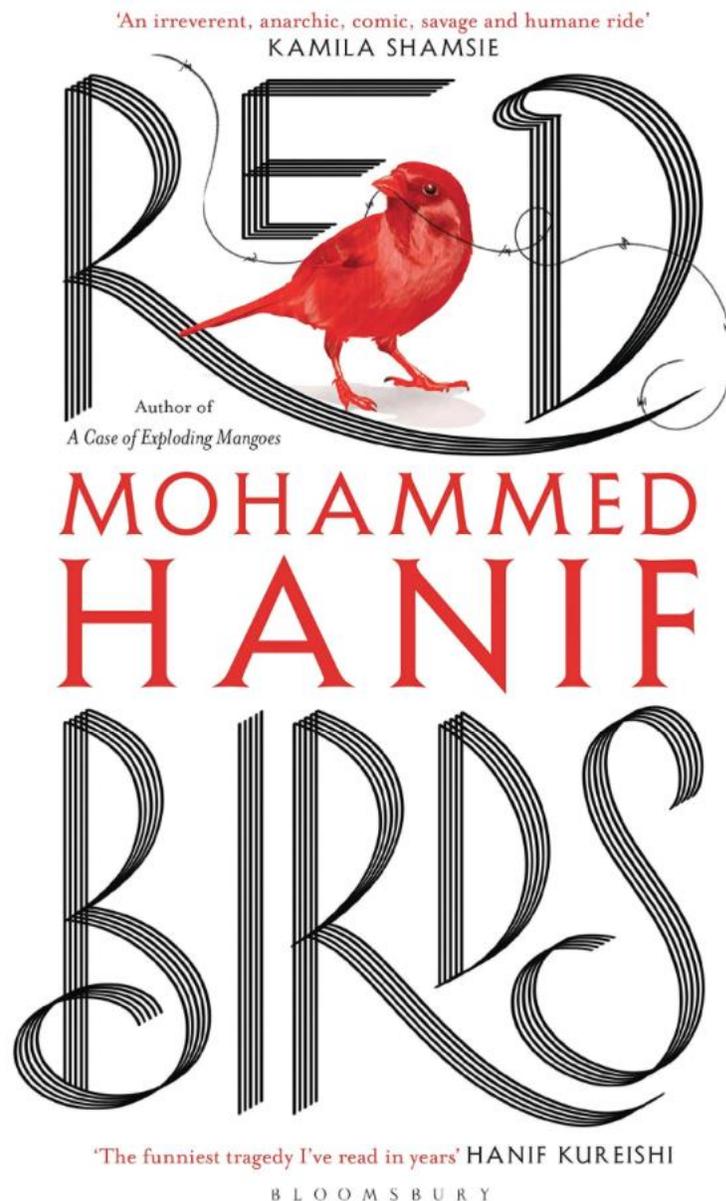


# Mohammed Hanif, *Red Birds*

Bloomsbury, 2018. 304pp.

Reviewed by [Kamil Ahsan](#)



Momo, one of the three protagonists of the British-Pakistani writer Mohammed Hanif's new novel *Red Birds*, is the sort of kid who delivers verdicts quickly and ruthlessly. "The international-aid types, nice-smelling do-gooders obviously were the biggest thieves of them all," he opines, two paragraphs in. "But they did their paperwork. You see that crater there? That was gonna be a dam for a water reservoir. You see that pile of shining steel poles tied down with chains and locks? That was gonna be electricity. You see that shack with two buffaloes in it? That's my alma mater." So strongly does Momo fit the cynic we expect—a teenage boy in a heavily-bombed refugee camp in the

middle of a desert, location unknown—that when he suddenly boasts of being an "entrepreneur," you know he'll have some convincing to do. Lo and behold:

“You can’t be a child in this place for long,” and then, “Show me another fifteen-year-old businessman in this Camp...who owns his own Jeep Cherokee 3600 CC. It’s vintage.” The boy struts, and speaks, with cocky certainty, though the reader may find it all a bit too obscure. Plenty of red herrings abound about the nature of the capitalized Camp’s location—is this the Middle East? Are they Arabs? Nobody seems to know, but everyone says the word “Arab” a whole lot.

Momo’s older brother, Bro Ali, has been seduced away from his grieving family into a nearby US Hangar (also capitalized, for maximum ominous effect) with no prospect of ever returning. An American man named Ellie who was supposed to bomb this very Camp has crash-landed nearby. And Momo’s dog, Mutt, has somehow gotten his brain “fried.” Ellie, and yes, Mutt, are the two other protagonists. As an anthropomorphized dog, Mutt *can* be pretty funny (“When goats or cows were licking salt they were so absorbed...I could sneak in between their legs and take a lick.”) but other than the occasional comic affect, his sole purpose seems to be olfaction (he discovers a starving Ellie in the desert) and world-weary wisdom (“God left this place a long time ago...He had had enough.”) Ellie, the crashed airplane pilot, lets us know right away that this whole business will be a sort of morality tale about American drones, bombs, and wars. Once Ellie reaches the refugee camp, it’s a dismal journey to what we have already figured out. The enterprising Momo wants Bro Ali back—and Ellie is something of a bargaining chip. The culmination of the drama will arrive when we get to the Hangar. There’s simply no other way through.

But before we get there, there’ll be plenty of information frustratingly withheld. For one, it is never resolved what “red birds” are. First they seem to be something Mutt sees when a person dies, but soon we find that humans can see them too if they want to, and then it seems that they’re somehow connected to the “ghosts” in the empty Hangar. Then there are the “ghosts,” about whom an NGO-lady named Lady Flowerbody observes near the end of the book: “I don’t believe in ghosts but here they are jumping from wall to wall, completely oblivious to local culture and traditions.” Occasionally, one finds the all-too-familiar observations turned into the gallows humor with which Hanif has made a name for himself. Momo, for instance, makes short work of Lady Flowerbody: “I have been the subject of many studies since I was eleven. ‘Growing Pains in Conflict Zones’. ‘Tribal Cultures Get IT’. Even ‘Reiki For War Survivors’ ...I get PTSD, she gets a per diem in US dollars.” Ellie does

the same with Momo: “What’s with the fake American accent if he hates us so much?” *Red Birds* isn’t entirely without its charms. A keen reader may find reprieve in sussing out the things Hanif has left out. When a phrase in Urdu is spoken later in the book, there’s a thrill in finally knowing for sure. But mostly it’s all a bit hokey and banal: Ellie is racist but pretends to help around the Camp while hatching a plot; Momo is hatching a plot, too, but when all is said and done, he’s just an angry teenager. And Mutt? Well, Mutt is just loyal—but also omniscient.

Refugee camps have become fertile literary ground nowadays—even for writers from the Indian subcontinent. This is perhaps a bit predictable. If one wanted to assess the enduring impact of British colonialism or the guiding salience of imperialism in literary narratives, one could scarcely do better than take a look at the subcontinent’s most critically-acclaimed English-language writers, all those who end up on Booker Prize longlists: Arundhati Roy, Mohsin Hamid, Kamila Shamsie, and Hanif too. Each seems to write out of the impulse of Post-Colonialism 101 to allow for an over-abundance of moral outrage—and yet, mostly they’re talking *to* the West, because the English-speaking intelligentsia of the subcontinent gave up on expecting something other than banality from them quite some time ago.

For writers so compulsively aware of the difficulties of writing in a language that the vast majority of their countrymen and women cannot read, each uses a strange technique of over-compensation. Writing predominantly from what Zadie Smith calls the “lyrical realism” tradition of Balzac and Flaubert, they rarely write sentences that, like James Baldwin’s, are “clean as bone” (Hanif does). No subject is too grand or too big to broach with the utmost confidence. I have yet to meet a South Asian who doesn’t talk of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* with annoyance. No matter the thrill of a hijra (intersex) character, the treatment is too familiar and saccharine, and the fever pitch of moral indignation too high. Obviously the story will collide with India’s occupation of Kashmir, and obviously there’ll be set pieces made out of Hindu fundamentalist mobs. Meanwhile, in *Exit West*, Mohsin Hamid departs from the subcontinent entirely—landing in a refugee camp in Mykonos. And then there’s Kamila Shamsie, whose book titles were a long-running insider gag: *Broken Verses*, *Fading Skies*, *Lost Lands*, and *Burnt Shadows*. Two of those are not like the others. To be fair to Shamsie, her latest, *Home Fire*, has been received more warmly than the other two—although even as a riff on

Sophocles's *Antigone* it, too, touches far too many hot-button "Muslim" issues to be believable.

The point is not the predictability of the stories, though that too is true (it seems that some covert rules for the Very-Important-Circle-of-Subcontinental-Writers dictate that every book must contain at least four of the following: Islamophobia, British rule, Partition, allegories for class or caste struggle, endless sections waxing poetic about minorities, the War on Terror, bombs, drones, terrorism, and immigration. Preferably all of the above.) The point is the staleness of it all. These writers—our esteemed people of letters—are intelligent to a fault; rarely does anyone argue otherwise. We expect their characters to amount to more than their stereotypes, but they've been trying for so long to subvert the tropes by blithely recreating them, it seems no one has mustered the courage to tell them that people aren't buying it. Even when the political commentary shows signs of being deeply trenchant, the aesthetic remains the same. It's a true Barthesian conundrum: Would these authors just die already so we can actually read something less *readerly*? Can they please come out from the umbrella of instinctive anti-Orientalism long enough to accept their own Orientalist dismissal of the largely quotidian—and not all *that* culturally specific—nature of our lives?

Hanif was *supposed* to be our reprieve from all this. It's hard to properly articulate precisely why Hanif's debut *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* (longlisted for the Man Booker) was such a thrilling moment for Pakistani literature. A revisionist, naughty, and often downright blasphemous (accounting for the otherwise-vague comparisons with Salman Rushdie) novel about the (made-up) events leading to the (real) plane crash that killed the Pakistani military dictator and then-President Zia-ul-Haq, Hanif's prose glittered with a devil-may-care attitude. He inverted the model: nothing was too serious or too grand to make fun of. The aesthetic of *Exploding Mangoes* was firmly black comedy. Hanif also didn't feel the need to hit all the buttons of topicality: the protagonist Ali Shigri, an officer in the Pakistan Air Force out on a revenge mission against Zia for the death of his father, still finds room in his life for a laundry man named "Uncle Starchy" whose most prized possessions are jars filled with venom, as well as a very risqué and titillating homosexual relationship with his roommate, "Baby O." As the satire found its stride in bleak familiarity, the plot expanded gleefully into taboo territory. Where English might have impeded his delivery, Hanif fashioned sentences with the jumpy, inverted rhythms of South Asian English vernacular. In 2008,

when *Exploding Mangoes* hit the shelves, Hanif was like the *Veep* to Kamila Shamsie's *The West Wing*. Nothing was too depraved, no character too unafraid of amorality. Ten years later, and three (largely) peaceful democratic elections later, the book more than holds up for its grim view on the Pakistani military.

Since then, it is Hanif's stellar nonfiction that, like Roy's, has garnered him a reputation as one of the most daring and eloquent writers from the subcontinent. As a journalist with the BBC and more recently an op-ed writer for the *New York Times*, Hanif may well be Pakistan's most trenchant and important writer. But he hasn't met his own high bar in fiction. His sophomore novel, *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*, was a tad more muted and daring; but using the perspective of a poor Christian woman (Christians are a beleaguered low-caste minority in Pakistan) gave Hanif's brand of tragicomedy a whiff of presumptuousness. Even still, Hanif's reputation for cheek continues to sustain the fevered anticipation of this new novel.

Which makes it all the more disappointing to admit that *Red Birds* is probably not the book Hanif's readers want, for it squanders his gifts with wild abandon. In Hanif's hands, the desert is tantalizingly exotic, the refugee camp a bottomless pit of bitterness, and the US hangar a place of sinful magic and mystery. For the first time, Hanif's settings feel too broad and unrealistic. And for the first time, he moves squarely from satirizing to proselytizing. It's clear that he's trying his hand out at something new: something farther than *Exploding Mangoes* or *Alice Bhatti*, but it takes a while to recognize that what's new is an earnestness about his subjects. Unlike in his previous novels, Hanif seems desperately to want to imbue his characters with more intelligence than the reader initially believed. And sometimes he very nearly succeeds. Ellie, who develops a tenuous friendship with Lady Flowerbody, decides that if there weren't people like him to drop bombs, there would be no places for people like her to save. Mutt tries to communicate to his master Momo about a gun with the safety catch off, and states plainly that "guns smell of idle lust." These are glimmers of beautiful insight; but they're rare, and even the determined reader may stop reading before they get there.

It is also undoubtedly Hanif at his most serious and tragic. When the characters all arrive together at the Hangar toward the end, the book opens up to a plethora of perspectives: Momo's mother, called simply "Mother Dear," the camp's resident doctor called simply "Doctor," and of course Lady

Flowerbody. It is here—three-fourths of the way through—that the plot gains momentum, and when it does, it is primarily because “Mother Dear,” who we have heard so little of, turns out to be capable of leading a blazing revolutionary charge to get her son back. Hell hath no fury like a grieving mother, Hanif is telling us. But who wouldn’t know that already? When the action begins to speed up, one realizes that almost every character—with the possible exception of Ellie, who never redeems himself—sounds exactly like Hanif himself. Particularly Mutt. There doesn’t seem to be anywhere to go from there. This is a polemic, Hanif seems to be warning us near the end, not a playground. We get it. Drones, bad. America, bad. War, bad. Refugees, sad. Anything else?

Hanif does have something of an answer to that, at the very end—specifically, in the last five pages—and it is, quite simply, glorious. Hanif finds a new rhythm—an operatic rhythm (interestingly, Hanif has in fact written the libretto for a new opera, *Bhutto*). Gone are the serrated edges of his prose; what you get instead, in three clean slices, are alternate endings. One character hangs from chains “like a human chandelier,” another bemoans knowing “everything about safe sex...[but] nothing about how to tell a ghost from a non-ghost,” a third sees a battle as the US soldiers’ “way of keeping the war going,” and a fourth tells us a story of a child who hands in a blank piece of paper as a drawing, arguing that it is a “white country...made of snow.” If one tries, one can make the layered perspectives cohere. It is, after all, just a matter of reading five pages over and over, though it is unlikely any strict determinations will be found.

So: anything else? Yes, Hanif answers in those clean five pages at the end of the novel: *everything else*. But what about the reader who, like Momo, has delivered a verdict well before then?

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