

**Red Birds by
Muhammad Hanif**

NUST Journal of International
Peace & Stability
2019, Vol. II (2) Pages 81-84
njips.nust.edu.pk

Azka Durrani¹

Muhammad Haneef, applied his intellectual wit, pugnacity and dead pan humor to pen down a much needed war novel set in the 21st century. His skills of journalism and fiction writing interlaces with his history of serving as a pilot in Pakistan Air force. This history of author is reflected in the character of Ellie, a US pilot who crashes his plane in a desert of a war torn country, a no-man's land (a fictional *Nowhere-istan*). According to Haneef, he is caught between his two roles as a fiction author and a political analyst. He equips 'Red Birds' with his insidious power of a satirist and combines it with his laconic worldview and political insight. He uses fictional characters but non-fiction global ideologies, wars and countries (like Afghanistan, United States) and institutions (like United Nations, Red Crescent, USAID) to present a vivid grim reality of contemporary war to the reader.

'Red Birds' laments the horrid conditions of conflict in a region which is not identified by the author but implicitly refers to US interventions in Middle East and/or Afghanistan, a predominantly war torn region. Like previously written war novels he opens this book with the absurdity of a condition of a man, tied to Sisyphean tasks that brings about order and chaos to this world at the same time. Enmeshed in a paradoxical situation, the soldier and premise of his duties, becomes the identity of his country (and vice versa). These 'duties' budded from nationalism becomes a necessary cog in the system of creation of wars, multiplying itself into production of chaos, destruction and a lost sense of self. The global battleground becomes a place where there are no winners or losers.

The book is divided into three sections. The first section, 'In the desert', introduces the reader to all its narrators starting with a pilot lost in a desert looking for his crashed plane. Through his narrative, the author gives reader an introduction of US foreign policy and military adventures in multiple conflicts. The second section, 'In the camp', centers its focus on a common family and their individual lives in post-conflict arena. The chapter revolves around issues of internally displaced persons, missing persons and refugees. In the last section, 'To the hangar', there is a rapid disclosing of events, near-mythical and imaginative in its depiction, it describes how the people in war-torn regions react to their plight usually in the form of retaliatory attacks on US soldiers which is portrayed in the western media as a terrorist attack. Previously written war novels revolves around the historical realities of total wars. However this book takes a deeper look into the additional element of humanitarianism and its sensitive rudiments corresponding to victims of war. The novel focuses on a triad of narratives; a US pilot Ellie (representing the common American caught in its country's foreign policy adventures). Momo, a young Muslim boy caught in the post-war situation, having big entrepreneurial dreams of wealth whilst stuck in a post-conflict economy,

¹ Azka Durrani is pursuing her Masters in Peace and Conflict Studies at the Centre for International Peace & Stability (CIPS), National University of Sciences and Technology (NUST).
E-mail: azkadurrani@yahoo.com

his identity mirroring the common freedom-loving American citizen. Though he is a character representing identity of global south, he is also a product of American lead war and the collective globalization effort. The dog, referred to as mutt represents the wise old critic, a philosopher, serving as the ethical compass of the story.

The story opens with Ellie, an officer well-trained in tribal traditions and prepared not only for combat but also the additional cultural sensitivity course prepares him to interact with people of foreign cultures. Despite that he still possesses an orientalist and a racist lens (symbolically this representing the West). He signifies a new typology of a soldier, one which is primed for defense and diplomacy. Lost in the desert he comes across the characters of Momo and the dog referred to as mutt. Their family is the holistic representation of common citizens affected by American war in their region. Ellie takes harbor in a place which is a village turned refugee camp. The story also has a mysterious abandoned US military hangar repetitively mentioned in the background and in the ending climax of the book. The abandoned hangar signifies the US military's intentions and delayed strategies of exiting the region of entrenched conflict (can be in reference to Afghanistan). The narrator introduces the reader to the absurd foreign policies resulting in war mongering of the west. The national interests of the hegemon supersedes all other national interests. When the author writes 'an entire United Nations of the teary-eyed' (p. 25), he satirizes the neo-liberal institutes created for the purposes of conflict prevention. Haneef censoriously defines modern war as: 'War has been condensed to carpet bombing followed by dry rations and crafts classes for the refugees'. Through the character of Ellie, the author is portraying the failing and horrific securitization efforts of US military. In a world where today human rights and human security is seen as a top priority of international security, a pilot is also not cared for by the central command. Thoughts of Ellie reflective of his existentialist crisis as a US soldier are written comically by the author. Criticizing the war budgeting, Ellie surmises: 'They give you a 65 million dollars machine to fly and... expect you to survive on four energy biscuits and an organic smoothie' (p. 3).

Additional fictional narratives of a USAID researcher and psychologist are also given space who is studying 'the minds of teenage Muslim boys' (pg.44) for her PhD thesis. Her role is empathetic to the plight of war torn countries but according to the author, that is not the case. She benefits from the conditions of post-bombings and PTSD since her research thrives in such fields, 'It was simple, they bombed us and then sent us well-educated people to look into our mental health needs' (p. 44).

The author narrates while referring to missing persons in post-conflict societies, contends that '...they have one department to pick them up and another department to make us forget them' (p. 67). From irreverence towards a legit conduct of war to insensitivity towards inhabitants of the region in conflict zones, some military campaigns in the history exemplified itself as a miscreant force exploiting the attacked regions. But with the rise of human rights post-WWII, a more defined set of *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello* injunctions for the ethics of war were laid. The author through Ellie's and Momo's stream of conscious tries to show how war has become intrinsic to some identities and the damage caused is irreparable. The west in its mission for civilizing has turned to liberating the regions from terrorizing militias, all in the name of global peace. Historically the pretense for intervention used to be scientific realism; today it has been turned into a global security issue. The characters in the book mocks these strategies veiled under humanitarianism, for making the war machinery persist and sustain. The pilot Ellie while stranded in a desert for more than eight days following a failed mission to bomb an area, projects his thoughts: 'In the beginning of my career

there was an argument about central command for the country or country for a central command' (p. 9).

The author explores and explains the persistent dilemmas of post-war economic and social conditions, satirizing a complex web of interdependent entities of war. For example a soldier trained to aim, fight and kill, are also getting trained in cultural sensitivity courses. They cannot care less of all the etiquettal niceties; they are not enrolled in a diplomatic peace corps. Through the character of Ellie, it can be inferred, that how it is futile to expect humanitarianism from a soldier sent in to war zone fully armed and veiling absolute powers over the unarmed enemy.

Satirizing the desensitization of drone operators, Haneef writes: '[...] they are going to retire me and replace me with a geek in Houston who remote controls drones, someone who can fight a one-handed war while dipping his fries in barbeque sauce' (p. 5). In military ethics, the dehumanization aspect of a soldier only virtually present in a battlefield (autonomous artificial intelligence vs. human-in-loop policy) has been contested by international law experts and still remains a deadlock debate in IR. The author delivers to his reader the dilemma of unmanned aerial vehicles which are replacing the aerial bombing raids by drone strikes. While the American military analysts applauds drones as the best targeting mechanism when it comes to tackling asymmetric threats like Taliban, Haneef disagrees and writes: '... though you can zoom in to see what's cooking in their pots, you can do the closest of close ups but you still can't tell for sure if they are discussing a cut of lamb or planning to bring down the western civilization' (p. 93). The writer does not only point out the obvious flaws in the revolution in military affairs (RMA) ,of introducing drones to combat militants hidden in remote geographical regions but also critiques how drone strikes just like conventional military attacks is merely a tool to kill.

The psyche of the people affected by prolonged conflict becomes deteriorated to the extent that in extreme conditions, ironically, they hope for war for it will bring in more aid through international donors, opportunities for some sort of employment for the local people, food and free health care. Ellie, the pilot while observing the refugee camp observes: 'They eat USAID grains, get US aid injections. These children think there was nothing before it and there will be nothing beyond its camp' (p. 110). They have a limited and distorted sense of their past. Slow eradication of their history through prolonged war can make the habitants of the region forget their true identity: 'If you are cooperating with the people who destroy your houses, it can have tragic results' (p. 29).

When the author talks about Momo's 'I heart NY' cap or his reading of 'Forbes 500' or his wish to ride the jeep Cherokee, the author implicitly refers to the Macdonaldization of post-war identities. The repercussions of that affect can be mangled and distorted. The individual can either be pushed towards extremist fundamentalism or become permanently confused and torn between his native culture and foreign values. He becomes a living corpse unable to move forward or look back. The characters of the two brothers Bro Ali and Momo reflects just that. In this age of asymmetrical theatre of war, military strategies for exiting war zones and a failure to uproot radicalization and terrorism is increasing, the author is trying to state the obvious: the military interventions for human rights or 'war on terrorism' were only labels created to amass popular support for enterprising war. The author explains a Kafkaesque conundrum of political economy of war in the following words: '[...] war is a business, no? Or is there more business after war?' (p. 152). On similar lines he talks of security the same way when he writes 'global security is nothing but social engineering through job creation' (p. 231). He tends to re-define 21st century military

institute in the following words: ‘Things have changed now, PTSD counselling, generation five drugs. Scientific breakthroughs. Retraining. Unit programs. With all your experience you could probably get a sociology degree’ (p. 256).

The author in the third section of the book gives voice of narrative to female characters in the post conflict arena. A mentally disturbed mother, whose son has went missing and a researcher, who is trying to understand and explore the psychological mind set of her other son. These characters come alive during war and specifically in post war environment. Just as in human securitization issues, child soldiers and small arms proliferation holds a central subject in security studies, women involved in war zones sets another frame work for understanding conflict and its elements. The characters of Lady Flower body and Mother Dear abruptly takes the center stage in the novel. It appears that the author decided to give them a pivotal place in the story-line when all men in the conflict zone have been exhausted or failed in rescuing Bro Ali, the missing person who was later found to be abducted by the US forces. This narrative turn in the novel is also reflective of trends in scholarly studies of International Relations. Theories like liberalism, realism, constructivism gives a set of explanation for state behavior and enumerate reasons for war. In past few decades Feminism has also found roots in IR scholarship. As a war novel, expanding on contemporary conflicts and post-conflict complications, inclusion of a female narrative in the final parts of the book is mark of ingenuity on part of the author.

The author has used metaphors of ‘red birds’, ‘red dust’, ‘ghosts’ and ‘mirages in the desert’ in order to refer to some deep held problems of a war torn society. ‘Red birds’ indicates to the idea of how common canaries consumed water having quantities of low-strength uranium, which has turned their color red. As the story proceeds the reader can infer his own interpretations as the metaphor gets mentioned throughout the text in different contexts. It symbolizes blood, mass-atrocities, violence, missing persons, dead persons etc. The novel is not just a narrative of the oppressed and violated but a heavy critique of war, post-conflict development and reconstruction efforts undertaken by agencies of UN. It is satirizing state and non-state actors alike. It refers to the corruption of UN aid departments, mismanagement of post-conflict areas by international agencies and mocks the so called ‘human security’ as envisioned by neoliberal international security paradigm. The comical representation of the story is not for the reader to merely get entertained from, but to readdress the entire institute of war and the political economies that finance the infrastructure, within which the global man finds himself deeply intertwined.