



The Visceral Canon: Corporeal Epistemologies and the Politics of the Grotesque in Muhammad Hanif's Red Birds

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ABSTRACT

This article employs Mikhail Bakhtin's conceptualisation of the grotesque body as a lens to read Muhammad Hanif's Red Birds as an attempt in 'visceral epistemology'. This technique employs a mode of analysing geopolitical violence through corporeal rather than discursive registers. This article mobilizes posthumanist thought with carnivalesque aesthetics to demonstrate how Hanif disrupts the sanitized praxis of neoliberal warfare and humanitarian interventions by highlighting the material, leaking, and transgressive body. Through critical reading of the scenes of digestion, corporeal violation, and interspecies consciousness, this article contends that characters such as Ellie, Momo, and Mutt exist not as ideological subjects but as bodies-in-process, politically formed through appetite, expulsion, and biological vulnerability. Through close textual engagement with scenes of digestion, corporeal violation, and interspecies consciousness, the article argues that characters such as Ellie, Momo, and Mutt (the canine narrator) function not as ideological subjects but as bodies-in-process, politically formed through appetite, expulsion, and biological vulnerability. The novel frames the refugee camp as a carnivalesque chronotope wherein conventional structures implode and the grotesque body emerges as both a site of truth and a locus of resistance. By conceptualising what can be termed as "visceral critique", this study intervenes in war literature, somatic politics, and the literary mobilisation of Bakhtinian frameworks in postcolonial contexts.



Introduction: Toward a Somatic Hermeneutics of War

Contemporary discourses that surround the conflict zone and military interventions have perfected the art of abstraction and obscured the lines of distinction between facts and fabrication. The excessively prevalent terms such as “surgical strikes”, ‘collateral damage’, ‘humanitarian aid’, ‘human concern’, operate as euphemistic mechanisms that normalize, sanitize, and aestheticize violence, and desensitize people to its material consequences. This meticulously curated praxis performs an epistemic function within the ‘necropolitical regime’, which functions as a biopolitical apparatus that dictates ‘who may live and who must die’ (Mbembe 11). These discursive and administrative systems render the violence and the consequent loss of lives as statistical externalities. Muhammad Hanif’s *Red Birds* (2018) productively complicates the dialogic and material space of representational sanitization by shifting the meaning from the discursive to the visceral, from abstract to the corporal. The novel not only foregrounds the atrocities and absurdities of the war; it challenges the epistemological structures which curate and design the discourses around war.

This article contends that Hanif’s narrative technique can be understood as ‘visceral epistemology’, which encapsulates a mode of knowing that is rooted in the inevitable materiality of embodied existence irrespective of ideological positioning and the prevalent discourse. Building upon Mikhail Bakhtin’s theorization of the grotesque body as given in *Rabelais and His World*, this reading locates *Red Birds* within the canon of carnivalesque literature on one hand, while marking its concurrent departure from traditional Bakhtinian framework through its intersection with necropolitical violence and posthumanist subjectivity.

Bakhtin postulates that a grotesque body is “unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits”, prioritises apertures, cracks, protrusions, and the cyclical processes of ingestion and expulsion (26). This body is essentially relational, incessantly in a state of becoming, and ontologically antagonistic to the classical body of formal culture, which is closed, autonomous, and complete. Whereas Bakhtin positioned the grotesque within the regenerative frames of the carnivalesque, Hanif deploys it within the conflict zones of perpetual war, wherein regeneration itself becomes problematic.

The theoretical underpinning of this article stems from three interconnected registers. First, it substantiates how *Red Birds* performs abstraction, destabilising the euphemistic discourse of contemporary warfare into visceral biological experience, thereby rendering visible the pain and suffering in its crude, inalienable corporeal form. Second, the novel disrupts the anthropocentric rationality by shifting the narrative authority across human and non-human agents. This refusal of the anthropocentric and humanist paradigm of political subjectivity makes a statement in the historical and political polemics. Third, and most fundamentally, the text recasts resistance as an essentially somatic practice in which survival, appetite, and corporeal persistence act not just as metaphors of political subjectivity but as fundamental modalities within necropolitical regimes.

Methodology

This article employs close textual analysis guided by Bakhtinian theory supplemented by critical frameworks from posthumanist philosophy (Braidotti, Haraway), necropolitical theory (Mbembé), and scholarship on somatic politics (Grosz, Ahmed). The analysis primarily focuses on the grotesque manifestation through four primary modalities. These include the digestive, the surgically violated, the animalistic, and the mechanized, to signify that these corporeal arrangements form an alternative praxis that refutes and transcends the representational extent of prevalent political discourse.

Theoretical Scaffolding: Bakhtin's Grotesque and the Necropolitical Chronotope

The Grotesque Body as Counter-Epistemology

Mikhail Bakhtin's theorisation of grotesque realism stemmed from his evaluation of Rabelaisian carnival as a temporary but stark inversion of hierarchical order. The grotesque body is the opposite of the 'classical body' celebrated in Renaissance culture. The classical body is seen as complete, elevated, and individuated, that rises above the immediate physical needs of eating and excreting, that knows no apertures and is not dependent on biological processes. The grotesque is the exact opposite of it. It is marked by excess, imperfections, and incompleteness. The symmetry is disturbed by apertures of the mouth, anus, and genitals, which are the means of connection with the world. It is further characterised by protrusions of the belly, nose, and breasts that violate prim boundaries and are dependent on the biological mechanisms of digestion, reproduction, and dying, which consequently destabilizes the segregation between self and other, inside and outside, individual and collective (Bakhtin 26–30).

For Bakhtin, the grotesque is neither degrading nor humiliating. It occupies an ambivalent space that productively complicates the high and low collision, giving birth to the "material bodily lower stratum" as a space of rejuvenation and rebirth. The body in its crude and raw form functions as a carnivalesque practice that momentarily disrupts official hierarchies. This disruption is understood as the "politics of transgression" by Peter Stallybrass and Allon White (6). However, Bakhtin's carnival is nevertheless temporary and licensed, which begets a permissible inversion which eventually reinforces the social hierarchies it appears to confront. This paradox has garnered controversy around the very foundations of the concept. Terry Eagleton notes that "the carnival model... remains too simplistically celebratory, unable to account for the ways popular culture may reproduce rather than resist dominant power" (148).

Hanif's involvement with the grotesque merits theoretical trajectories beyond classical Bakhtinian parameters. The refugee camp in the novel cannot be equated with a simple carnival but functions as a site of necropolitical chronotope. It is a disturbing space-time matrix where the normal no longer exists, where the grotesque is not sanctioned but endemic, and where the regenerative energies that animate Bakhtin's carnival have been subverted by the destructive synergies of never-ending war. This article contends that Hanif disturbs and disrupts the grotesque as the aesthetic and sanitized mode appropriate to conflict zones wherein biopolitical governance has converged with thanatopolitical administration to control and monitor "who may live and who must die". In such negative zones, the body does not temporarily subvert hierarchy through carnivalesque performance. The grotesqueness is imposed on bodies in such necropolitical zones, stripping the grotesqueness of any festivity and making it a permanent, non-negotiable form of existence and survival.

Posthumanist Extensions: The Multispecies Grotesque

The article is further informed by posthumanist frameworks that challenge the anthropocentric structures. Critics like Donna Haraway's focus on "staying with the trouble" in multispecies engagements and Rosi Braidotti's theorization of the "posthuman subject" as primarily relational offer crucial points of intervention to understand how Hanif distributes narrative consciousness across human and non-human agents. Hanif skilfully disrupts the conventional modes and methods of narration by making Mutt, a dog, the primary narrator of the novel. The praxis of the dog is contentiously and emphatically somatic: "The world is divided into things that smell like something you can eat and things that smell like something you can't" (Hanif 7). Hanif does not simply build upon anthropomorphism but rather makes a sustained engagement with "significant

otherness” as conceptualised by Haraway, which rests upon the presupposition that non-human animals are capable of alternate modes of knowing that subverts humanist assumptions of rational supremacy.

Mutt’s consciousness can be understood as “multispecies grotesque”, which implies a Bakhtinian body extended to encapsulate interspecies relationality. Bakhtin’s grotesque destabilises the boundaries between human and animal, individual and collective; Hanif pushes it further by making animal consciousness not a metaphor for degradation but a valid discursive position. Mutt’s consciousness should not be understood as human consciousness in a degraded form; rather he occupies and represents an alternative position of perception, understanding, and value that is informed and shaped by odoriferous intelligence, territorial logic, and the economy of scarcity. His relationship with Momo, the teenage scavenger, is not emotional but symbiotic as Momo provides scraps and in return Mutt extends companionship. Through Mutt, Hanif poses serious questions about the centrality and certainty of human knowledge and understanding. He suggests that in necropolitical regimes and thanatopolitical administrations, the somatic epistemology of the non-human agent may be more transparent and neutral than the discursive and ideological rationales and logics of human actors.

Visceral Critique as Analytical Framework

This article contends at a point of theoretical intervention through the concept of “visceral critique”, which stems from the intersections of Bakhtinian grotesque realism, necropolitical theory, and posthumanist thought. The visceral critique can be understood as a representational practice that extends the following formulations. It foregrounds the material, biological body as a site of political truth; refuses the normalization of violence through discursive abstractions; acknowledges the epistemic authorities across different human and non-human species; and reframes resistance not as an ideological position but as corporeal persistence. This framework casts *Red Birds* not as a mere satire on contemporary warfare but lends to it the deeper meaning that subverts the epistemological practices through which such warfare is rendered acceptable and a necessary requirement of the political urgencies of the time. Satire functions within the discursive practices of irony, parody, and rhetorical inversion and thus exists within the field of language. Visceral critique, on the other hand, moves beyond the centrality of language’s claim to authenticity and contends that violence and its different forms resist linguistic representation and are understood through the body’s irreducible materiality.

This conceptual framing, by mobilizing the necropolitical chronotope, the multispecies grotesque, and visceral critique as method, gives the required analytical tools for the close textual analysis of the novel that follows. Each section explores a different manifestation of the grotesque body, explicating how Hanif systematically establishes an alternative political praxis anchored in corporeal rather than discursive registers.

Textual Analysis: Cartographies of the Grotesque

The Digestive Insurrection: Ellie’s Leaking Sovereignty

Major Ellie, the downed American pilot, manifests the tension of the negative space that is at once acquired by military-technical rationality and the grotesque body of biological dependability. His narrative trajectory can be understood via Bakhtin’s ‘degradation’, which is not to be taken in a derogatory sense, but as the carnivalesque gesture of subverting hierarchical order. He is the specimen of the military-industrial subject, a representative of aerial sovereignty who has been brought into contact with the material bodily lower stratum. Ellie’s initial appearance in the text establishes this equation with visceral immediacy: “My guts are making sounds like a sinking ship.

I haven't eaten anything but a bag of sour plums in three days and I am shitting like a backed-up sewage pipe. I am constantly thinking about my bowels" (Hanif 23). The sinking ship in the quoted lines extends beyond a single metaphor. It instantiates the failure of Ellie's mission and by extension evokes the eventual collapse of American military and aerial supremacy in the region. It also reframes the body itself as a failing vessel, incapable of containing and sustaining itself. The arrangement of events in descending hierarchy is disturbingly poetic. The movement from military prowess in the form of ships and aircraft to plumbing infrastructure shown through sewage pipes to the biological process exemplified in defecation traces a hierarchy that exemplifies Bakhtin's carnival logic. The elevated is brought down, the technological is reduced to the biological, and sovereignty and supremacy dissolve into shit.

Ellie's diarrhoea does not merely show the dysfunctionality of the body but pose as an epistemological condition. His statement, "I am constantly thinking about my bowels", shows how bodily dysfunction shapes consciousness. The rational, military subject has been transformed into an 'intestinal subject' whose cognizance revolves around monitoring his bodily functions. This exemplifies grotesque consciousness as the mental processes are invested in the demands of the digestive tract. Bakhtin writes that in grotesque realism, "the body and bodily life have here a cosmic and at the same time an all-people's character; this is not the body... of the biological individual... it is a body that is blended with the world" (19). Ellie's uncontrollable excreting body blends with the landscape it sought to dominate. His diarrhea is metaphor for what he has brought to the land. This blending of his excretory waste within the land also shows the land's rejection of the imperial presence.

The political ramifications of this dysfunctional body extend beyond individual degradation. Ellie acts as an agent of the biopolitical apparatus of American intervention, a regime that fantasizes sovereign control through different mechanisms at place. These include military prowess, aerial supremacy, and informational omniscience. The drones, his primary weapon, manifest embody this fantasy. It culminates as the power to kill and surveil without physical presence. It enables the practice of necropower as pure abstraction. However, this abstraction is rejected by the material body. Ellie realises that his technological mastery cannot address the material reality of dysentery. The "surgical strikes" are taken over by the uncontrolled leaking from the body; the precision of targeting skills is replaced by the imprecise timing of the digestive system. His diarrhoea acts as visceral critique in its classic form: the crude, raw, and unruly body against the ideological discursive formation of clean, clinical, and 'humanitarian' warfare.

The Surgical Archive: Dr. Senior's Museum of Violated Bodies

Whereas Ellie's failing body explicates grotesque as an involuntary biological process, Dr. Senior's museum embodies the grotesque as a carefully designed inscription. It manifests the corporeal repercussions of necropolitical violence as permanent and pedagogical. Dr. Senior, the self-appointed supervisor of the camp, has designed a gallery of surgically modified bodies that literalize the abstract concept of 'collateral damage'. His elaboration of his collection manifests the 'necropolitical grotesque', a grotesque rooted in horrific perpetuity, stripped of Bakhtinian regenerative potential: "I have a boy who can store water in his hump. Like a camel... And then I have my masterpiece... I took out his lungs and put in a birdcage. Now he breathes through the birds. When they sing, he lives." (Hanif 187). The 'boy with a hump' instantiates a grotesque mutation to conditions of perpetual drought. This, however, is not an organic mutation but a surgical intervention, a corporeal inscription forced upon the material body to adapt to the camp's reality. The camp's imagery invokes Orientalist tropes on one hand and emphasizes the survival mechanism on the other. It also brutally expose those excessive violent processes that necessitate such 'adaptation'. Here the body act as an archive of the violence inflicted and endured.

Dr. Senior's 'magnum opus', the boy with lungs replaced by a birdcage, can be understood as the novel's most radical instance of necropolitical sovereignty. Mbembe theorizes necropower as the capacity to define conditions under which life persists or is extinguished. Dr. Senior actualizes this power. His breathing is dependent on the songs of caged birds, metamorphosing the autonomous biological function of breathing into a spectacular performance contingent upon non-human life. The birdcage lungs act as a layered metaphor. They denote the 'red birds' or the drones whose surveillance regulates the camp's spatial logic; they recast militarized zones as open-air prisons; and most importantly, they materialise the fragility of life in conditions of war and conflict. Breathing, being the essential marker of living, is externalized, mechanized, surveilled, and made subject to forces beyond individual control.

Dr. Senior and his carefully designed museum represent a dark parody of "humanitarian aid" that arrives in the zones of militarised conflict. His surgeries are not presented as torture but as the embodiment of all the humanitarian efforts for reconstruction made in the aftermath of war. The humanitarian interventions after the war are nothing short of perverse and add to the humiliation and degradation brought about by wars. Dr. Senior's museum is the actualisation of all those discursive and material practices that aim to make people endure what should be unendurable. The museum thus act as a site of human grotesque, showing that the apparently humanitarian discourse does nothing but legalize, normalize, and perpetuate the forms of corporeal violence and violation.

Canine Epistemology: Mutt and the Olfactory Political

Mutt, the dog, provides the novel's most persistent engagement with the "multispecies grotesque". His consciousness revolves entirely around the "lower bodily stratum", not as degradation but as a legitimate alternate form of knowing the world. "The world is divided into things that smell like something you can eat and things that smell like something you can't. Sometimes you can eat things that don't smell like food, but you'll only do it once (Hanif 7)." Mutt's consciousness is shaped by edibility, olfactory investigation, and embodied experience ('you'll only do it once'). This should not be understood as primitive logic but rather as a sophisticated survival logic attentive to the conditions of extreme scarcity. The human characters appear as absurd as they are surrounded by extreme conditions but are engaged in ideological debates about civilization, democracy, and development. Mutt, on the other hand, attends to the fundamental question: what sustains biological life? Mutt's consciousness and outlook destabilise anthropocentric rationale by exposing all the hue and cry of human geopolitical concerns. The grand assumptions of human's supremacy, the philosophical debate surrounding the humanitarian rhetoric, all become redundant and absurd when contrasted with the body's immediate needs.

Mutt's relationship with Momo, the teenage entrepreneur who navigates the camp's informal economy, actualises the transactional, non-sentimental materialism of the multispecies grotesque. They have a symbiotic relationship where Momo provides scraps, and Mutt provides a different sensory apparatus. His inherent olfactory and auditory abilities serve as an efficient warning system. Their alliance can be deemed as "becoming with", which Haraway theorizes as a relationship of mutual dependency that resists anthropocentric structures and acknowledges species difference. Mutt does not become human, Momo does not sentimentalize the dog. They form a survival mechanism which employs practical coalition necessitated by the shared circumstances and need of persistence in a hostile environment. The materiality of this relationship is not even ended by the death of Mutt.

When an American soldier shoots Mutt, the novel does not offer elegiac consolation. His death is described with crude materialism: "The bullet entered through his shoulder and exited through his stomach, taking with it a substantial portion of his internal organs. What remained was mess and stink (Hanif 241)." These lines culminate visceral critique. What is left of the subjectivity and

identity is “mess and stink”. The lines emphasize the body’s material reality especially in death. There is no eulogy offered, no consolation extended. The event is recorded in stark, crude, and raw words stripped of any sentimentality. His death is explained as pure biological fact wherein tissues are destroyed, organs are expelled. However, the novel’s refusal to eulogize Mutt’s death renders it more political. By stripping Mutt’s death of any meaningful or even emotive contribution in the anthropocentric matrix, the novel politically scandalise his killing. He is murdered for being exactly what he is: a hungry animal navigating a landscape of scarcity, a burden on the already flimsy economy of the camp. His death renders the necropolitical logic of disposable lives, be that of humans or non-humans, to be eliminated in the pursuit of ‘security’.

The Mechanized Sublime: Red Birds as Grotesque Technology

The actual ‘red birds’, the drones that surveil and kill, represent the ‘mechanized grotesque’, which reconfigures the technological rationality and organic form and synthesizes the novel’s central concerns. These technological artifacts occupy an uncanny position. They resemble and mimic biological life as birds in flight; however, they function as instruments of death. They guarantee precision while functioning in abstraction. They deliver indiscriminate death. Ellie calls them the ‘future of warfare’ (Hanif 89). They occupy the space of visibility and non-visibility simultaneously. While they function in abstraction, they remain visible to the camp’s residents as manifestations of the perverse sublime. “They are so beautiful when they circle above us, patient, waiting... But when they fall, they don't sing, they scream. And then they turn everything red. (Hanif 134).” These lines highlight the aesthetic satisfaction associated with military prowess and technological development. They expose the absurdity and brutality of contemporary warfare. These lines dovetail the inevitability of death and destruction with technological exactness. The precision is contrasted with the scream of impact, the abstraction of aerial surveillance transforming into the visceral reality of bodies ‘turned red’. The red birds operate as the novel’s central motif that binds the classical and grotesque. They represent the perfected art of combat, that is clean, distant, aerial, technological, whose operational principle is the formation of grotesque as opened bodies, scattered organs, and spilled blood.

The drones’ avian nomenclature, to be called birds, epitomises the euphemistic discourse of contemporary warfare that normalises and naturalises death and destruction. The metaphor of birds also enables an aesthetic distancing. When the birds fall, this distancing collapses; the scream is not avian but human, and red is inevitably blood. The bodies are ruptured to blur the distinction between exterior and interior. Hanif explicates how this clean, precise, and distant form of violence engenders grotesque effects. The fantasy of surgical strikes, of precise targeting, is exposed and rendered as visceral reality. Every clean, exact, and precise strike results in scattered limbs, opened torsos, and the human subjects are reduced to ‘bio-signatures’, as called by Ellie, and recorded as ‘mess and stink’ by the novel.

Theoretical Implications: Resistance, Regeneration, and the Limits of the Carnival

The preceding discussion elaborates the systematic deployment of the grotesque body in the novel as an epistemological and ideological resource. Nevertheless, it engenders a critical question: does the grotesque operate as a mode of resistance in necropolitical regimes, or does its use reinscribe the very dehumanization it attempts to undermine? This question gestures toward the broader debate within Bakhtinian scholarship regarding the political efficacy of carnivalesque aesthetics.

Critics like Terry Eagleton argue that carnival’s nature undermines its subversive potential. The temporary subversion of hierarchy reinscribes the status quo, providing a controlled ventilation for social pressure. The preceding analysis demonstrates how *Red Birds* systematically deploys the

grotesque body as an epistemological and political resource. Yet this raises a crucial theoretical question: can the grotesque function as a mode of resistance within necropolitical regimes, or does its deployment in such contexts risk reproducing the very dehumanization it seeks to critique? This question gestures toward the broader debate within Bakhtinian scholarship regarding the political efficacy of carnivalesque aesthetics. As Eco observes, “Carnival can exist only as an authorized transgression” (6), implying that the subversive potential is always approved by the very power structures it seeks to confront. When applied to *Red Birds*, this critique would imply that the novel’s engagement with the politics of the grotesque, however visceral, remains politically impotent. It renders a spectacle of abjection that engenders sensationalism through explicit imagery of disgust, horror, and pity without enabling any meaningful resistance.

However, this reading contends that Hanif’s engagement with the grotesque escapes this limitation by refusing to indulge in any optimism that associates regeneration with Bakhtinian carnival. Bakhtin’s grotesque at once signals both death and rebirth, degradation as a prelude to regeneration. Hanif’s necropolitical grotesque extends no such hope. The refugee camp in the novel is not a temporary carnivalesque space but a permanent “state of exception” that has been legitimised and normalised (Agamben). In this light, the grotesque body operates not as a carnivalesque performance that will reinscribe hierarchy, but exists as a permanent condition of horrific existence under regimes of perpetual war.

Conclusion: The Endurance of the Flesh

This article formulates that Muhammad Hanif’s *Red Birds* forms a deliberate practice in visceral epistemology that signals a mode of knowing and critiquing geopolitical violence through the inevitable materiality of the body. By problematising Bakhtin’s theory of the grotesque and extending it beyond standard carnivalesque parameters, the novel generates “visceral critique.” This signifies a representational exercise which desanitizes and sensitizes the abstractions of contemporary warfare and the ideological and discursive formations around it. It locates political truth in corporeal processes of ingestion, expulsion, violation, and death. This analysis has identified four primary instantiations of the grotesque, which include Ellie’s digestive insurrection, Dr. Senior’s surgical museum, Mutt’s olfactory epistemology, and the red birds’ mechanized sublime. This ontology subverts anthropocentric certainty and rationality by distributing narrative authority equally among human and non-human agents. It exposes the absurd logic of humanitarian intervention by revealing how human concern becomes a perverse abstraction for corporeal violation. It reframes resistance not as ideological and political opposition but as the adamant persistence of biological life under conditions curated for its destruction and elimination.

The analysis has traced four primary manifestations of the grotesque—Ellie’s digestive insurrection, Dr. Senior’s surgical archive, Mutt’s olfactory epistemology, and the red birds’ mechanized sublime—demonstrating how each contributes to a coherent alternative political ontology. This ontology challenges anthropocentric rationality by distributing narrative authority across human and non-human agents; it exposes the perverse logics of humanitarian intervention by revealing how care can mask corporeal violation; and it reconceptualizes resistance not as ideological opposition but as the stubborn persistence of biological life under conditions designed for its elimination.

Red Birds extends no redemption and makes no promises of hope. It does not extract meaning from the meaningless existence of life surrounded by violence. It insists that bodies matter, that biological suffering cannot be covered up by eulogized discourses and ideological rationales. It argues that survival itself is the ultimate act of resistance. In an era where technologies are perfected to make violence look clean, sanitized, distant, and precise, Hanif’s visceral epistemology performs critical political work. It sensitizes us to the inevitability of violence, to the

horror of opened bodies and spilled blood, to the grotesque truth that ideological and political discourse work hard to obscure. It reminds us that beneath all the discursive sophistication and ideological abstractions of political urgencies, military strategies, and humanitarian intervention, war remains an essentially biological phenomenon that works upon the mass destruction of living bodies. *Red Birds* reminds us that in zones of necropolitical violence, where discourses, ideologies, and politics are deliberately designed, the body in its raw form—the hungry, leaking, violated, and enduring body—remains the last site of truth.

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