



**ANTHROPOCENTRISM IN POST-COLONIAL
LITERATURE: ANALYZING ANIMAL
MARGINALIZATION THROUGH
MUTT'S PERSPECTIVE IN *RED
BIRDS* BY MUHAMMAD HANIF**

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Abstract

The research aims at highlighting the 'animal's marginalization' in the 'anthropocentric' human society along with uncovering animal's 'double subaltern status' due to their being a belonging to a subaltern society through the character of dog named as "Mutt", from the postcolonial context provided in the novel "Red Birds" by Pakistani writer "Muhammad Hanif". The research applied the post-colonial theory of "subalternity" from the essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" By "Gayatri Chakravorty Spivek". The primary as well as secondary data collection method is used to do a comprehensive literature review and to gather relevant data. The study followed the close-reading method of analyzing the data. The research is qualitative and achieves the outcome of identifying Mutt's marginal and subaltern status.

Keywords: *Anthropocentrism, Colonization, Epistemic Violence, Marginalization, Subaltern.*

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1. Introduction

"Mohammed Hanif's *Red Birds* is a powerful ecocritical text, interweaving themes of anthropocentrism, environmental degradation, and postwar trauma within a satirical narrative. It critiques American militarism's environmental and human cost, presenting a stark portrayal of a devastated desert landscape." (Loss of Human-Earth Equation in Muhammad Hanif's *Red Birds*)

Red Birds is masterfully set in a nameless country, the depiction of which suggests that it must be either Pakistan or Afghanistan. A war-affected family of four with a pet dog is shown living their Western-influenced life in a refugee camp located in a desert. The novel's protagonist; Momo is a 12-year-old, clever boy full of capitalist influenced money-making ideas. His big brother, Omer is taken by the foreigners in the hanger located nearby and he hasn't returned for months. Momo's parents grieve the absence of brother Omer while Momo is seen brain-storming all sorts of ideas to bring his brother back. Another important character is Momo's pet dog referred to as "Mutt" who is the main subject of this research. Meanwhile, the family is busy with missing brother Omer, Mutt is treated differently and is directly affected by Momo's sadness and anger as he considers him a fool and even calls him "fried brains". "Momo says my brain got fried in that accident. I think I became a philosopher that day." (p. 158, *Red Birds*). Mutt expresses his opinions on all the events of the novel showcasing himself as wise but voiceless in the presented post-colonial society. "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". (Benevolent violence: Bombs, Aid, and Human Rights in Mohammad Hanif's *Red Birds*, Shazia Sadaf, Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada).

The novel opens with an American pilot; Major Ellie crash-landing near the refugee camp, he is devastated and is given a place by Momo's family. His opinions are biased exhibiting Western perceptions but he also holds a grudge against the American Airforce system.

Mohammed Hanif is a talented Pakistani author who traded his wings as a Pilot Officer for a life of storytelling. His debut novel, "*A Case of Exploding Mangoes*," burst onto the literary scene, earning a longlist spot on the prestigious Man Booker Prize, a shortlist nod for the Guardian First Book Award, and the coveted Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Novel. Hanif's sophomore effort, "*Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*," solidified his reputation as a masterful storyteller and was shortlisted for the 2012 Wellcome Prize. He published "*Red Birds*" in 2018 and was longlisted for the "Rathbones Folio Prize".

The study identifies the character of "Mutt" as an animal character living among a subaltern society who is also collectively bearing the state of marginalization, firstly of his

marginalized human owners and secondly by his animal existence. Hanif highlighted the fact that how it's like to be a margin in a human centered world therefore critisizing the anthropocentrism among human society. The study's deep analysis of the chapter 3 of Red Birds is dedicated to Mutt's feelings of being useless for his human family. The disheartened Mutt fed up from the ignorance and coldness expressed by his owner Momo, lefts for the desert. As he narrates, "And here I am feeling nostalgic about falling bombs. And about those who call you their best friend ever and then plunge a dagger in your back". (lines 9-12, p. 30, chapter 3, Red Birds). While narrating his story on how he gets electricuted, the event on which he gets titled as "fried brains" by Momo and the day Momo hits him with a ball as a result of which he becomes lame just because he peed on Momo's favorite "I love New York" cap explains how precious Momo hold a colonist's "leftover object" and how he can even hit his dog for it further suggests his subaltern trauma directed on his non-human belonging. To quote Mutt's description of the suffering imposed by his human owner, he says, "I was still looking skyward when the ball hit my hind leg. All the air went out of my lungs and not even a little yell came out of my mouth. (lines 20-22). I jumped after the ball hit my hind leg with a force of a canon all testing through a state traitor. " (lines 24-26, p. 55, chapter 6, Red Birds).

Not only Mutt feels unvalued but also "voiceless" like a "subaltern" as Spivek asks in her celebrated essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?". "In her essay, 'Can the Subaltern Speak? (1985), Spivak popularized the term, 'Subaltern' where she says, "The Subaltern cannot speak!" (Artium, A. (2018). On the Margins: Theorising Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?". Ars Artium, Vol. 6.). Mutt often shows devastation on the fact that humans themselves do stupid acts like going on wars and acting crazy over women and believing in ghosts but only he gets labelled as 'stupid' and 'fried brain'. Hanif cleverly portrayed the wisdom animals hold by creating Mutt as a "philosophical figure" of the novel showcasing that just because animals cannot speak verbally doesn't mean that they aren't intelligent and can't contribute to human society. Mutt keeps on playing the moral compass and a critique of colonization throughout the novel while advocating for his right of "importance and acknowledgment" in the human world along with revealing another dark side of subaltern trauma that exhibits itself in further marginalizing the subaltern's pets.

2. Literature Review

"Red Birds" is a witty and comical novel written by Pakistani novelist; Muhammad Hanif. Due to its transparent, raw, and satirical portrayal of a postcolonial society, it's among the top-tier works of Postcolonial Literature originating from Pakistani English Literature. "Hanif demonstrates his finesse by dovetailing the tenebrous story of the war with comic yet insightful scenes that bring tragicomic effects to the novel. Often satirical

in tone, the book derides the absurdity of war in a highly provocative and intriguing fashion." (World Literature Today/2019/spring/ Muhammad Hanif).

The subject character of the research is the novel's protagonist; Momo's pet dog called Mutt. "The dog, referred to as Mutt represents the wise old critic, a philosopher, serving as the ethical compass of the story." (NUST Journal of International Peace and Stability (NJIPS) Vol. II, No. 2).

In the process of literature reviewing, it became clear how Mutt's character gets further marginalized treatment in addition to his owner's marginalization by colonizers. "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." (Benevolent violence: Bombs, Aid, and Human Rights in Mohammad Hanif's Red Birds, Shazia Sadaf, Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada).

"The same idea has been foregrounded in the words of mutt whose feelings are also recorded in the novel and several chapters have been allocated to his observations. He also views war and aid through a single lens when he thinks, global security is nothing but social engineering through job creation. First, build a facility, then man that facility, then hire more people to protect that facility, then hire some dogs to protect those guards, then hire more men to destroy it, and then start dreaming up reconstruction contracts." (Exploring the Absurdity of War and International Aid in the Novel 'Red Birds' by Mohammad Hanif: A Critical Discourse Analysis Touqir Nasir¹, Sonia Touqir², Sajid Pervez³, Hira Ali⁴)

Mutt is effectively used to portray the non-human narrative of human behavior and acts. ".....momo's dog mutt, Hanif presents this dog, not as an animal but rather as a character with a more philosophical mind than humans in the story he narrates not only the important incidents and events but the inner thoughts of the characters as well. "With his fried mind" (Hanif.2018) the story sheds light on the human relationships after the war and we can see a deep desire of many characters for the past when they were happy with their families." (A Postmodern Quest to Reconstruct Human Ties: A Nostalgic Desire for Reality in an Era of Simulation in Red Birds by Muhammad Hanif, Dr. Bushra Shoukat, and Aurangzeb

The literature review helped to find the "gap" of "Mutt's marginalization" in the previous studies where the brilliancy of his character is properly discussed but his suffering as a result of him being a belonging of "subalterns" is not highlighted effectively and directly.

2.1. Research Question

Q. How does Muhammad Hanif's "Red Birds" portray the animal marginalization, subalternity and the theme of anthropocentrism through Mutt's narrative ?

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is conducted through the concepts provided by "Can the Subaltern Speak?" By Gayatri Chakravorty Spivek. "In her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak? ", Gayatri Spivak develops the concept of the "subaltern," first coined by the Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci in the 1930s. Gramsci used the term "subaltern" as an alternative to "worker" to describe the subordinate and oppressed position of the working class in the capitalist system. Continuing Gramsci's thought, Spivak emphasises that "subalterns" do not just find themselves in an oppressed position, but are denied opportunities to assert their interests and even to make themselves visible." (Spivak, n.d.)

The research's subject character "Mutt" is analyzed as a 'marginalized subaltern's belonging' through the Spivek's arguments on subalternity as an identity. Spivek's theory applied on the Mutt's narrative exposes the suffering and marginalized treatment of animals in an anthropocentric society.

The lens of theory is to identify Mutt as a 'marginalized' existence and 'highlighting that not only the subalterns but their animal belongings are also not safe from the marginalization imposed by colonialism' along with indicating the 'double subaltern status' of animals living in a subaltern society while touching on the theme of anthropocentrism. " The oppression of non-human animals emerges as a natural consequence of the silent or invisible roles which they occupy as the marginalized 'Other' ". (Can the Non-Human Subaltern Speak? Addressing Injustice through Parakeets, Penguins and Blue Macaws by Sutirtho Roy)

The study used the concepts and arguments of Can the Subaltern Speak? By Gayatri Chakravorty Spivek in to four main points:

1-Identifying the Subaltern

2-Power Dynamics

3-Epistemic Violence

4-Voicelessness

"Subalterns" are referred to those human groups that are completely sidelined by both colonists as well as the colonized group in majority. In the case of study, Mutt's owner Momo is a subaltern which makes Mutt a 'double subaltern' as he is a belonging of a Subaltern. Spivek speaks of power dynamics by showcasing how West keep itself as dominant and powerful and considers oriental as weak and powerless. This study views Mutt as a powerless animal in front of his human owners. "Epistemic Violence" is the term used by Spivek to showcase how the subaltern's voice and identity is completely eradicated or mediated by the dominant groups in the post-colonial context."It is the colonial

epistemological trajectory, Spivak argues that, through which the 'other' comes to know and narrate its 'self.' It is the moment in which the colonial authority speaks for/ as 'the native'-the other becomes self." (Vinayaraj, Y. T. (2013). Representation of the Subaltern: Spivak and Historiography. *Mar Thoma Theological Journal of Theology*, Vol. II, No. 2.). The voicelessness found among the subalterns due to the excessive devaluation of their presence and narrative is significantly applied to Mutt's presence in the novel.

The theoretical framework is applied through answering following questions:

- 1-How to identify Mutt as a subaltern-within-subaltern in the post-colonial society ?
- 2- How does human exert their dominance over animals in context of anthropocentrism?
- 3- How does Mutt reveals himself to be a victim of epistemic violence?
- 4- What ideological narrative makes Mutt voiceless?

The methodology used to apply this framework is close-reading method to interpret and evaluate Mutt's dialogues revealing his narrative on his marginalization, suffering and voicelessness.

The study expects the outcome that animal marginalization in an anthropocentric, post-colonial and subaltern human society should be considered. It expects the deeper understanding of role of animals and Spivek's Can the Subaltern Speak? theory.

4. Data Analysis

4.1. Identifying subaltern-within-subaltern

The identification of the subaltern is a crucial aspect of this study, and Mutt's narrative provides a paradigmatic example of subalternity. Spivek's thought notes, "...in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak"(p.28, Spivek, 1988). As a pet of a 'subltern owner', the study focuses on the marginalization of non-human figures. Mutt's treatment in the novel presents the notion of "subaltern-within-subaltern," wherein he is marginalized and erased by his own mentor and best friend, Momo, who is the subaltern figure and the reason behind Mutt's dual subalternity. The anaylsis of relationship between Momo and Mutt as 'Owner and Pet' in the context of owner's subaltern status, points towards the ability of marginalization to exceed human boundaries and touch their non-human possessions. As Mutt recounts, "And what happened to me was not an accident by any stretch of the imagination, it was an assault, simple and brutal. By my own mentor and best friend and self-styled, so-called owner, Momo" (lines 24-27, p.25, chapter 3). This testimony highlights the ways in which Mutt is marginalized and erased by those who are supposed to care for him, underscoring his subaltern status. His suffering as belonging of subaltern and the evident marginalization that comes from it is vivid from his following lines, "It's a well-known fact that those under assault from outsiders take it out on their own." (lines 28-29, p.25, chapter 3, Red Birds).

4.2. Power Dynamics

The power dynamics between Mutt and his human counterparts are explored through Spivak's take on the role of dominant narratives in erasing the voice of subalterns. In the case of anthropocentrism, the subaltern humans are the 'dominant powers' to their non-human belongings. "Anthropocentrism, just like Colonialism, consists of a dominating human group, and victims of Colonialism often are also victims of Anthropocentrism, making them subalterns of an Anthropocentric world ". (Anthropocentric Subaltern: The Protagonist in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*, George Samuel Kisku). The data reveals a complex web of oppression and marginalization, with Mutt's narrative critiquing the dominant discourse and highlighting the power dynamics between Mutt and his human counterparts. Momo's opinion regarding Mutt's status and ability is noted as, "He is not a very good observer of the human condition. He doesn't understand human longings. He used to have some manners but he lost them all in the accident when his brains got fried. Now he is never gonna learn" (lines 12-16, p.47, chapter 5). Furthermore, when Momo's own subaltern state and the marginalization gets mixed together with him being a dominant figure in front of Mutt reveals the trauma a subaltern induces on their living belongings as stated, "She accuses me of cruelty to animals. That's one classic symptom of PTSD, she says. 'Soldiers traumatized in conflict areas go home and take it out on their pets'" (lines 29-31, p.73, chapter 8).

The findings of this study demonstrate how epistemic violence is perpetuated through dominant narratives and epistemological frameworks, rendering Mutt's experiences and knowledge invisible. Momo's narrative highlights this phenomenon, noting, "You don't know my Mutt. He's the one who has been cruel to me" (line 3, p.74, chapter 8). This resonates with Spivak's (1988) argument that , "Some of the most radical criticism coming out of the West today is the result of an interested desire to conserve the subject of the West, or the West as Subject" (p. 24, Spivek, 1988). Like the West, Momo wants to keep his dominance even if he has to ill-treat his pet Mutt.

4.3. Epistemic Violence

Can the Subaltern Speak? By Gayatri Chakravorty Spivek gives the concept of "Epistemic Violence" which means that the dominant discourses and power structures perpetuate the erasure, distortion, or suppression of marginalized experiences, perspectives, and knowledge. " The oppression of non-human animals emerges as a natural consequence of the silent or invisible roles which they occupy as the marginalized 'Other' ". (Can the Non-Human Subaltern Speak? Addressing Injustice through Parakeets, Penguins and Blue Macaws by Sutirtho Roy)

The findings of this study indicate that Mutt's narrative is replete with instances of epistemic violence, wherein his identity is reduced to a mere animalistic existence, stripping him of his agency and voice. For instance, when Mutt says, "Today, for example,

my existence smells of an empty-headed, unloved cat" (lines 13-14). Similarly, when he says, "Nothing to sniff here but my own broken and bloodied leg. Nobody comes to this part of the desert on a picnic. You come here to die of shame" (lines 16-18, p.24, chapter 3), it highlights the insignificance an animal's existence holds in human society and in case of subalterns, the animal existence gets more distorted, suppressed and in short silenced due to the complete lack of power and trauma subalterns possess.

The data further reveals that Mutt's experiences are marked by violence, shame, and marginalization, highlighting the ways in which epistemic violence is perpetrated through language and discourse. When Mutt says, " 'Mutt', Momo spat out the word like it was a bitter almond" (line 25, p.54, chapter 6), it demonstrates how Mutt's name is used as a tool of oppression, reducing him to a mere object of disdain. This is reminiscent of Spivak's argument that "the clearest available example of such epistemic violence is the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other" (Spivek, 1988).

Epistemic violence leads to the silencing of marginalized voices as when Mutt complains , "Did I get tired of being best friends with folks who do not only call me Mutt but have finally started to treat me like one?" (lines 17-19, p.25, chapter 3), here; his voice is being silenced by the dominant discourse of his human counterparts. Likewise, when Mutt said, "There was something about the unexpectedness of the assault, the sheer viciousness of it that shook me" (lines 3-4, p.26, chapter 3), it highlights how his experiences are marked by violence and trauma.

The institution of law and power structures is another tool to perpetuate epistemic violence. To quote Mutt, "If you are cooperating with the people who destroy your homes, it can have tragic results" (lines 12-14, p.29, chapter 3), this statement highlights the devaluation of marginalized's knowledge. The dominant power structures not only ignite violence and oppression, but also renders Mutt's experiences and knowledge invisible. This is in line with Spivak's argument that "in the constitution of that Other of Europe, great care was taken to obliterate the textual ingredients with which such a subject could cathect, could occupy (invest?) its itinerary - not only by ideological and scientific production, but also by the institution of the other." (Spivek, 1988)

The erasure of marginalized experiences and emotion is evident from Mutt's confession, "Yes, my leg is fractured and I am dying of hunger and thirst and stand but if someone was to walk up to me and ask me Mutt, what happened, did you break your leg? I'll tell them, yes but what's really broken is my heart" (lines 1-4, p.56, chapter 6).

If the marginalized tries to contribute, his status remains marginalized. The epistemic violence cannot be undone and remains at its position. To quote Mutt, "Whatever modest intelligence I had I shared with Momo and look where it got me. A mangled leg. The desert" (lines 25-27, p.29, chapter 3), it highlights regardless of his contribution to the

dominant discourse of his human counterparts, his knowledge and perspectives remain invisible. As Spivak argues, "the narrow epistemic violence of imperialism gives us an imperfect allegory of the general violence that is the possibility of an episteme" (Spivek, 1988)

4.4. Voicelessness of Non-human living beings:

The main question raised by Spivak as in the title, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" really determines the significance and the existence of the 'voice of animals' in an anthropocentric society. An animal cannot be itself a 'subaltern' however, the treatment and value it gets equals to the subaltern status. In addition, if an animal is a belonging of subalterns, it is a part of their voicelessness. It aligns with Spivak's thought as quoted, "For the 'true' subaltern group, whose identity is its difference, there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself; the intellectual's solution is not to abstain from representation." (p.27, Spivek, 1988)

Mutt's feelings on ignorance he gets from his owner as he says, "When good citizens like me, son of the souls, start abandoning their ancestral abodes, you should know there is no hope left." (lines 13-15, p.26, chapter 3, Red Birds), shows the continuous state of voicelessness his animal existence gives him.

The data analysis revealed the uselessness of Mutt's contribution. He has been made silenced by his human counterparts as they don't listen. To quote Mutt, "I am what they call stoic of nature but sometimes I bark and howl. But do these people listen?" (lines 19-20, p. 24, chapter 3, Red Birds). Mutt subaltern status reinforced by his voicelessness has even contributed to the meaninglessness of his life. The following lines suggest this notion:

"I am a Mutt and I can excrete gold and spout Rumi but I will remain Mutt. " (lines 21-22, p. 137, chapter 17, Red Birds)

"Is Mutt's life not life?" (line 6, p. 121, chapter 15, Red Birds)

"When a Mutt dies he stays dead." (line 2, p. 117, chapter 14, Red Birds)

In case of animals, the voicelessness is forced by humans. "Spivak was also wary of the intellectuals who attempted to speak on the behalf of the subalterns rather than allowing them to speak for themselves. She thought that this led them being positioned relative to their rulers rather than allowed them cultural identity of their own." (Artium, A. (2018). On the Margins: Theorising Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?". Ars Artium, Vol. 6). The human-animal relationship is in binary opposition with each other where the former has completely occupied the domain of centrality in the world. Humans as owners and central figures have made the world a place that entirely belongs to them, leaving no place for the intelligence that animals possess. "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." (Benevolent

violence: Bombs, Aid, and Human Rights in Mohammad Hanif's Red Birds, Shazia Sadaf, Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada).

The forced voicelessness results in further personal issues such as isolating, alienation and suicidal thoughts as Mutt feels when he leaves for the desert. "Spivak attempts to focus on the struggle of the silenced subalterns and gives them a voice. By championing the voices she challenges some dominant idea that the western world is more civilized and developed than the non-western world. She criticizes western critics such as Karl Marx, Derrida, Foucault and British or French feminists." (Ambesange, P. V. (2021). Postcolonialism, Gayatri Spivak and the Subaltern: Struggle and Voices of the Disenfranchised. KY PUBLICATIONS.) Atlast, through Spivek's approach on Mutt's condition, the continuous epistemic violence, power dynamics and the resulted voicelessness becomes evident in this study.

5. Conclusion

The research found out about the marginalization imposed on the animals and how it leads to the construction of human-centered world. Mutt presented himself to be an advocate for animal's existence and how living among subalterns has impacted his condition suggesting that colonialism has drastic effects on not only humans but it reaches animals as well. The narrative of Mutt uncovers his subalternity which gets perfectly analyzed by Spivek theory on subalterns focused on navigating the power dynamics, epistemic violence and voicelessness of the subaltern nations.

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