



Mohammed Hanif and the voices in his head

SARAH ANJUM BARI

The *Guardian's* review of Mohammed Hanif's *Red Birds* points out how Momo, one of its characters, "complicates our picture of helpless children in refugee camps." I'd say the novel complicates the picture of all the characters one expects to see in such a camp. We have a refugee family: a grieving mother, a forcibly optimistic father, a missing older son, a bitter younger brother, and a loyal pet dog, and a do-gooder USAID consultant researching the effect of trauma on the Teenage Muslim Mind. In this mix of seemingly stock characters, set in an unnamed Middle Eastern desert, crashlands Major Ellie of the US Air Force, who had set out to annihilate said camp with bombs labelled 'YES' and 'OH YESS'. He ends up plane-wrecked, stranded, and starving in the dusty desert heat.

To say that Hanif complicates this picture through character development would be misleading, because the characters meet you fully formed from the very first page. There isn't even that split second of distance when a narrator usually introduces the characters. From the first word uttered, we are inside Major Ellie's mind as he surveys his survival kit after crash-landing in the desert, recalling his training and the wife he had divorced. You then find yourself in the minds of two other narrators: first Momo, the younger son of the refugee family who has long ceased to be a child, who dreams of building a business empire with US dollars in this land of thieves, and yet is still teenager enough to be entranced by the USAID consultant woman; and second Mutt, Momo's wounded, loyal, perceptive pet who sniffs the others' minds before they know their own

feelings, who understands their human politics, and is still dog enough to find it all nonsensical. Their narratives intersect and weave through the novel in alternating chapters, explaining how Ellie is found by Mutt and Momo and taken to the camp for food and shelter.

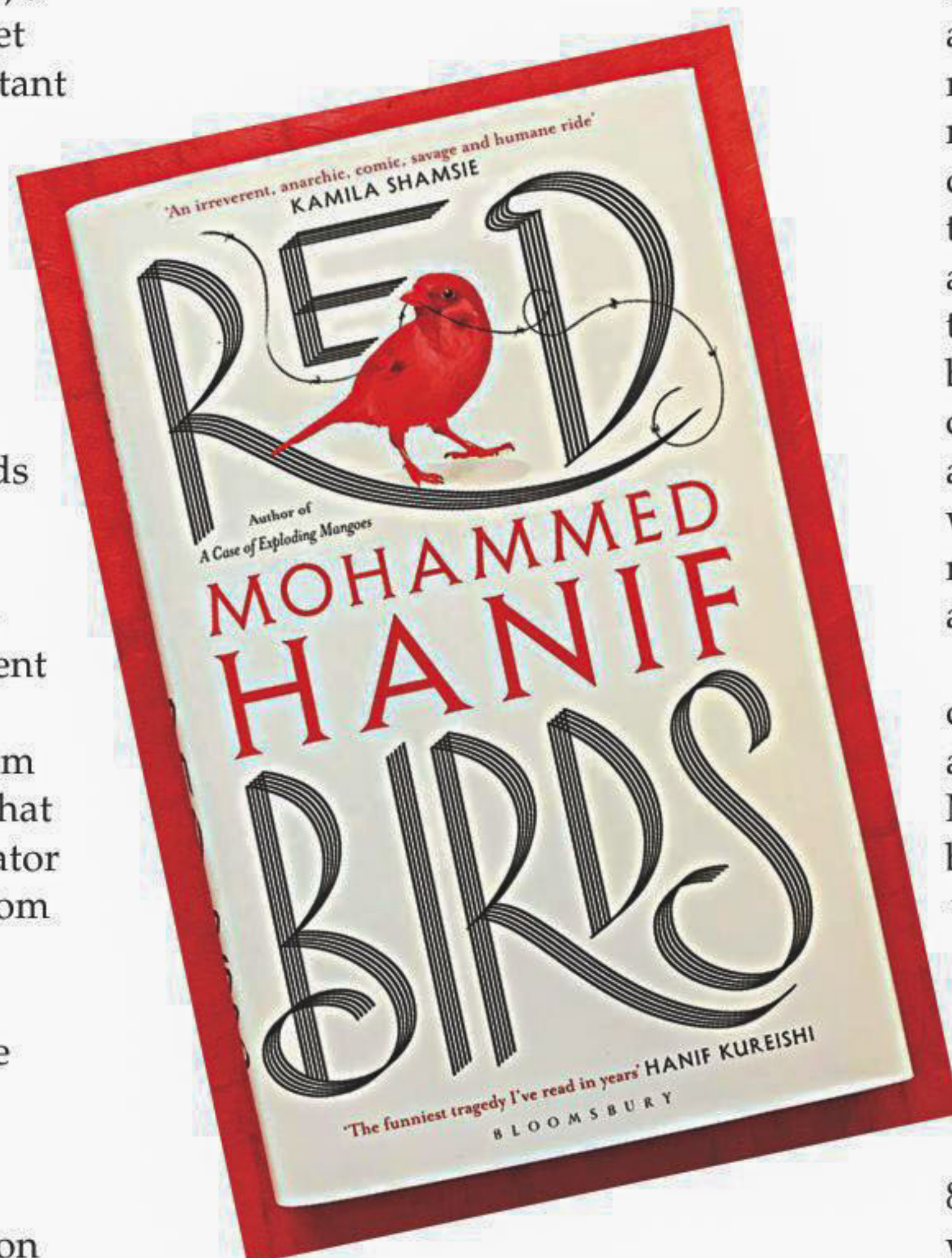
Anyone familiar with Mohammed

tongue-in-cheek humour as he satirises the role of Western humanitarian bodies in war zones and makes his teenage narrator wonder why they're being bombed when they don't even have any ideology. The humour coexists with a sense of acceptance, of awareness of their reality, felt by the camp dwellers in the novel. Momo explains that "You can't be a child in this place for long." The realities of "this place" have turned a man in their camp into the designated doctor "through trial and error because there was no other doctor". The doctor advises his patients not to worry about their wounds or their wasting organs, but instead for the planet which is certainly going to die. This tone of acceptance mingled with humour, tinged with just enough of a sense of denial, marks Hanif's characters as real, as living and complicated.

While discussing his writing process during the "Crashing Realities" session at last week's Dhaka Lit Fest, Mohammed Hanif distinguished between his journalism and creative writing. "As a journalist you're supposed to state facts, even though I know many journalists who are much better fiction writers," he quipped to general laughter. "You see something, you want to criticise it, you write your 800-word rant and you tell the world what you think. You have to think about what you can get away with and who your readers are. But [I] go to write a novel because I don't really know what I think. You're urging your mind to go to places where it is trained not to go." It's about figuring out the voices in his head, he admitted. The form and content of *Red Birds* fit exactly this description. It is indeed about interspersed voices

brimming with personality, with histories and prejudices, and enough humanity that they undergo constant changes. In the same breath that Momo admits to no longer being a child, for instance, he also admits that his missing older brother Bro Ali was "the original boss", revealing an abandoned younger brother's grief. We see Mutt feeling everything from betrayal and contempt to defiance towards his master Momo in the same sentence that we read of his undying love. And we watch Ellie travel from a state of confidence—"Roving Angels would be on their way to rescue [him]" and his poorly-stocked survival kit "will keep [him] alive"—to one of desperate hunger, homesickness, and uncertainty.

The setting, and our expectations from it, are further complicated by an inversion of power hierarchy. We tend to think of families in refugee camps as starving and destitute; but here we find Major Ellie at their mercy. After hours of agonising hunger turned into nausea, he devours a plate of soggy rice drowning in milk and sugar as his host, Momo's father, enjoys a platter of bread and "big juicy chunks of meat" dipped in oily gravy right in front of him. "I stay quiet and imagine a world that is so busy that it has forgotten me," he says. "I have a feeling that I am being treated like a refugee. I feel insulted," he says. The monologues, which permeate most of the novel, reveal the inner struggles of all these impoverished characters in a way that defies sympathy. It isn't just about feeling pity towards these people, you realise. It's about living in their shoes and feeling the alternately sad, ugly, and wonderful shades of their feelings. It's a crash course in empathy.



Hanif's oeuvre will recognise the setting as familiar territory. A former pilot officer turned journalist from Pakistan, Hanif has written extensively on international politics in his trademark 'no frills' style, particularly for his monthly *New York Times* column. Here, that tone translates into a deadpan