

Language Game Analysis of the Speech of the Oppressed and Oppressors in Muhammad Hanif's Red Birds

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Keywords	Abstract
Language, Oppression, Wittgenstein, Language Games, Post Colonialism.	<i>This research paper explores and analyses the speech of both the oppressed and the oppressors in Red Birds (2018), authored by British Pakistani novelist Muhammad Hanif. The research utilises qualitative textual analysis while applying Ludwig Wittgenstein's Language Games framework, using his notable propositions from Philosophical Investigations (1953) and Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (1921). Red Birds serves as a significant fictional portrayal of the impact of oppression on people who face it in a post-war setting with postcolonial context. The paper demonstrates that the characters of the novel convey their feelings by means of language. The study analyses the thoughts, monologues, and dialogues through Language Games framework and reveals the emotional and psychological toll of oppressive tactics on the oppressed. The paper argues that individuals employ different language games to express their emotions. It contributes towards the enhancement of our understanding of Wittgenstein's concept of language games and emphasises the need for further research in the future.</i>

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper proffers an analysis of oppression and its consequent expression in Red Birds (2018), written by Muhammad Hanif. For this purpose, the study uses Ludwig Wittgenstein's concept of Language Games (1953). Red Birds, published by UK's prestigious Bloomsbury Publications, serves as a monumental work that realistically portrays the cruelty and indifference in modern warfare. It shows deliberate planning and oppressive tactics employed by the Western Powers especially the United States of America (USA) in various global conflicts and the resultant suffering caused by them. This study has been carried out to enquire how the victims express oppression with a goal to expose varied meanings and connotations of the phenomenon. Oppression is defined as the "systematic use of tactics that restrict the decision-making power of the marginalised, invalidate their voices, hinder their progress", and create conditions where they begin to question their sanity. It "operates as an ecosystem where individuals are denied the freedom to live according to their own desires" (David.et.al, 2017).

Red Birds (2018) presents a tale of a family that finds itself embroiled in a post-war situation displaying the ravages of war with its damaging impacts on their psyche. The situation they are facing threatens their very survival as well. We are introduced to one of the main characters Maj Ellie at the very outset. He is a US fighter pilot and represents the heartless war machinery of the

US. He gets his plane crashed while attempting to bomb a refugee camp located in a nowhere desert land. He is stranded in that merciless terrain for over a week until he is saved by a teenaged local named Momo. Surprisingly enough, he is rescued by the same people whom he was planning to bomb. He is taken to a refugee camp which is filthy, with deplorable living conditions. The Camp highlights harsh realities of war, especially from the perspective of oppressors, who belong to the privileged first world. But Maj Ellie has nowhere to go and must learn to survive in these dire conditions. Momo's family comprises his father, mother, and Mutt (Momo's dog). The dog is not only a pet; it is presented as a wise being who occasionally reflects on life as well. In this way the dog also serves as the mouthpiece of the author. Another significant character is Momo's brother, Bro Ali as Momo calls him. He has been employed by the US forces and serves in the Hanger. Once he goes to his work but does not return. His family believes that he has been sold to the Americans by Momo's father. The war seems to have affected every part of local life, including economic stability, making people willing to exploit any opportunity to make money, regardless of the cost.

Red Birds is an excellent portrayal and exposé of the inherent hypocrisy involved in world affairs. The novel is particularly relevant for this research as it presents various facets of oppression highlighting adverse consequences for the victims. Language Game analysis of Red Birds endeavours to discover how the sufferers identify and live with these forms of oppression. Language games, much like other games, are rule-based and are useful in articulating feelings and emotions with a careful selection of words. The victims, who are under foreign occupation, utilize language as a weapon of resistance. "Occupying forces, in turn, inadvertently resort to excessive use of power and oppressive measures against the weak and vulnerable nations of the world" (Daxner, 2009). This research on Red Birds displays the critical role of language in expressing these emotions within modern literature.

Wittgenstein made important contributions to the philosophy of language, with "a focus on how language conveys meaning and the ways in which language can express various ideas" (Rorty, 2013). The "concept of Language Games is central to his later philosophy of language" (Dipankar & Rituparna, 2020). Wittgenstein considers that language is like a game similar to other activities. In his seminal work *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), he maintains that as a child begins to grow up, he learns the usage of words in relation to various activities. These words describe different activities and help him in performing certain actions. The child also listens to and understands the words of other speakers and reacts to them as per his understanding. The use of these specific words in a social setting according to particular culture, norms and customs is what he terms a language game (p. 7). According to Wittgenstein, "language is a semiotic practice involving moves and grammar. Our linguistic behaviours can be seen as 'moves' in a language game, which, although we often aren't consciously aware of them, are assigned meaning through grammar" (pp. 65-71). Since language is a social practice, therefore, "analysing these semiotic practices involves examining the 'moves' within a language game to understand their grammatical possibilities". Wittgenstein (1953) emphasises that "language is selected carefully, intentionally, and contextually, with different expressions appropriate for different situations" (p. 83). What might be an accurate expression in one social setting may not be true in another context, even if the situations are similar. For Wittgenstein, in order to understand a language, we must look at the context, social setting and customs of a

society's language. In addition to it, the way a sentence is structured, articulated and the grammar involved in it all help create intended meaning (Gefwert, 2000).

1.1. Research Questions

The research questions of the study are:

1. How do the opposing discourses of the oppressors and the oppressed overlap and portrayed in *Red Birds* (2018)?
2. What are the ways in which the bitterness of oppression is expressed in *Red Birds* (2018) using language games?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Wittgensteinian concept of "language games" is an important analytical tool for the analysis of literary works. This concept shows that there is a relationship between use of language and a game which is played according to certain rules and conditions. If the speakers/players in a language game do not understand the rules of a specific conversation, its context and structure, then flawless conveyance of meaning may not happen and cause unnecessary vagueness in expression. Like every game which strives for a successful outcome, a language game also endeavours for a correct conclusion; otherwise, it will result in faulty interpretation. For Wittgenstein, context is the most essential feature for a clear comprehension of a particular language game. The notion of language games, has a direct relevance to both literature as well as daily conversations. If we delve into details and look around us, everyone engages in different kinds of language games. From adults to the children, the topics of our conversations define what kind of language game we are playing. We carefully choose relevant vocabulary for a specific language game, create a structure and employ grammar to make the language game meaningful (Gibson & Huemer, 2004).

The works of literature, in all genres, reflect human beings, and our actions constitute its themes. While going through a piece of literature, we feel ourselves to be part of it. We feel connected with its words, we understand the conversations of its characters, and we can easily infer meaning from them. "Writers provide enough background information to help their readers understand the theme of a story, and in this process, the language of literary work plays a critical role" (Shalini & Samundeswari, 2017, pp. 170-173). Here we find why Wittgensteinian philosophy of language is relevant for the analysis of literature as it relies heavily on the internal workings of our minds, how we express those thoughts and the way meanings are created. Literature functions the same way. Hence, using language games framework for the analysis of *Red Birds* seems to be a correct approach. It is however, highlighted here that analysis of literary language is not a straightforward task.

The work of Wittgenstein concerns itself primarily with the use of language in philosophy; literary critic Huemer (2004) argues that Wittgenstein wanted to analyze the language used by philosophers and believed vagueness in language to be the reason for all philosophical problems. He also refers to Wittgenstein's caution regarding the "complexities involved in understanding language". Language, according to Wittgenstein, contains "inherent traps that hinder clear

comprehension. Attempting to understand it might lead us down blind alleys, resulting in misunderstanding and misinterpretation". Wittgenstein deals with language and the definitions of various words in different contexts. He advises the readers to remain very careful while interpreting words, as lack of knowledge of the context may result in faulty understanding. From day-to-day conversations to scientific language, from entertainment to theatrical performances, language usage and subsequent meanings depend on our knowledge of the context in which the words are being spoken (Copi et al., 2005).

Meanings in a language are shaped by the social environment and these meanings evolve as language moves from one community to another. We cannot find meanings of words in fixed references, but we can find them in their use within that language, specifically when we know the context of the related language game. As human beings with thinking abilities, we are forced to ask questions regarding meanings, such as "What does someone say? What is their objective? What do they mean by this?" Wittgenstein was cognizant of the importance of language in our lives, and he considered it an instrument through which the speakers conveyed their desires, aspirations and thoughts. He argues that we use language to make meaning and when we talk to others, we influence the way they behave and act. In this way language is not only an instrument of communication, it is also a medium to construct the reality we live in (Kaliuzhna, 2020).

Sadaf (2022) carried out a detailed research on *Red Birds* with a focus to find the collaboration between global military industrial mafias and world aid agencies and assert that both these entities are same and just play good cop and bad cop. All wars in the world are fueled, subsisted and fought by this military-industrial complex. They plan and bomb poor nations in the name of freeing them from tyranny and dictatorship. Once they have decimated target countries, then they send in aid agencies citing love for humanity and desire for reconstruction. The same thing has been narrated in *Red Birds*, where the desert land is first bombed by the oppressor followed by the arrival of US AID to help rebuild the destroyed land. We find an uncanny resemblance of the story with the situation in the South Asian country Afghanistan, destroyed by almost three decades of an imposed war. The study highlights that these wars have proved to be useless and have done no good for the victims. The wars have made their lives a living hell on earth. Her analysis points at the oppressive techniques used by the Western countries to suppress poor nations, with a fake gesture of helping them and tricking them through aid agencies.

These wars are absurd in their nature being aimless and without any moral backing. Hanif has presented the absurdity of the situation in *Red Birds* through literary techniques such as humour and sarcasm, juxtaposed with tragic elements. The novel reveals self-contradictory nature of war that first makes children orphans and then champions itself by saving them. While the narrative of the novel is woven with sadness, there is a continuous humorous rendering of the situation as well which heightens the effect of loss. The absurdity of the situation and helplessness of the characters gives rise to a form of specific humour. "People are trapped in an inescapable, hopeless situation, creating a tragicomedy unfolding before our eyes. The novel presents two conflicting ideologies battling each other in this absurd and complex scenario" (Nasir et al., 2023).

Red Birds presents characters as precarious beings with unstable lives, particularly in the post-war, postcolonial context. The characters in Red Birds are analogous to those people who have unstable, insecure and torn-in-pieces lives. Such people were termed as precariat by Standing in 2011. Their lives are akin to those who leave their motherlands and move to other countries in search of a livelihood, and in the process, they lose stability and peace of their lives (Veyret, 2020).

Karim (2020) points out that Red Birds is a literary attempt by neocolonialists to show that the Muslim countries are averse to change and refuse to absorb modern trends of society. He refers to the power of narrative and humour as tools used by the novelist to offer “a satiric account of American imperialism strategies,” with a view to highlighting the inherent contradictions and absurdities of the geopolitical world.

Hussain (2019) explores the hypocrisy in the conduct of first-world countries by highlighting their actions which bring nothing but death and destruction in the lives of the sufferers as shown in Red Birds. The developed world champions’ higher standards of conduct in their own countries while they support dictatorial regimes in poor countries involved in gross human rights violations. They take pride in the freedom of speech only in their own countries.

Anjum et al. (2021) argue that Red Birds is an oriental piece of literary work. They discover that the novel starts by critiquing Western ways of thinking but later on shifts to criticise the Eastern way of life, even blaming Muslims for their failure to embrace modernity. They conclude that the novel is a mouthpiece of the West, despite its initial critique of Western ideologies.

Red Birds reflects that the process of colonisation usually does not last long and eventually turns into the process of decolonisation. As per Fanonian thought, which suggests that the more violence external forces exert, the more intense the response is from the oppressed. Ashcroft also (1989) says “violence can sometimes mute resistance and help maintain control; it also fuels an ever-stronger counter-response, leading to a cycle of coercion and rebellion” The research explores how the violence of foreign powers creates an inevitable and powerful push for decolonisation and resistance (Naz, 2022).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is qualitative in nature, analysing and interpreting exhaustively the selected parts of text from Red Birds. The inductive approach, which is closely related to qualitative research, has been applied on this study. The text has been thoroughly analysed through textual analysis methods in research to explore the speech of the oppressed and oppressors. In this connection, McKee's (2003) and Belsey's (2013) textual analysis method in research has been used for the interpretation of the text. It is implemented by finding answers to questions like what the text says, to whom it says and why it says so. Interpretation of the text through this framework is then linked with the main framework of Language Games analysis through which answers to research questions are found. For carrying out research with adequate primary and secondary resources, the researcher has made use of the novel Red Birds as the primary source for data collection, and this data has been explained and elaborated with Wittgenstein's Language Games framework. In addition to the primary source, the secondary source comprises

a collection of notable research papers which have a relevance to this research. These research papers have been taken from acclaimed research journals. The physical and psychological impacts of oppression as a phenomenon have been analyzed with the help of language games concept. The concept also assists in drawing a comparison of feelings among different characters in *Red Birds*. It is pertinent to mention here that socio-cultural practices have also been explored and made use of to understand the context. This framework has the capacity to bring together differing language games, draw a comparison, consolidate their meaning and facilitate comprehension. As *Red Birds* may be categorized as a post-colonial text, major themes of post-colonial literature have also been used to explain oppression in a thematic manner (Nayar, 2008).

4. DISCUSSION

To find answers for the research questions of this study, selected passages/quotations from *Red Birds* have been analyzed. These passages focus on overlapping discourses of the oppressed and the oppressors, the expression of bitterness caused by oppression, and the portrayal of the misery and pain experienced by the natives in *Red Birds*. It is noteworthy that *Red Birds* presents and builds two distinct discourses which move simultaneously. There are two sets of characters in the novel, and each set represents a particular discourse. Both discourses make use of different language games which complement the intended outcome. These discourses are about the oppressed and the oppressors. The discourse of the oppressed is led by Momo, his mother and Mutt, while the discourse linked with the oppressors is woven around Maj Ellie and US AID worker Lady Flowerbody. Both groups of characters initiate and forward their respective discourses through their language games.

These discourses make use of language games which highlight intricate power structures in the society, hollow identities, and the quest for resistance by the oppressed. The oppressors see war as a necessary evil with the pretext to bring stability and economic prosperity. Their views are shaped by hawk politicians, military generals, and industry leaders, who justify war as a means to bring prosperity (most of the time for themselves) even if it is at the expense of the impoverished masses. They resort to wars to build societies but their ill-planned adventures end up destroying the world. In doing so, they benefit military industries who are their partners in crime. Once the destruction is over, then they start constructing, and the cycle continues till their appetite for loot and plunder is not satisfied. Momo highlights this hypocrisy when he says, "What comes after war? ... Reconstruction" (p. 75). It means that their prime focus is economic profit, regardless of the countless lives lost during these conflicts. The oppressed employ a distinct language game in their conversations. They have been seeing death and destruction around them and are struggling with loss, emotional devastation, and economic ruin. For them, life is not a bed of roses and business as usual; everything is coloured with grief and suffering. They continuously allude to destruction and death they have been enduring. For them even the birds, soaring through the skies, serve as a powerful symbol for the violence and killings they have witnessed. The red colour of the birds symbolizes bloodshed and devastation. These birds are not mere creatures in the sky; they represent the restless souls of the deceased who have not received justice and are for it even after their deaths. The birds, in this context, symbolize the cost of a futile war that serves the interests of only a few while it crushes the majority.

In *Red Birds*, the discourse of the oppressed often resorts to humour and sarcasm to highlight the absurdity of war they are trapped in. Humour and sarcasm become powerful tools for the oppressed to resist and reveal the forces of oppression. It is through this language game that Momo exposes fake sympathy shown by his oppressors, such as the field researcher Lady Flowerbody. She reveals her true colours in her interactions with her subjects. Momo's obsession with carving out a future by doing business further displays the disparity between the promised economic prosperity versus the dark reality of deprivation. While dealing with this despair and frustration, the oppressed make use of humour in their conversations as a coping mechanism. They employ slangs and jargon of the oppressors to articulate and highlight their suffering, using language as a weapon for the sake of resistance. Language is not merely a means of communication. To maintain their control, the colonizers / occupiers have to remain with their subjects therefore, both come across one another on a daily basis. In such a setting, likelihood of direct confrontation and communication increases.

In this oppressive environment, there is an unending presence of tension for the inhabitants. This feeling is amplified when language games from opposing forces clash with one another. In a power-packed society under severe oppression, the pendulum always swings in favour of the mighty and powerful. The clash of words does not start at once; it first originates in thoughts, causing a lot of confusion and anger. Then the thoughts get the shape of words, and these words evolve into uncomfortable conversations. When these conversations clash, they affect the sufferers on a physical as well as mental level. What causes frustration for the natives is the fact that they may not be able to get justice ever. For them there is no light at the end of the tunnel. This frustration turns into anger, and their language becomes a way to vent their frustration and anger. The nostalgia of a better past decimated by war does not help either.

Red Birds is significant as it makes the readers realize that our experiences play a crucial role in giving direction to our lives. Good and bad experiences both alter our cognitive alignment. The litmus test of maturity will be to understand this fact and try to understand humans in the light of their experiences. This idea is validated when we see the psychological condition of Momo and his mother. Their language games reveal their experiences, the impact of oppression and the suffering they have faced. Out of all the characters in *Red Birds*, it is Momo's mother who comes out as the most tragic one. She has to bear three major tragedies. She loses her happy home due to war, she undergoes severe psychological and physical pain that comes as a consequence of war, and lastly, she loses her son to the conflict. It is not a normal loss of a child, her son disappears and she does not find his whereabouts. She does not know whether he is alive or dead. There is a constant clash between hope and despair in her. She deserves an emotional closure, but there is none, so her language is full of references to her personal grief. She wants to go out and search her son but she cannot do it because of social customs which restrict a woman from going out. It adds to her anger and frustration. This feeling finds expression in her words when she says that she is "tied to the stove" or that "Sadness is practically my sibling in this household" (p. 72). Her words are a commentary on the plight of women in the Eastern households where the women are supposed to take care of the family by staying inside. This social culture is widespread in South Asia, and if a woman ventures out of her home, she is considered immodest. Women stay indoors just to preserve their honour and reputation. The

word “tied” makes her language game overwhelmingly potent. It conveys her helplessness as well as the feeling of grief in the face of domestic as well as societal oppression. Mutt’s words, “Why does she need salt? She could just cook with her tears” (p. 72), speak volumes about her condition. The suffocation in the society makes everyone run for their lives and aspirations.

It is not only the women who are feeling the heat of oppression; men too suffer the same fate, especially the young ones. Momo is young and has so many dreams for a better future. Yet when he looks around, all he can find is the dance of death and destruction. The war and, later on, oppression by the enemy forces leave everything in shambles. There seems to be no hope for a bright future. Momo’s language game comprises words which reflect his desires to make a future from nothing. The war and devastation have deep imprints on his psyche. Whatever he speaks is painted with the colour of war and hopelessness. Even if he tries to think positively, he is rendered helpless in the presence of monuments of war like the ever-present hangar. To make matters worse, he does not find comfort and solace in his own home, as there is a constant reminder of the loss of his brother. His grieving mother is ever present with her pains and anguish.

The context of war makes everything ridiculously painful in the lives of the natives. War alters the way they perceive everything from abstract emotions to physical scars. It seems oppression has changed and rewired them in every way. They struggle to think like rational humans. Their speech is erratic, either too fast or too slow and sometimes broken. It has changed their psychology, the meaning of their utterances and their viewpoint of the world around them. The locals have been betrayed in every possible way. First, they were bombed, their homes destroyed, then they were put in camps as if they were animals. After that, they were provided with bare minimum aid to survive and also asked to be grateful by their tormentors. This deception and hypocrisy gets revealed through the character of Lady Flowerbody, a field staff member of USAID. Her shenanigans, her callous apathy to the plight of natives is quite evident from her language game. She fails to show sympathy to the masses, and her hollow words are as futile as the promises of aid by the aid agencies. Here it is pertinent to mention that after winning the 2024 presidential elections in America, the Trump administration actually acknowledged the wrongdoings of USAID and shut down its offices across the world. He exposed the agency’s notorious role as a tool in the hands of the deep state to fund evil and change regimes in various countries around the world. It is the acknowledgement of the claim made by Red Birds against Western aid agencies. These agencies are just a humane face of oppression which is used to perpetuate atrocities in third world countries.

This research reveals the fact that no matter how articulate we are, we can never be able to express perfectly what we experience. It raises questions regarding the capacity of language to express what is in our hearts. The research reveals that language has limitations, as our feelings cannot be worded the way we feel. Red Birds presents characters which seem to struggle in expressing themselves. The words used by them do not grasp the essence of their suffering despite their best efforts to express themselves. One logical reason for this incapacity could be the effects of living in an oppressive environment which impairs psychological prowess and cognitive clarity. The usage of the expression “lab rat” for Momo dehumanizes him and reduces

him to the level of a sub-human who has no will of his own. This language game hints at the consequences of war and oppression. In an oppressive environment, humans cease to be humans and are converted into Neanderthals survived like animals without any ability to speak and ultimately became extinct. The language games which use expressions like the above also refer to the incapacity and limitation of language to express our emotions tangibly. When language cannot find correct expression, it turns towards abstractions to convey the same ideas.

This study sheds light on the fact that no matter how hard we try to empathize with the people who are suffering at the hands of oppressors, we cannot fathom the depths of their feelings, as words fail to grasp the intensity and convey them appropriately. Therefore, the language games expressing abstract feelings are very hard to be articulated and comprehended.

4.1. Findings

Language Game analysis of Hanif's Red Birds illustrates that context, shared norms and customs of a society and interaction of words join hands for the creation of intended meaning. This study emphasizes that the choice of words and the structure of discourse are critical for communicating our emotions, whether they are concrete or abstract like oppression and pain. Furthermore, the research argues that a deep awareness of the broader social context is imperative to understand the true essence of communication. Without a wholesome presence of context, words lose their meaning, and language becomes an activity in futility disconnected from its purpose and without any potential in conveying real meaning.

5. CONCLUSION

This research brings us to the conclusion that we cannot understand the meaning of a language if we ignore socio-cultural norms and customs where that language is being used. We also realize that oppression manifests itself through various means, language being one of them. The oppressors as well as the oppressed use different language games to assert dominance and resist oppression, respectively. Therefore, Wittgenstein's concept of language games proves its efficacy in exploring abstract feelings and emotions linked to and tied with oppression in Red Birds. We cannot comprehend the workings of oppression if we do not take into account the context, customs and culture of a particular society. The text in Red Birds comprises various language games which have been used by characters to express themselves and give way to their feelings.

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