home environment, the desert.

After the crash incident, Ellie faces a really difficult situation while wandering in the desert and struggling for his survival. It is ironical that the desert which he has come to destroy now becomes necessary for his survival. He needs air, water and food. None but the desert can only manage these necessities of his life. He is at the mercy of the desert, which already is at the mercy of the bombers. The inhabitants whom he comes to kill become his saviours and rescuers. Before he meets the native family in the camp, Ellie spends several days wandering alone in the barren desert. These days are really painful and challenging for him. He is already experiencing psychological trauma after the crash, but it becomes more intensified when he experiences ecological distress while wandering and searching for water and food in the desert. This when he realises the ecological destruction of the desert and becomes eco-anxious. The scarcity of water, vegetation and plants weigh heavily on his psyche, which is already fragmented and disrupted after the crash. His experience becomes more intensified and complex after his psychological trauma and eco-anxiety intersect with each other. In Oramus' (2022) words, he becomes "unconsciously aware that human destination is extinction" (p. 166). He already experiences numbing, hallucinations and nightmares. After he is overwhelmed by the sight of the ecological disaster of the desert, he shows more signs of distress, anxiety, grief and fear. These further complicate his existing trauma. Interconnected consequences of his trauma and eco-anxiety become so complex that it seems difficult to separate their distinct characteristics. But the important thing is that his eco-anxiety is distinguishable on the basis of his clear grief and worry over the devastated natural sources. So, being interconnected, trauma and eco-anxiety retain their distinct conceptual characteristics as well.

On many occasions in the narrative, Major Ellie shows his distress about the scarcity of water. He becomes distressed and frustrated when he sees a water source that has been "dried up" (Hanif, 2018, p. 10). While wandering in search of food and water, he often cries for a "drop of water" (p. 10) and a bit of some food. Ellie's eco-anxiety is so intense and severe that water seems a mirage. He also searches for some food but cannot find any vegetation or plant that may provide something to eat. He realises that it is very difficult to survive on a few in his kit. He needs water and food. This is how Hanif beautifully shows the importance of natural sources and criticises the neo-colonial powers, which are the main cause of this ecological destruction. It can be said that these neo-colonial powers and the capitalist cultures in the first world are mainly contributing to the rise and acceleration of eco-anxiety, especially in the third world and marginalised places. Ecological disaster haunts him, and he often finds himself "in shock" (p. 4). Ellie's ecological distress is obvious when he says that he has searched for something to eat and drink in order to gain some energy because he knows that he cannot survive on "measly rations" in his kit (p. 3). He realises how important the desert is. In fact, it is a message to his country, which does not care for nature and its environments.

Momo is another character who confronts eco-anxiety. He is a young and intelligent boy who lives in the refugee camp. He loves wandering in the desert and enjoying its natural environment. After the US started bombing the desert, it has become barren, and there is

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nothing left that would please Momo. Rather, the dreadful sight of devastation makes him sad and distressed. This grief and distress over the destruction of one's loved home environment is a specific ecological emotion that is defined as solastalgia by Glenn Albrecht, who terms solastalgia as a serious "stress burden on people remaining in places that are being devastated" (Albrecht, 2011, p. 46). Momo witnesses frequent sights of devastation of his natural home, including the shrinking waterfall and devastated plants and vegetation. Econastalgia is another psychoterratic syndrome, which means that an individual recalls the ecologically beautiful past of his homeland that is now destroyed. Momo also experiences econostalgia along with solastalgia. He recalls, "There was a waterfall here, yes, a proper waterfall, it had shrunk" (Hanif, 2018, p. 14). He recalls the past when he and his brother used to enjoy bathing under the fall. He also recalls the days when the animals used to graze freely and happily in the desert and there was a lot of vegetation and grass. Now, there are no more animals except for some thin and weak goats. This sight of the waterfall and the absence of grazing animals evoke a deep sense of grief and distress. This is how solastalgia and econastalgia are interconnected. His grief and distress are reflected when he sees wild animals moving in their courtyard in his dreams. He also sees a fox sticking to the window, but he cannot understand what these dreams suggest about his "mental state" (Hanif, 2018, p. 71). Momo's eco-anxiety is also manifested when he sees the paper cups and hates those cups. He feels pity for the trees, which have been cut ruthlessly for the manufacturing of these petty cups (p. 69). He cannot help recalling the beautiful ecological past of his desert and the soothing company of nature: "But it was nice to be close to nature. [---] It was all very relaxing" (p. 71). Now, he can only regret and mourn because gone are the days when nature used to relax them. Now, it is injured by US bombs.

2. Psychological Trauma in *Red Birds*

In the novel, Major Ellie is an American pilot who has been assigned the task of bombing the unnamed desert. He comes in his fighter jet to hit a target place, but his jet crashes and he has a "near-death experience" (Hanif, 2018, p. 89) after his narrow escape in that traumatic event. In the desert, he wanders in a miserable condition for many days before he meets a refugee family. Though he is lucky that he can move his "limbs about" and "nothing" is "broken" (p. 4), he gets deep psychic wounds. In his case, the crash of his jet is seen as a traumatic stressor, and his survival as an overwhelming traumatic experience. This traumatic experience exactly aligns with Caruth's trauma theory. Caruth (1995) argues that that traumatic event goes away, but the survival becomes a challenge. The survival itself is a crisis (p. 9). This is how Ellie is traumatised and his trauma results in the disruption of language and truth, fragmentation of the memory, hallucinations, numbness and nightmares.

Caruth (1995) focuses on the fragmentation of the memory and crisis of the language as the immediate outcomes of an overwhelming traumatic experience. This experience is overwhelming and is caused by catastrophic events that occur suddenly (Caruth, 1996, p. 11). Such an overwhelming experience badly disrupts language and memory. The survivor cannot assimilate or express the event as it happens. It is not fully known and leaves the survivor in a chaotic state. This is true of Ellie's experiences after the survival; his memory is fragmented, and he loses concentration and focus on things around him. He himself says that he is so

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miserable that he cannot think about where he has “come from” (Hanif, 2018, p. 89). In this condition, he cannot narrate his experience in words. This unspeakability and crisis of the words clearly shows his fragmented memory. Saadia (2023) explains Caruth’s concept of fragmented memory, which accurately aligns with Ellie’s condition. She maintains that trauma is, in fact, a reaction to an upsetting event that overwhelms an individual’s ability to fully understand the reasons because the event fully disrupts his sense of self (p. 64).

Ellie’s fragmented memory causes a crisis of meaning and leaves him in a chaotic and existential void. He says, “I have never felt so ravenous in my life" (Hanif, 2018, p. 107). Though he needs water and food for his survival, his psychic wound has made him so ‘ravenous’ that he cannot find some tangible ways. Caruth (1996) says that trauma is not a simple pathological case or a psychic illness; it is something more than that. It is a “story of the wound that cries out” (p. 4). It cries out in order to be named and known. In a similar way, Ellie’s ravenous condition calls for such an attempt to find some meaning.

Furthermore, Caruth (1995) posits that traumatic experiences return to haunt the survivors in the forms of nightmares and hallucinations. She says that the response to the overwhelming event is often delayed. It returns in the form of repeated hallucinations or dreams (p. 4). DSM-III (1980) also defines hallucination as a *“*sensory perception” that has no external stimulation. It has the immediate realisation or sense of “a true perception” (p. 359). After the plane crash, Ellie is repeatedly and badly haunted by such nightmares and hallucinations. These intrude from the past and badly shatter his sense of time: “I listen to the howling wind [---]; I can hear voices [---]. I can hear my own dead comrades" (Hanif, 2018, p. 57). He hears them shouting and yelling at him. He also sees the marching tribes. It clearly shows that his sense of time and reality is blurred. These visions of his dead companions, marching tribes and the sounds of the howling wind depict his strange psychic state. In fact, there is a chaos and turmoil that has badly disturbed his senses and perceptions.

According to Caruth (1995), nightmares and hallucinations are also accompanied by “numbing” that begins after or during the traumatic experience (p. 4). *DSM-III* (1980) also explains that the main feature of psychological trauma is “numbing of responsiveness” to the surrounding environment or the world (p. 236). Ellie’s conception of time and reality as well as his overall cognitive ability are damaged because of such absolute numbing, and he is in the crisis of truth. He says that his “brain draws a blank now” (Hanif, 2018, p. 89), and he has gone “beyond dreaming” (p. 76). This psychological numbness has obliterated his ability and capacity to dream, think, and imagine. It has also lead to a crisis of imagination and hope for the better future. His numbness demonstrates that his traumatic experience has paralysed his psyche. Caruth (1995) views this condition as an integral part of trauma (p. 4). Ellie’s inability to imagine and dream confirms that the crash incident has badly disrupted and damaged his psychic health. His psychic injuries are worse than the physical injuries.

Ellie’s trauma also disconnects his mind from his own body at certain times. He says, "I can feel no life below my torso, though. Is this how people die, from the toes up? Lower half lifeless, and the upper half wielding a dagger, raring for one last fight. The brain is the last thing to die, I remember" (Hanif, 2018, p. 59). His numbness detaches his central nervous

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system from his body, and he feels that his lower limbs are lifeless. This is how his trauma manifests in several complicated forms. It shows the complexity of traumatic experience as depicted in a fictional work. This experience is further complicated as it interconnects with eco-anxiety. Major Ellie also confronts ecological distress and anxiety that exactly align with Albrecht's and Pihkala's concepts of ecological emotions. For clarity, it is important to highlight that this study utilises the concept of eco-anxiety as a broader and inclusive term that includes Albrecht's psychoterratic syndromes, future fear of ecological catastrophe, climate anxiety, ecological grief and many other emotions related to ecological and environmental issues.

3. Existential Void: An Absence of Existential Choices

As discussed above, the major characters of the novel experience eco-anxiety and psychological trauma simultaneously. Both of these psychological challenges are interconnected and intertwined in their complex experiences. These interconnected perspectives of psychological trauma and eco-anxiety are further interconnected with a third theoretical perspective, the existential void. The idea of the existential void developed for this article is simply an absence of existential choice. When there is no existential choice, there is always a void that is termed as the 'existential void'. So, for the understanding of the existential void, the understanding of the concept of existential choice is necessary. My concept of existential choice is based on three principles of Sartre's existential philosophy. These principles include freedom of choice, power of action and sense of responsibility. In simple words, it means that man is free to make choices in this world, and he is not bound to follow the set patterns. When he makes a choice, he has a power and potential in his actions to materialise that choice. The third component, sense of responsibility, means that his choice and actions must concern the whole world or the wider community. If a choice does not benefit the society or community, it is not an existential choice. I argue that such choices have great potential to combat adverse situations and overcome psychological challenges like trauma and eco-anxiety. For instance, the protagonist of Imbolo Mbue's novel suffers from eco-anxiety and trauma but makes an existential choice of becoming a revolutionary leader. This choice not only helps her manage her anxiety and trauma but also contributes to her personal growth and ensure her dignified existence. Similarly, protagonists of Waheed's novel *Thee Book of Gold Leaves* (2014) and Delia Owens' *Where the Crawdads Sing* (2018) make such existential choices and combat their psychological challenges. When the characters tangled in such adverse situations do not make such choice and remain stuck, they remain in an existential void.

In the novel *Red Birds* (2018), the protagonists suffer from eco-anxiety and psychological trauma simultaneously, like the protagonists of the above-mentioned novels, but they are stuck in a void and cannot come out of it. Existential choice puts the individual on a driving seat where he transforms his journey at his own will. But most of the individuals, in Tillich's (1959) words, are "more often driven than driving" (p. 39). Those who are driven cannot give meaning to their meaningless existence. They cannot grow and transform

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themselves and contribute to the world. The same is the case with Hanif's characters in *Red Birds*. They are not in the driving seat of their circumstances. Rather, they are driven and remain stuck in their existential void.

Major Ellie experiences eco-anxiety and trauma simultaneously but cannot recuperate because of his existential void. It has diminished his freedom of choice and agency. He is helpless and paralysed. He is unable to come out of his odd condition because he does not take some special step in order to exercise his freedom and agency. He cannot think of getting beyond his survival and his search for food, water, and shelter. Throughout the story, he only thinks about his own life and his wife back at home. He cannot go beyond his personal aspirations and simply concentrates on his own life and survival. He does not develop any meaningful interaction with the inhabitants of the desert. He simply believes that he is nothing more than "a mid-ranking officer" (Hanif, 2018, p. 76) who is destined to do that ordinary job. He feels powerless, as, according to him, "even hope gives up on itself" (p. 75) in difficult times. This helplessness, hopelessness and inability to exercise freedom and agency are the characteristic components of existential void. The solution or alternative is existential choice, which compels an individual to utilise his freedom of choice, power of action and sense of responsibility. Ellie's lack of self-reliance and agency and lack of a meaningful engagement with his odd circumstances make his situation even worse. He is left in an absolutely desolate and static condition. This absence of existential choices leads to an existential paralysis and existential stagnation. So, Major Ellie's unchanging, meaningless and static condition validates the necessity of existential choice and signifies its role in adverse situations.

Momo also remains in the same void and cannot change or transform circumstances. He also faces psychological challenges caused by the violence and ecological destruction, like Major Ellie. As he lives in the refugee camp with his family, his life is constrained by his family, and he cannot utilise his power of freedom and agency. The whole family is governed by the powerful external forces like war, displacement and poverty. Moreover, Momo is bound to follow the rules and set patterns of his parents and family. This is how his agency, choice and freedom are restricted. He is forced to focus on his day-to-day survival. That's why he always thinks about earning money—an ordinary choice adopted by the majority. He becomes disillusioned and cannot develop any existential engagement, active change, and resistance. Instead, he becomes easy prey to a resigned acceptance and, thus, remains stuck in existential void. Existential void of Major Ellie and Momo can be best described in Tillich's words. Tillich (1959) maintains that human life is mostly a superficial routine. We are bound to follow that routine, and we have no control over our circumstances and lives: "We are more often driven than driving" (p. 39). We have no freedom to look at the heights above us or to the depths below. We always move in a circle, which takes us nowhere. We keep returning to the same place every day. In this way, we are unable to transform our lives and give meanings to our meaningless lives in this absurd and chaotic world (Tillich, 1959). These words best describe the existential void that is opposite to an existential choice. This is true to the major characters of the novel. They cannot bring themselves out of that void which has snatched their freedom of choice and agency.

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So, Ellie and Momo do not pay heed to the "voices from the depth" (McCandless, 1993, p. 346) or to "the voices speaking our depth" (Tillich, 1959, p. 39). Their existential void makes them emotionally detached from their societies and communities. It proves that existential choice is highly needed in such adverse situations that are caused by wars, military operations and armed conflicts. The neo-colonial powers are overwhelmed by their greed for wealth, control and power. They don't care about the human and non-human worlds alike. Though this intersection or synthesis of three different theoretical perspectives is a significant addition in the field of literary research, its knowledge and awareness may prove valuable, especially for the individuals of the war zones and marginalised places. The awareness of their existential void and the potential of the existential choices can help transform their odd conditions and can lead to their personal growth and better societies.

4. Conclusion

Hanif's novel *Red Birds* (2018) portrays a disturbing picture of human life in which ecological destruction, violence, and war intersect to cause psychological trauma, eco-anxiety, and existential void. The analysis of the text shows that psychological trauma and eco-anxiety are not isolated but are presented as interconnected and complex experiences. Their causes, consequences and manifestations are interconnected and distinguishable at the same time. These further intersect with existential perspective in the form of an existential void in which the major characters are stuck. Eco-anxiety is examined as a broader and inclusive theoretical concept that includes future fear, grief, solastalgia, econastalgia and distress. All the protagonists demonstrate different forms of eco-anxiety. It is analysed in the light of Pihkala's concepts and Albrecht's concept of psychoterratic syndromes. Trauma is analysed in the light of Caruth's theory, which mainly focuses on the fragmentation of memory, crisis of language, hallucinations and nightmares as outcomes of overwhelming traumatic events. Similarly, Sartre's existential philosophy is taken into account in order to develop and examine the concept of existential void. The statement that "we are more often driven than driving" consequently reflects the characters' miserable condition and highlights the tension between human freedom and the external forces. Ultimately, Hanif's novel *Red Birds* demonstrates how psychological and ecological crises cause an existential void, which paralyses the characters' struggle for freedom and agency.

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