Benevolent violence: Bombs, Aid, and Human Rights in Mohammad Hanif's *Red Birds*

Shazia Sadaf

Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada

> Every word I write is affected by how the world works, what it does to us, to our fellow human beings. Also what we do to the world. (Hanif in Mukerji)

Introduction:

This article was written in the months prior to the fall of Kabul to the Taliban in August of 2021, and since, as the world has watched the swift exit of US forces from Afghanistan after two decades, the obvious failure of the war on terror is no longer lost on anyone. Pakistani post-9/11 Anglophone fiction writers, including Mohammad Hanif, have repeatedly called attention through their storylines to the futility of US military interventions against terrorism in the Muslim world. Hanif's most recent novel, *Red Birds* (2018), is an almost prophetic story of lost men on both sides of a violent war without resolution. Hanif spins a contemporary tragicomic satire that revolves around the twin ghosts of Ellie and Ali, and other characters who seek answers to their disappearances. All the narrators, including the ruminating dog, are protagonists within their own versions of the same tale and are, in certain ways, both victims and perpetrators of different forms of violence in an incongruous post-9/11 conflict zone. A series of monologues reveals the characters' parallel yet contrasting positionalities within a human predicament caused by larger geopolitical forces beyond their own control. The humour in this novel is tinged with sadness; it is a situational tragicomedy of people caught in a clash of ideologies. Hanif thinks that writers like him "actually tone down" the reality of such situations because even fiction fails to "match the absurdist comedy going on" (quoted in Singh; emphasis added) around us, and in a way his books are "much less violent and less absurdist" (quoted in Singh) than the ordinary lives of people in a country like Pakistan that is caught in someone else's war for the last twenty years.

From its partition and the subsequent wars with India, to the ongoing internal separatist movements in Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (previously North-West Frontier Province), Pakistan has a history of violence. However, the US-led war on terror added a new complex dimension to the profile of violence against ordinary citizens

in Pakistan. In addition to the direct Pak-Afghan civilian casualties due to Taliban terrorist activities, there is the further injustice of forced disappearances and alleged torture of citizens because of the Pakistani military's role in aiding the United States' anti-terrorism mission. The involvement of the United States in Pakistani politics is not new, and likewise, "forced disappearance is not a new tactic of the state to eliminate political dissent in Pakistan" (Hussain 55); its long history goes back to the early years following the country's independence in 1947, when the "Pakistani political and military elite allied itself with the United States and its geostrategic ambitions [and] the intelligence services violently cracked down on the Communist Party of Pakistan ultimately banning it in 1954" (Hussain 55). Following the attacks of 9/11, the United States not only placed the Pakistani government under huge pressure to comply with its anti-terrorism plan but also offered considerable economic incentives for Pakistani assistance, which "added to the urgency of Pakistani intelligence operations against militant networks in Pakistan" (Hussain 57) and resulted in increasing numbers of forced abductions. The few missing persons who returned reported that they were "questioned by foreign intelligence services" (Hussain 57), which points to an allied exchange of suspected terrorists. The role of the US Pakistan alliance in disappearances of civilians is backed by ex-President of Pakistan Pervez Musharraf's account:

> Since shortly after 911, when many members of al Qaeda fled Afghanistan and crossed the border into Pakistan, we have played cat and mouse with them… we have captured 689 and handed over 369 to the United States. We have earned bounties totalling millions of dollars. Those who habitually accuse us of 'not doing enough' in the war on terror should simply ask the CIA how much prize money it has paid to the government of Pakistan. (Musharraf 237)

Hanif's interest in weaving the tragedy of forced abductions into his novel is not surprising. In the seven-year gap between *Red Birds* and his last novel, Hanif was approached by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan to pen a non-fiction book containing accounts by families of missing persons in Baluchistan, a topic so heartrending that, according to Hanif, "some of that seeped into" (quoted in Aslam) his new novel. Hanif says in his article "Explaining a Novel to Pakistani Intelligence" that in the seven years he spent writing *Red Birds*, "not once did I pause to consider whether the Pakistani establishment or its intelligence agencies would like it, whether I was being blasphemous, whether I was compromising the country's national security," even though several journalists had been made to pay for their views, including Sabeen Mahmud, a close friend of Hanif's who was shot in Karachi after hosting a debate on the Baluch nationalist movement.

The novel is set in a semi-fictional, war-battered place that appears to be a cross between a Middle Eastern desert and the arid Pakistani tribal belt in Baluchistan and has all the elements of dissonant positionalities in one competing space: a military hangar, a UN food mission, a USAID refugee camp, and a Red Crescent hospital. Hanif populates this space with all the expected character representations in a contemporary global war zone: a presumptuous US bomber pilot, an angry young Muslim refugee, an ingratiating local UN logistics officer, and a futile USAID consultant carrying out research on post-conflict resolution strategies. The story revolves around an American pilot, Ellie, who crash-lands and dies in the very zone that he has been sent to bomb. Without the realization that he is now a ghost, he is discovered by a mangy dog belonging to a local fifteen-year-old boy from a nearby USAID refugee camp. To save himself, he pretends to be a humanitarian aid worker who has crashed while flying in essential supplies. Momo, the refugee boy, accompanied by his dog Mutt, spends their time divided between looking for his disappeared (also dead) brother Ali, and dreaming up plans built on foreign magazine advice about how to become a billionaire to lift himself out of the plight of a limbic refugee state. His borrowed vocabulary from the personnel at the military hangar near the camp includes ludicrously formal titles like "Father Dear" and "Mother Dear" for his parents. Angry at his father's role in getting his brother Ali a job at the hangar from which he never came back, and desperate to console his grieving mother, Momo becomes the perfect lab rat for a USAID research consultant studying young Muslim minds in "a survey on post-conflict resolution strategies" (*Red Birds* 43). The complex interplay of the internal monologues of all these characters not only reveals the violence of their relationship with each other, but also the violence encapsulated in the hypocritical benevolence of aid missions and conflict-resolution strategies that follow the more direct violence of war. Nowhere is this failure more apparent than in the recent withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan and the ensuing sense of abandonment felt by the Afghan people. Through this narrative, Hanif cleverly weaves the staple terminology of the war on terror, like "enemy combatant" and "collateral damage," that justify Western intervention and violence through semantic modifications in human rights discourse.

Although Hanif maintains that *Red Birds* "is set in a war-torn, devastated, half-forgotten place" inside his head rather than any specific geographical location, he also admits that while writing the novel, his mind was preoccupied with the fact that, as Pakistanis, "we are perpetrators, collaborators and victims" (quoted in Aslam) of the war in Afghanistan. That is why there are subtle hints in the novel that the setting could well be the tribal, desert region of Baluchistan, on the border with Afghanistan that has borne the direct and indirect brunt of

US interventions during the war on terror. The absurdly complex relationship between the three countries occupying Hanif's mind is reflected in caustic insights like Ellie's: "If Pakistan screwed Afghanistan and USA was the midwife you'd get a country called FAMILY" (*Red Birds* 184). There are other signals about the geographic setting. For example, Mutt tells readers that he was electrocuted by a current that travelled from 800 miles away, generated by the "largest earth filled dam in the world" (*Red Birds* 157), which is widely recognized as Tarbela Dam in the Hazara district of Pakistan. This calculated distance accurately places Mutt in the Baluchistan tribal region. Also, through Momo's internal musings, readers find out that Momo is likely from the Hazara tribe, because he claims that of all his people "one in every 200 men is linked to Genghis Khan through a direct bloodline," and that he himself could "probably his great great grandson" (*Red Birds* 69). It is widely understood that the Hazaras are descendants of Genghis (Changez) Khan, the founder of the Mongol empire, and soldiers in his Mongol army who occupied the region [Afghanistan and Quetta, Baluchistan] in the 13th century (Hucal). Hazaras are internally the most ethnically targeted group by the Taliban in both Afghanistan and the Baluchistan province of Pakistan, mainly because they are Shi'ites and have racially distinct looks. Momo expresses his exasperation that as a group they are conflated with the Taliban and are therefore mistakenly caught up in the war on terror because of suspected Al-Qaeda hideouts in the region, when in truth, they don't have any ideology beyond the struggle for survival as a minority:

> [T]his place may look poorer than Afghanistan, and more violent than Sudan, but thank God there's no ideology at stake. Not for them, not for us. They bomb us because they assume we're related to bad Arabs. We steal from them because that's all we can do. They take our boys because they think that's all we have. And to lure the boys they sent out their tallest soldiers, their shiniest vehicles. (*Red Birds* 65)

Meanwhile, Ellie, as a representative of the uninformed US fighter, despite his rigorous training, including a "Cultural Sensitivity" course, cannot differentiate between an Arab and a South Asian. All appear to be the same and are clumped together as "Arabs." The misunderstandings and suspicions between characters in their assessments of identities and intentions reflect the larger human discord of the war on terror.

Defense, development, and the securitization of aid:

Hanif's setting of a military hangar, side by side with a USAID refugee camp in a desert (a terrorism-affected area), presents a composite picture of the usual triad of US allied activity in contemporary war

zones. The close working connection between the military and humanitarian aid organizations and their involvement with the local populace reflects a more recent policy adjustment by the United States. The onset of the war on terror precipitated a shift in how Western donors approached countries that were seen as potential threats to international security due to ongoing terrorism, large-scale violence, and weapons proliferation. To "stabilize" such "fragile states," most Western governments responded by aligning their diplomatic, development, humanitarian, and defence policies under one goal, resulting in not only a growing coordination between the military and civilian elements within governments, but also "changing the relationship between, on the one hand civil, society within beneficiary communities, and, on the other, intervening militaries" (Howell and Lind, *Civil Society Under Strain*: 109-110). This has led to the securitization of aid, "impacting both on military strategies and the activities of humanitarian agencies, creating a complex convergence of security objectives and development processes" (Howell and Lind, *Civil Society Under Strain*: 110). With its mission to champion the cause of human dignity, "The US national security strategy of 2002 marked the encapsulation of the field of development into the War on Terror regime" (Howell and Lind, *Counterterrorism, Aid and Civil Society*: 85) and listed the three central components of national security strategy: development, diplomacy, and defence, a tripartite plan called the 3Ds (Howell and Lind, *Counterterrorism, Aid and Civil Society*: 85). A further restructuring in the US foreign aid and diplomatic corps in 2006 also led to the "creation of a new post of Director of Foreign Assistance at the level of Deputy Secretary in the State Department, with the deputy secretary also concurrently serving as the USAID administrator" (Howell and Lind, *Counterterrorism, Aid and Civil Society*: 85).

According to the USAID 3D Planning Guide, "Diplomacy, Development, and Defense (3Ds) – as represented by the Department of State (State), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the Department of Defense (DoD) – are the three pillars that provide the foundation for promoting and protecting U.S. national security interests abroad" (4). It seems that the division of *Red Birds* into three sections, "In the Desert," "In the Camp," and "To the Hangar," corresponds to the practice of the 3Ds of US policy in stereotypic terrorist anywhere-istan. The Desert represents the natural habitat and cultural backdrop of the local people and requires a careful show of diplomacy. The USAID Camp clearly stands for humanitarian aid and is linked to the project of development, while the Hangar reflects military strength and aligns with US security and defense. The novel is played out within this triangular space, and the failure of the characters to understand each other fully represents the ultimate failure of the 3Ds. Although, Kapstein points out that:

> On its surface, the notion of joining the 3Ds into a more comprehensive whole-of-government strategy toward the world's trouble spots is more than enticing; it seems downright obvious," but in practice, "the idea that the arrows of defense, diplomacy, and development can be joined into one missile, much less hit a single target, may be misleading. (21)

That the United States has failed in deterring its enemies, from the Vietnam War to the fight against terrorist organizations like Al-Qaeda, is not so much due to a lack of diplomatic or economic tools but "because the Nation has failed to understand the new enemies it is facing and their objectives and systems of motivation" (Kapstein 22). This lack of understanding of the enemy is demonstrated by Hanif in the novel through the callousness of Ellie's superior, Colonel Slatter, in his misconceived descriptions of the locals and the utter uselessness of the cultural and religious sensitivity courses attended by Ellie that do nothing to help him understand the place he has fallen into from his superior pedestal, much like Icarus burning his wings and falling down to earth.

The refugee camp in *Red Birds*, with its faded and broken signage that "seems to have dislodged itself out of embarrassment" (92), represents not only the futility of humanitarian aid aimed at development, but it also reveals the dangers of the securitization of aid. While briefing Ellie, who is sent out to bomb the same camp where USAID rehabilitation is set up, Colonel Slatter calls the camp a "really bad place full of bad bad people," which is the "hideout for some of the worst human scum" (*Red Birds* 8), and poses a danger to the hangar next to it. Each character has his own perspective on the camp. Momo says from experience that one "can't be a child in this place [camp] for long" (*Red Birds* 15), while Ellie eyes it as a slum, "a sea of corrugated blue plastic roofs, stretching like a low, filthy sky, broken by piles of gray plastic pools an overflowing blue plastic rubbish bins… [a] kind of place where evil festers" (*Red Birds* 92). He calls the camp a humanitarian "freak show" with "teenagers strutting around in NATO generals' uniforms," grandfathers "wearing overalls from the British infantry," and young girls in "the French Foreign Legion's berets" (*Red Birds* 200). Ellie views the natives as lazy and dependent "goatherds who believed in nothing but grassy fields" but could now "go and live in UN tents, eat exotic food donated by USAID and burp after drinking fizzy drinks" (*Red Birds* 33), as he looks at their houses littered with a mix of US Army and USAID materials, like "sleeping bags with US ARMY SURPLUS NOT FOR SALE inscribed on it" (*Red Birds* 109) and camping chairs "emblazoned with UNITED NATIONS FOOD PROGRAMME" (*Red Birds* 107; Capitals in original). Unlike Momo's defiant stance, however, Father Dear has a more resigned attitude towards his position within the war-aid-development matrix: "We are fugees and we can't do a thing about it. We have been fugees for such a long time that it's difficult to tell

today's kids that we were not always fugees. We were like normal people. We were nomads. We had goats and buffaloes and we followed the rains and stored our own grain in our own stores," but now our children "eat USAID grains, get USAID injections… [and] think there was nothing before it and there will be nothing beyond this Camp" (*Red Birds* 110).

Benevolent violence of post-conflict reconstruction:

The reconstruction and development plans for post-conflict zones demonstrate the benevolent violence of the Western nations. As Momo's mother wisely proclaims, "What comes after war is USAID" (*Red Birds* 235), and in Ellie's succinct words, "War has been condensed to carpet bombing followed by dry rations and craft classes for the refugees" (*Red Birds* 32). In the case of Afghanistan, which Daxner refers to as "the graveyard of good intentions," he quotes the former governor of Herat province, Sayed Hussain Anwari, as complaining about double victimisation of his countrymen (20; emphasis added). Not only were they the victims of a long and terrible war, but also victims of the prejudice that they don't have enough competency to utilize the aid delivered by the West because they are corrupt. Furthermore, the locals were humiliated by the preferential import of Western consultants and experts and were not asked for advice. The role of Lady Flowerbody in *Red Birds*, who is introduced as a USAID consultant and the "co-ordinating Officer for the Families Rehabilitation Programme" (*Red Birds* 41), is the personification of such misguided intentions. With her "insultingly nicely dressed" (*Red Birds* 41) presence and a "benevolent demeanour" (*Red Birds* 70), she is looking to research "the teenage Muslim mind, their hopes, their desires" and intends to use the refugee camp community as "a laboratory for testing [her] hypothesis" (*Red Birds* 44). Momo, whose thinking represents the locals, resents the fact that he is "the Young Muslim Mind that will pay for her six handed massages and her toned skin" and, while he gets the PTSD, "she gets a per diem in U.S. dollars" (*Red Birds* 68). He thinks their camp is a "tourist destination for foreign people with good intentions" (*Red Birds* 44), and sees Lady Flowerbody as no more than one of the "nice-smelling do-gooders who would give us powdered milk and ask about our feelings then note them down in lovely, leather-bound notebooks" (*Red Birds* 42), employed by the same people who "bombed us and then sent us well-educated people to look into our mental health needs" (*Red Birds* 44). The disturbing interdependence of military and aid missions is apparent in Ellie's blunt monologue as a silent reply to what he sees as Lady Flowerbody's arrogant saviour complex:

> If I didn't bomb someplace, how would she save that place? If I didn't rain fire from the skies, would need her to douse that fire on the ground, why would you need somebody to throw blankets on burning babies if there

> were no burning babies? If I didn't take out homes, who will provide shelter? If I didn't take out homes who would need shelter? If I didn't obliterate cities, how would you get to set up refugee camps? Where would all the world's empathy go? (*Red Birds* 201)

The war on terror is premised on the saviour complex of the Western world and is played out in Makau Mutua's description of the SVS (Savage-Victim-Saviour) metaphor of the human rights narrative, within which Lady Flowerbody represents the role of the saviour. As an employee of a non-governmental humanitarian organization on a "$120.00 per day contract" (65), she builds her credentials on the losses of war. According to Mutua,

> INGOs constitute perhaps the most important element of the savior metaphor. Conventionally doctrinal, INGOs are the human rights movement's foot soldiers, missionaries, and proselytizers. Their crusade is framed in moral certainty in which "evil" and "good" are as separate as night and day… Although they promote paradigmatic liberal values and norms, they present themselves as neutral, universal, and unbiased. Based in the capitals of the powerful Western states, their staffs are mostly well-educated, usually trained in the law, middle-class, and white. They are very different from the people they seek to save. They are modern-day abolitionists who see themselves as cleansers, single-handedly rooting out evil in Third World countries and cultures by shining light where darkness reins. (240-241)

There is a clear dividing line of superiority and inferiority between Western aid workers and the victims of violence, and in the novel, this stark difference does not go unnoticed by Momo, who complains that "after they have asked you about your innermost feelings," field scholars like Lady Flowerbody reward you with a Cadbury mini that has "fake milk, fake sugar and fake chocolate [while] they themselves retreat into their offices and eat real chocolate that is at least seventy percent pure" (*Red Birds* 145). Such "chocolate-fixes" only increase dependence on psychological and material aid and can only be temporary measures for post-conflict rehabilitation. In the long run, the populations affected by the war on terror must return to security and self-governance without foreign involvement.

In his words, Daxner correctly questions the long-term violence of such benevolence:

> Eventually, the West will leave Afghanistan, and if we do so without developing the capacity of the local populace to govern its own affairs, we risk total failure in the region. All in all, we do not pay enough respect to the rights of Afghans to discuss their vision of the future. (20)

Even though, under the "fragile state" policy in Afghanistan, USAID "initiated programs on job training and youth, reintegration of combatants, water development, training of judicial and local officials in public service and starting the radio service" (Howell and Lind, *Counterterrorism, Aid and Civil Society:* 87), as demonstrated by the employment given to Momo's father and his brother Ali in the hangar in *Red Birds*, they are valued more as native informants than trainees

and are never trusted to take on any independent role in managing their own lives. Kapstein sums this situation up well when he says that "the industrial world's development policies resemble the benefactor who endows a scholarship to Harvard but then refuses to hire the recipient upon graduation because of race or gender" (23).

Ali and his father were both part of the rehabilitation program, but neither of them fared well. While we know that Ali was good with machines and his father took him to work at the hangar, readers cannot be sure about his disappearance. It is implied that Ali helped the Americans with locating their bombing targets, which suggests that he was working as a "native informant" (*Red Birds* 61), but what is not so apparent is the reason for his disappearance. We are told that boys were hired for "crisp notes" to go "off into the desert to lay mines" (*Red Birds* 66). However, Ali was cleverer than that because "he would disappear at night with this transistor… every time he went out a plane would appear in the sky. He was sending them signals. He was on a mission to clear our area of evil guys" (*Red Birds* 64), Momo says, and although at first "he was helping the people in the Hangar clear the area of our own bad guys," later "he decided to clear the area of the bad guys who were taking out the bad guys" (*Red Birds* 64). Did he turn against his employers and destroy their planes? Was he martyred for his nationalist loyalty? Or was it that the Taliban found him a traitor and punished him for his disloyalty to the cause of freedom. Again, in Momo's mind, "if you are cooperating with the people who destroy your houses, it can have tragic results" (*Red Birds* 29). In either case, soon after Ali went to the hangar, the bombings stopped, and the hangar fell silent. In his utter silence about his son's disappearance, Father Dear, who is a USAID logistics officer and is accused by his family of "licking white man's boots" (*Red Birds* 97), appears to be either complicit in Ali's disappearance in some way, or utterly bound by his "unrequited love for his American employers" (*Red Birds* 21). When asked why he sent his son into the hangar to work, he says, "Who can say no to Americans?" (*Red Birds* 196). Momo thinks that "his love for his employer is the source of all [their] troubles" (*Red Birds* 19).

Momo's character, on the other hand, represents someone who wants to make personal gains from the same war that has forced his dependence on international aid. His "real education was on tv" (*Red Birds* 16) and he wants to become an entrepreneur, learning the tricks of his neo-colonizers as he watches Secret Millionaire (*Red Birds* 44) and reads Fortune 500 stolen from the Hangar. Mutt, the dog, says that all Momo thinks about is a business plan to make him rich. Rather than relying on the USAID rehabilitation program, he believes in his own business acumen and sees marketing potential in sand to make cement needed for post-war reconstruction. He calls his potential company

"Sands Global" (*Red Birds* 85). A jaunty "I Heart NY" cap on his head, which gives him "conquering-the-world-then-on-to-Mars-type of overconfidence" (*Red Birds* 51), and carrying "a standard UN Food Programme rubber flask" (*Red Birds* 79), Momo drives a stolen "Jeep Cherokee with the fat, fading USAID logo and a limp white flag" (*Red Birds* 75). He gets a certain sense of satisfaction from his tactics and the fact that while he might only get "$4 in subsidized food," he is "a survivor of the most useless war in the history of wars" (*Red Birds* 69).

The futility of the war on terror is manifest in the empty hangar that sounds to Mutt like:

> A thousand dead American soldiers screaming their last scream, it rises and falls like their fathers whispering to their dead sons' pictures and then it rises in cacophony, like all the dead from their bombing, pulling themselves out of their graves and trying to tell the story of their abruptly ended lives. (*Red Birds* 192)

At the start of the war, before it fell silent, Father Dear remembers the hangar as a hub of activity full of "people from 15 countries … daily review meetings. . . twelve thousand gallons in reserve fuel," and eight types of bread on the buffet" (*Red Birds* 196). Hanif points to the ludicrousness of the money wasted during the war by having Momo comment on the illogical building and bombing of his family house. He complains that his father was first given money by USAID to build his house, and then the US military "spent a thousand times more money to obliterate it" (*Red Birds* 98). Bro Ali thought they had deliberately bombed their house to ward off suspicion that their family was being given special protection because Bro Ali helped the military by giving them information about targets to "clean up the place" (*Red Birds* 99). From Ellie's perspective, such bombings are nothing more than violent video games. In the simulator exercises that they undertook to train for these bombings, their "basic rule was that if it moves, hit it," and if any one of them questioned the rules, then the "sessions turned into screaming matches. To bomb or not to bomb, or as central command started to put it, to B or not to B" (*Red Birds* 104-105). In real war, the simulator is replaced with a "65-million-dollar machine" (*Red Birds* 6), an "F15 Strike Eagle with two 500-pound laser-guided bombs, one marked YES, the other marked OH YESS in grey stencilled letters" (*Red Birds* 11-12).

Animalizing the terrorist:

Besides tackling issues of violence clearly witnessed in countries targeted with carpet bombs and drone strikes, Hanif also points to the options of deadlier weapons of destruction that might have been used despite official denials. Utilizing Mutt's canine experience of the bombings, Hanif stealthily hints at such violence. As Mutt says,

> Sometimes between dropping bombs they used to drop these slabs of salt, pink hewn and white, and they floated down tied to little umbrellas. The good thing about them was they didn't make any noise, no alarms went off, nothing burned, no houses collapsed, there was nothing to sniff, nothing to save. . . This salt bombing was supposed to be some humanitarian plot to help us animals. (*Red Birds* 30; emphasis added)

Readers are left to wonder if Mutt's naïve description of blocks of salt thrown down for animals is to be taken literally, or whether Mutt is very intelligently warning the readers that "salt bombing" was indeed part of a secretly planned military strike in the area. In war terminology, a "salted" weapon is made of non-radioactive materials such as cobalt-59 that are placed inside the weapon and can be activated with a neutron flux, intending to "create radioactive contamination for a longer time over a larger area compared to the activation products and fallout from a non-salted weapon" (Reeves 33). Although salt bombs have never been reported to have been used, it is not farfetched to think that there might have been a temptation to use the devices. Indeed, there are examples of the possibility of their use by US allies. A former UK Labour defence minister, Lord Gilbert, had actually suggested dropping a neutron bomb on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border as a crackdown on terrorism "to create cordons sanitaire along various borders where people are causing trouble" (Simons). He admitted that although his suggestion might seem "impractical" because of the large-scale and lasting damage it could cause, he would not worry too much because "nobody lives up in the mountains on the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan except for a few goats and a handful of people herding them," and also "if you told them that some ERRB warheads were going to be dropped there and that it would be a very unpleasant place to go, they would not go there" (Simons).

In animalizing the terrorist, undifferentiated from innocent civilians, the US and its Western Allies conveniently bypass human morality and disregard human rights violations by justifying violence as collateral damage. Lady Flowerbody's reminiscences about animal safaris in Tanzania are reminders of colonial demarcations, and like white colonizers of the past, she is callous in her description that:

> We were in these vehicles, very well protected, with iron bars that could be electrified if they [the animals] came too close and a guard [the "native" on foot] with a shotgun on everyone. But it was nice to be close to nature, miles and miles of shrub, real caves. It was all very relaxing. (*Red Birds* 71)

In these accounts, the guard and the animal are both on the other side of the iron bars. Mutt is a reminder in *Red Birds* of the human/animal boundary, but he also subverts the division. When asked about the need for an animal character, Hanif's says "I kind of refuse to believe that dogs don't have philosophical thoughts or don't deal with ethical

dilemmas. Most prophets were declared raving mad in their times" (quoted in Singh). Mutt has a prophetic role in the novel. As a dog, he is more intuitive in sensing violence. He has borne the brunt of violence as an animal at the hands of humans, even Momo, his master, who mercilessly kicks him. Mutt is an enlightening parallel to the relationship between the victims of the war on terror, who are treated as subhuman, and the superior white race waging the war. In her article "Animal Studies in the Era of Biopower," Sherryl Vint says that behind the "idea of the superrace and subrace is the human/animal boundary in which those called 'human' are part of the ethnic group of fellows or society and those excluded from the civic order are designated non-human" (454). Vint further explains that:

> Violence against fellow members of the social contract constitutes a violation of its terms, but violence against those who remain in the state of nature is unquestioned. This structure of the social contract explains why the discourse of animality is so often invoked against marginalized social groups, serving as it does to justify violence and to exclude those so labeled from the realm of ethical consideration (*Science Fiction Studies* 445).

Mutt's confusion as a servile dog about the treatment meted out to him by his master echoes the questions that Momo and his family have about the interference of the United States in their previously uncomplicated lives.

Mutt's olfactory understanding of the world and the violence around him presents a highly perceptive view that humans overlook because of their preoccupation with the materiality of their surroundings. What humans overlook seeing, Mutt can smell. In this novel, unlike traditional animal figures in literature with a metaphorical purpose, Mutt reflects animal agency and offers an alternative-species subjectivity that is valuable in its insights, especially "[n]ow that scientists are identifying the interdependence of life forms even below the cellular level, the pervasive companionship of human subjects with members of other species appears ever more elemental to narrative subjectivity, a dark matter of sorts awaiting literary analysis" (McHugh 2). Hanif's introduction of a thinking animal as an impactful and perhaps only objective character in the story, as well as the unexpected ending with its fantastical, supernatural resolution, tips the novel into the fringes of speculative fiction, raising the "what if" question. What if animals and ghosts could help us see the situational reality of our lives, to which we appear blind in full sight?

According to Sherryl Vint, animals are an important literary device in speculative fiction because animals can serve:

> As a foil for how humans define themselves… sf's interest in imagining the future or 'next stage' of human identity frequently turns to images of animals, figured both as what we might become were we to construe our

> subjectivity otherwise and as a warning that we can be displaced if we do not find ways to transcend our self-destructive qualities. (*Animal Alterity:* 225)

The ending of *Red Birds* is a macabre pantomime of dead men in an empty hangar, who do not know they are dead, and who endlessly keep playing their futile roles. Fluttering red birds of regret fly above them, and those left behind in mourning, including a grieving mother, respond to violence with violence. There is certainly an irony in the flailing of a salt dagger and a rosary in Mother Dear's hand as she fights to "save" her dead son: a salt dagger can perhaps be read as her reply to a salt bomb, and a rosary as the power of her spiritual faith in the face of Western materialism.

Colour metaphor in *Red Birds*:

Upon a broad examination, *Red Birds* is premised on a competing colour metaphor of Blue vs. Red. When the emblem of the United Nations was being created, the "UN blue" was chosen because, according to the official UN website, "Blue represents peace in opposition to red, for war" and since then this colour choice has become "an integral part of the visual identity of the Organization" (United Nations Emblem and Flag). In the novel, however, the colour blue stands for western superiority and white for saviourism; Colonel Slatter's eyes are unrepentant, "icy blue pools of certainty" (*Red Birds* 6) about his position of power. His officers wear "blue overalls of a U.S. Army infantry Sergeant complete with stripes and standard issue Ray-Bans held together with Scotch tape and a USAF helmet with WE DARE emblazoned on it" (*Red Birds* 172). The UN workers with aid packages drive around in "sky blue Jeep Cherokee[s] 3600 CC" (*Red Birds* 17), while Lady Flowerbody's "blue-tinged" hair gives her a halo of superiority in knowledge and insight (*Red Birds* 43, 67). For the refugees in the camp, however, blue represents dependence on foreign aid. The camp is a sea of "blue UN tents" (*Red Birds* 33), "USAID blue plastic corrugated sheet roofs" (*Red Birds* 45) and "blue drums" for garbage (*Red Birds* 172). Momo's family house at the camp is built with "rubble" from their previously bombed house and USAID "blue plastic corrugated" prefabs that come in "the same blue for everyone" (*Red Birds* 44).

The Red of war is everywhere manifest in the novel. It stands for raw emotions like anger, regret, and loss. After he wakes up from his plane crash, Ellie sees a "red blur" (*Red Birds* 34) and "red smudges" (*Red Birds* 37) of birds in the desert. He says, "I see a dab of red colour spreading on the sand. I'm bleeding, hell I'm bleeding, I think, and then a flutter of wings and a shiny little bird emerges from the sands and takes flight. My hands flail in the air to capture it but it shoots like an arrow into the air and as soon a little red dot on the

horizon dissolving into nothingness in the sky" (*Red Birds* 61-62). In an interview, Hanif explains his inspiration for using the red birds as a symbol:

> Shah Hussain Punjabi poet, who named himself after his lover and became Madhu Laal Hussain. Laal. Red. He writes beautiful poetry and if I follow in his path maybe there will be some meaning in my work. So he uses red a lot. Give a poet, even a Sufi poet, a lover called Laal and he is going to make sure that he weaves in his lover's name a lot. Shah Hussain gave me the title although if he was around he might totally deny it. (Quoted in Quadri)

Madhu Laal Hussain's connection of the colour red with his longing for his beloved is indeed reflected in the losses of the characters in *Red Birds* as well: the loss of Cathy for Ellie, the loss of Ali for his family, the loss of war for the US, and the loss of dignity for the refugees. In the novel, Mutt philosophizes:

> Red birds are real. The reason we don't see them is because we don't want to. When someone dies in a raid or a shooting or when someone's throat is slit, their last drop of blood transforms into a tiny red bird and flies away. And then reappears when we're trying hard to forget them. (*Red Birds* 84)

It is also possible that the red birds are "cardinals" from western folklore, little red birds that are generally believed to be dead souls visiting their loved ones. The word *cardinal* "comes from the Latin word *cardo*, meaning hinge or axis. Like a door's hinge, the cardinal is the hinge on the doorway between earth and Spirit" (Innes). As a novel, *Red Birds* is also set on an axis, a limbo, or "a purgatory, when war is suspended but it is far from peace time" (Ghoshal). The red theme continues throughout the novel, mostly for the victims of war. To Mother Dear, all Americans are dangerous. When she looks at Lady Flowerbody's face, the "mole on her lip turns into a red dot" in her mind (*Red Birds* 44) and when she goes to the hangar to avenge her son's death, the ghosts of the Americans she plunges her salt dagger into, disappear into a "puff of red dust" (*Red Birds* 271).

Conclusion:

Overall, Hanif's world is a dystopic, paradoxical place where everyone simultaneously plays a victim and a violator in a repetitive, cyclic drama of the global civilizational clash. Violence not only changes its form from one age to another across the pages of history, but is ever-present. Perhaps the novel's uniqueness lies in the characters' prolific observations about the inevitability of "this business of life and this business of war, not only in Pakistan and in Afghanistan but replicated elsewhere in Syria, Iraq, Yemen," and the ongoing "colossal contradiction — that we can be at peace, when there will always be some people who continue to get bombed" (Dutta; emphasis added). There is clearly a larger existential message in *Red Birds*, even when it so obviously paints the futility and failure of the war on terror that has

achieved nothing beyond violence. At one point, Momo says to Lady Flowerbody, "Sometimes I think this is what we have achieved... we used to drink wine from our enemy's skull. Now we drink purified water from paper cups made by cutting down trees" (*Red Birds* 69). From the violence of humans towards their fellow humans to the violence of mankind towards nature, the world is comically ignorant of its own tragedy.

Works Cited:

Aslam, Irfan. "Mohammed Hanif on 'Red Birds'." *The Hindu*, 28 September 2018, https://www.thehindu.com/books/mohammed-hanif-on-red-birds/article25066822.ece Accessed 12 May 2021.

Daxner, Michael. "Afghanistan: Graveyard of Good Intent." *World Policy Journal*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2009, pp. 13–23. MIT Press, doi: 10.1162/wopj.2009.26.2.13.

Dutta, Amrita. "We are Living in Times When it has Become Very Difficult to do Satire: Mohammed Hanif." *The Indian Express*, September 23, 2018, https://indianexpress.com/article/express-sunday-eye/mohammed-hanif-red-birds-interview-5368483/. Accessed 23 May 2022.

Ghoshal, Sumak. "Mohammed Hanif on the Futility of Satire and the Making of his New Novel 'Red Birds'" *Mint*, 28 September 2018, https://www.livemint.com/Leisure/220sUVdoNjupwbpQbHdtgO/Mohammed-Hanif-on-the-futility-satire-and-the-making-of-his.html. Accessed 23 May 2022.

Hanif, Mohammed. *Red Birds*. Bloomsbury, 2018.

Howell, Jude, and Jeremy Lind. *Counterterrorism, Aid, and Civil Society: Before and after the War on Terror*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

—. *Civil Society Under Strain: Counter-Terrorism Policy, Civil Society, and Aid Post-9/11*. Kumarian Press, 2010.

Hucal, Sarah. "Afghanistan: Who are the Hazaras?" *Aljazeera,* 27 June 2016, https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2016/6/27/afghanistan-who-are-the-hazaras. Accessed 10 May 2021.

Hussain, Salman. "Violence, Law, and the Archive: How Dossiers of Memory Challenge Enforced Disappearances in the War on Terror in Pakistan." *Political and Legal Anthropology Review*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2019, pp. 53–67.

Innes, L.J. “Red Cardinal Sighting: What Does Seeing a Red Cardinal Spiritually Mean?” *California Psychics*, 6 January 2019, www.californiapsychics.com/blog/animal-sightings-symbolism/meaning-red-cardinal-sighting.html. Accessed 19 May 2021.

Kapstein, Ethan B. “Do 3Ds Make an F? The Limits of ‘Defense, Diplomacy, and Development’.” *Prism*, vol. 1, no. 3, June 2010, pp. 21-26.

McHugh, Susan. *Animal Stories: Narrating across Species Lines*. U of Minnesota P, 2011.

Mohammed Hanif. “Explaining a Novel to Pakistani Intelligence.” *Columbia Journalism Review*, vol. 58, no. 2, 2019, p.12.

Mukerji, Soumya. “Muhammed Hanif: Red Birds.” *Platform*, 2018, https://www.platform-mag.com/literature/mohammed-hanif.htmlMukerji.

Musharraf, Pervez. *In the Line of Fire: A Memoir*. Simon & Schuster, 2008.

Mutua, Makau. “Savages, Victims, and Saviors: The Metaphor of Human Rights.” *Harvard International Law Journal*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2001, pp. 201-245.

Quadri, Shireen “Mohammed Hanif: The War Behind the Lines.” *The Punch Magazine*, 30 September 2018. https://thepunchmagazine.com/the-byword/interviews/mohammed-hanif-the-war-behind-the-lines. Accessed 23 May 2022.

Reeves, Glen. “Understanding the effects of ERWS and Salted Devices.” *The Homeland Defense and Security Information Analysis Center (HDIAC) Journal*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2016, pp. 33-38.

Simons, Ned. “Lord Gilbert Suggests Dropping a Neutron Bomb On Pakistan-Afghanistan Border.” *Huffington Post*, 26 November 2012, https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2012/11/26/lord-gilbert-neutron-bomb_n_2190607.html. Accessed 23 May 2022.

Singh, Jai Arjun. “Meet the Writer: Interview with Mohammed Hanif.” *Scroll.in*, 29 September 2018, https://scroll.in/article/896043/increasingly-you-cant-match-the-absurdist-comedy-going-on-around-yourself-mohammed-hanif. Accessed 23 may 2022.

“United Nations Emblem and Flag.” *United Nations*, United Nations, https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-emblem-and-flag. Accessed 17 May 2021.

Vint, Sherryl. “Animal Studies in the Era of Biopower.” *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 37, no. 3, November 2010, pp. 444-455.

—. *Animal Alterity. Science Fiction and the Question of the Animal.* Liverpool UP, 2010.

3D Planning Guide - U.S. Agency for International Development. 30 July 2012, https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/3D%20Planning%20Guide_Update_FINAL%20%2831%20Jul%2012%29.pdf. Accessed 14 May 2021.