

Imprecise Attacks, Invisible Victims: Representation of Drone Warfare in Selected Post-9/11 Pakistani Fiction

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ABSTRACT: Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) or drones have arguably been the most controversial part of the US strategy in its ‘War on Terror’ in the Global South especially in Afghanistan and the tribal belt of Pakistan. Apart from a few high-profile targets, most of the victims have been non-combatant common people including children, women, journalists, rescue workers, funerals and animals. A lot of journalistic and media discourse concerns itself with the anonymity, lethality, ethicality and the spatiotemporal (im)precision of drone strikes in Pakistan and Afghanistan in the aftermath of 9/11 and the US-led counter-terrorism campaign in the region. But there is a scarcity of scholarly engagement of the literary fiction from the region with the havocs of the drone attacks especially from the victims’ point of view. Building on the literary representations of drone warfare in Mohsin Hamid’s short story “Terminator: Attack of the Drone” (2011) and Nadeem Aslam’s novel *The Golden Legend* (2017), this article looks into the perspectives of the civilian victims of the drone strikes to challenge the epistemic violence that categorizes the unseen victims of drones as un-representable. Seeking to unsettle the prioritization of official narratives over the individual narratives, the research responds to what Frank and Malreddy (2018) call “the existing schism(s) between the spectrality of 9/11 and the invisibility or opacity of the ‘War on Terror’” (98).

Keywords: Drone strikes, epistemic violence, Nadeem Aslam, Mohsin Hamid, invisibility

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Following the 9/11 tragedy, the US and NATO launched their punitive campaign on Afghanistan to eradicate the terror havens in the region. Pakistan became a main non-NATO ally of the US in the war on terror. The lack of logistical and military accessibility in many areas being used as hideouts by Taliban and their supporters led the CIA to normalize and legalize the use of the uncanny and deadly drone technology. With this decision, drones began to be seen “in the skies over the warzone of the Afghanistan/Pakistan border” (Wood 339). Despite Pakistan’s role in facilitating the war on terror, its own north-western tribal belt became a target of drone attacks, leading to scathing criticism of the government policies on the part of media, religious class and the common public. Uzma Aslam Khan (2013) states:

Both Pakistani and American newspapers have reported that the drone war is resulting in 50 civilian deaths for every 1 “suspected terrorist” killed. Though the total number of civilian deaths since the start of the drone war is never reported, estimates are anywhere from 1,000-3,000. So we are looking at around 52,000 Pakistanis killed since 3,000 Americans were killed on 9/11. (Khan).

Despite a lot of media and diplomatic protests, Pakistan’s territorial sovereignty has repeatedly been violated by the US drone strikes, leading to what Akbar Ahmed in his landmark work on drone strikes *The Thistle and the Drone* (2013) calls “death, destruction, disinformation, deceit, and despair” (2). Adding fuel to fire, these attacks have recurrently been termed legal, ethical and wise under the Obama administration. This use of drone warfare “for targeted killings in the context of the war on terror has prompted scholars to consider how these circumstances challenge existing theories of sovereignty, warfare, and ethics and whether they violate national and/or international law” (Parks & Kaplan 5). Since 9/11 and the US invasion of Afghanistan, hundreds of drone strikes have been carried out in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia. The terrorists’ hideouts in Waziristan have been “the target of one of the most concentrated drone campaigns on earth” (Ahmed 48). The growth of drone technology into a full industry has changed the dynamics of modern warfare.

The invisibility of the attackers and the obfuscation of the scale of destruction caused by drones have sparked many controversies and debates. Kanwal (2020) observes that the drone warfare is “instrumental

in the strategic silencing and invisibilization of war victims” (1). And the undermining of “the civil rights and liberties of people around the world, particularly Muslims and people of color, forcefully impeding their mobility, infringing upon their privacy, and detaining them without cause” (Parks & Kaplan 11). While the attacker remains invisible, the lives of the target people are the subject of the imperial gaze. According to Waqar Azeem (2019), the surveillance strategies make “drones tools of state-violence to the extent that they invoke the histories of the imperialism” (3). The narratives of the countless victims including women, children and other civilians are often erased with the rhetoric of collateral damage.

The image of the drone “has saturated Western public consciousness to the point that it can be described as a trope” (Smethurst & Craps 1). The “conflicted and wounded relationship with the USA in the context of an ongoing military conflict and the rise of anti-Muslim racism globally” (Gopal 22) serves as the basis of a lot of English fiction from Pakistan. Aroosa Kanwal (2015) sees a visible shift of focus on the part of the Pakistani novelists “to Pakistan against the backdrop of the devastating impact of US drone attacks” (200). Moreover, she observes an inclination in Pakistani English fiction away “from the megacities of Karachi and Lahore to small rural areas and northern Pakistan, which had previously not featured in mainstream Pakistani writings” (200). As the phenomenon has caused severe implications for Pakistani society, creative writers from Pakistan are taking up the issue in their literary productions. As Afghanistan and Pakistan are still going through the repercussions of the controversial US policy of drone attacks, some Pakistani writers make visible more and more people physically or emotionally affected by drone strikes in order to build a counter-narrative that is more empathetic to these people. However, there is little scholarly engagement of Pakistani Anglophone fiction with the psychological, physical and economic ramifications of drone attacks for the victims of the drones. This article, by offering critique on two pieces of drone fiction, engages with the role of post-9/11 Pakistani Anglophone fiction in animating the impacts of changing tools of surveillance and violence on the non-combatant victims especially in the tribal belt of Pakistan.

Hamid’s “Terminator: Attack of the Drone” (2011)

Mohsin Hamid’s “Terminator: Attack of the Drone” (2011) explores the psychological impact of the drone attacks in the tribal areas of Pakistan. It gives projection to “the traumas of the people experiencing deaths by

drone and aerial warfare” (Azeem 4). Set in a surrealistic and “what initially seems to be a burnt-out, post-apocalyptic landscape, a science fiction or fantasy space almost devoid of animal and human life” (Clements 85), the story captures the life under constant surveillance and what Kanwal (2020) calls “the fear of living under the shadow of drones” (2). Narrated from the perspective of a young boy who has lost his father to the attacks by the flying machines, the story depicts a bleak world in which drones have killed a large portion of the society and destroyed most of the food resources and shelter places. The narrative dramatizes the unnamed protagonist’s encounter with a drone. Hamid creates a pathetic fallacy as the inner landscape is projected onto the outer landscape. The narrator and his friend Omer move through a landscape which is more psychological and inner than objective and physical. They fear that another drone may strike at any time, and this anticipatory anxiety is most difficult to handle. The potential victims are constantly reminded of their death. The story problematizes the drone warfare being accurate in its information and its targets.

Aslam employs dehumanizing tropes to project the life of the people under the threat of drones. “You can’t see ‘em at night. Sometimes you can’t see ‘em in the day neither. But you hear ‘em all the time, huntin’. They’ll go away for days. Sometimes weeks’ll go by and you ain’t heard ‘em once. Then they’ll be back and there’ll be a burial” (Hamid). The word ‘hunting’ used by the narrator implies an internalization of the American projection of terrorists and their families as sub-human beings. The wolves also hunt people in the wilderness, but the narrator thinks that the invisible hunters are more dangerous than wolves. The survivors are reduced to creatural level. The boy’s mother has lost her one of her legs in a landmine explosion. She can only crawl in the house. The dead bodies are mutilated beyond recognition. The narrator attended his father’s funeral, but he could not recognize him due to his charred and mutilated body.

The story highlights the invisibility as well as the omnipresence of the drones. Their invisibility enhances their power and the helplessness of the victims. “If they hunt you at night, ain't nothin' can keep you safe” (Hamid). David Rohde, an American journalist who was kidnapped and held captive for almost seven months in a Taliban jail in the tribal areas of Pakistan talks about the terror unleashed by the imminence of the drones: “From the ground, it is impossible to determine who or what they are tracking as they circle overhead. The buzz of a distant propeller is a constant reminder of imminent death” (qtd. in Chamayou 45). What the

boys perceive, in Hamid's story, is only the killing sound of the flying machines.

The story hints to the possible radicalization of the young people whose family and parents have been killed in drone strikes. The two boys want to try any available weapons to fell the flying machines that have killed most of their people. They unsuccessfully use a rocket launcher or a Kalashnikov to hunt down the flying machine.

Nadeem Aslam's *The Golden Legend* (2017)

Nadeem Aslam's *The Golden Legend* is set in the fictional town of Zamana, which closely resembles Lahore, in the post-9/11 Pakistan riddled by war on terror, drone attacks and escalating anti-American sentiments. The novel makes visible the impact of drones on the lives of the underprivileged sections especially women and children in the tribal areas of Pakistan. It further spotlights the escalating tensions between the government and the non-state actors in the backdrop of the drone strikes. The novel also gives voice to the narratives of those countless women and children who have been widowed and orphaned by the drones. It challenges the accuracy of the intelligence behind drone strikes. Many times, the drones target a site without correct information resulting in the killing of the people not actually intended. It also points to the fallout of this warfare in the shape of grave threats to minorities especially Christians in Pakistan.

Aysha, in *The Golden Legend*, stands for the countless women in Pakistan whose husbands and families were killed in drone strikes. She is the daughter of an old cleric in Badami Bagh area of Zamana. She comes to live with her father after her militant husband has got "killed by a missile fired from an American drone, a year or so ago, in the faraway deserts of Waziristan" (14). Aysha's husband's brother Shakeel also stays with Aysha and her father. He makes sure that Aysha does not marry for the second time as, being the widow of a martyr, she needs to remain true to her dead husband. She is under the constant and intrusive gaze of her brother-in-law. This constant surveillance changes the moral landscape for her and prompts her to seek alternative space where she can be a normal human being with her feelings and emotions. On the other hand, it is revealed through Aysha's thoughts that she "had hated her husband, and the other men in the Waziristan house, was barely able to stand the sight of him, and there was guilt in her at times, as though she had invited their

deaths, had willed the American drones to arrive overhead, carrying missiles in their claws” (95). For her, it is not the Americans alone who are responsible for her son’s tragedy but also the people like her husband who give the US a cause to continue their war.

Inevitably, military’s use of UAVs has invited a huge amount of criticism regarding the ethics of drone warfare and the morality of extrajudicial killings (Chamayou 2015). The pretext of ‘collateral damage’ is often employed by the Americans to cover up the loss of civilian life in the drone strikes. The drone missiles keep wreaking havoc under the notion that “people in an area of known terrorist activity, or found with a top Qaeda operative, are probably up to no good” (Becker & Shane 2012). Aslam brings into focus the death and maiming of women and children in the drone strikes. Despite the claims of accuracy and precision, many innocent people are killed when a drone missile strikes. Michael Walzer, in *Just and Unjust Wars* (1977), propounds his theory of a just war. He argues in favour of the “principle of noncombatant immunity” (43). In Walzer’s opinion, a distinction should be made between a soldier and a non-combatant. As far as possible, the safety of the civilians should be ensured.

The Golden Legend highlights the cost of the so-called collateral damage that the survivors have to pay. At the forefront of the novel is the plight of the non-combatant victims of the vertical warfare. Death and disability are rampant in the tribal areas of Pakistan. Women, children, old people and animals alike suffer the consequences of the misdirected or misinformed attacks despite the US secretary of defence Leon Panetta’s claim calling their drone warfare “the most precise campaign in the history of warfare” (Ahmed 85). Despite many such killings, the US government has never “accepted responsibility or apologized” (Gregory 45) for the killing and maiming of the innocent people. In *The Wasted Vigil* (2008), an earlier fictional response to 9/11 by Nadeem Aslam, a CIA agent David Town admits that many times the drone attacks are misinformed:

The information that selects the target isn’t always without its faults, he knows. In Usha at the end of 2001, the house of the warlord Nabi Khan was reduced to rubble from the air, everything and everyone inside a hundred-yard radius was charred, but later it turned out that he had not been in the vicinity. His rival, Gul Rasool, had lied to the Americans just to see the building decimated, to have

as many of Nabi Khan's relatives and associates killed as possible. (75)

This incident underscores the fact that many times the intelligence sources are not authentic. In many instances, the drone attacks are used to settle personal scores by the warlords siding with the US. The targeting of children in the drone attacks is perhaps the most controversial aspect of the drone phenomenon. Even if they are not directly hit, the psychological effects are horrible.

Particularly affected are young children who are said to be unable to sleep at night and cry due to the noise. Some children have lost their lives with the impact of the drone missile strikes in their neighbourhoods. Local doctors have declared many adults mentally unfit due to the effect drones have had on them, with the details of the disorders unknown due to lack of, firstly, awareness of mental health and, secondly, expert psychiatrists and psychologists in the area. (Khilji)

In *The Golden Legend*, Aysha laments the fate of her child and her own: "She was the mother of a child mutilated by the Americans, a child who was collateral damage, the daughter-in-law of a woman who was killed because she happened to be near the enemy when the hour struck" (307-8). Billu's fondness for toys causes his disability and the ensuing sufferings. Unaware of the imminent tragedy, the child gets up at night to search for his toys buried in the ground. He looks for Noah's Ark and some plastic animals that his father had brought for him a few days earlier. During Billu's search for his toys, "the explosion occurred. A large section of masonry had flown towards him. The eighty-five-year-old Amma died with the men" (88). Billu loses his legs in the attack. His maiming questions the precision as well as ethicality of the drone warfare. He cannot shake off the psychological effects of this shocking encounter with death. Bringing him up, Aysha too has to go through a lot of physical and mental torture. It takes her a lot of daily trouble to get him ready for his school.

Aslam also depicts the resilience of the drone survivors. With the passage of time, Billu is able to develop resilience in the face of public perceptions about his disability. Aysha is surprised to see how he has made up a story about his missing legs:

At one point he had made the neighbourhood children believe that the missile from the American drone was just a rumour he and his family had spread. 'The real reason for my missing legs is that I had wings growing on my ankles and was able to fly.' The magical legs, apparently, had been put away for safekeeping because a sorcerer wanted possession of them. 'My mother and I have come to Zamana to hide from him for a little while.' (283)

This is indeed a marvelous resilience on the part of a boy who has gone through the horrors of a drone attack and disability. With this made-up story, Billu tries to enhance his acceptability among his school mates. For Aysha, dreams are sources of hopes in her otherwise restricted and hopeless life. She cannot do anything to get her son recover from his disability. She visits the shrine of Charagar to ask for the saint's blessings. She sees Billu in her dream "standing beside a personage she understood to be Charagar. Both of his legs were intact and he was smiling and in the morning she took that to be the reassurance she had sought, and she vowed to visit the saint's mausoleum on his next death anniversary" (281). This dream keeps Aysha's hopes alive that her son can and will recover.

While 9/11 haunts the American imagination as a horrible tragedy that killed thousands of people, the truths about the loss of the civilian lives in Pakistan's tribal areas are often kept hidden from the public gaze. This serves as an instance of what Spivak (1988) terms the "epistemic violence" or "the asymmetrical obliteration of the trace of that Other in its precarious Subjectivity" (281). Aslam points out a constant effort on the part of the authorities in Pakistan at ensuring the invisibility of the drone victims and the opacity of the stories about drone victims. The question of civilian casualties is one of the highly-debated issues surrounding the drone attacks. Drones are indiscriminate, opaque and global structure of violence in which civilians account for the largest share of victims (Borger). The journalists who dare to challenge the official narrative have to pay a heavy price for it. The novel raises a voice for those journalists and media personnel who want to show the truth to the public regarding the drone attacks. A journalist wants to bring the facts surrounding Aysha's husband's killing. But he meets a tragic end:

A journalist, who had arrived at the scene before the military-intelligence agency, had photographed

fragments of the missiles, the markings and numbers identifying them as American. A fortnight after he made the photographs public his disfigured corpse was found in a sewer. His widow said in an interview that she knew who was responsible for his murder, and that in the days leading up to his death her husband had told her that he was terribly afraid. (95)

Later on, his wife and three children are also killed in an explosion outside their house. The fate of the journalist and his family is a reminder to the fact that most of the horrible incidents involving US drone missiles have been kept hidden from the public gaze. In another incident, Helen recalls that “just an hour ago, there was news that an unmanned drone – flying above Pakistan’s tribal belt but operated remotely from within the USA – had assassinated yet another militant leader. How many others had been killed with him was not mentioned” (23). The authorities neutralize the public anger by controlling media and revealing only a partial truth. The same happens in the case of the killing of three people by an American diplomat in Zamana. The military officer who visits Nargis’ house to force her to pardon the American does not want the truth to be public. Pakistan’s own government and intelligence agencies lend a helping hand to the CIA’s drone warfare. “[T]he collusion and acceptance of Pakistan’s government and intelligence agencies” (95) is the main factor behind the American success in the region. The dead bodies of Aysha’s husband and his fellows are buried in secret in order to avoid the reaction of the public especially the religious groups. In return for hefty reward, the area around Aysha’s “house was cordoned off by the military intelligence agency” (95). Aysha was instructed to state that “the house was an explosives factory and there had been an accident, leading to the deaths” (95). Aysha knows that the militants cannot do anything against the military agencies. They can just target the helpless minorities. She challenges Shakeel who always acts as a moral policeman for her:

‘And, yes, the Americans took away your brother, mother and Billu’s legs, but it’s the Pakistani military and the intelligence agencies who secretly gave them permission to fly their drones above Waziristan. In return for rewards and weapons and money. Nargis and Massud’s house is visited by people from the military almost every other day. Why don’t you go and take this matter up with them?’ (305-6)

The Golden Legend depicts some instances of the radicalization of Pakistani youth in response to the drone strikes in the tribal areas. Some of the survivors especially men feel justified in taking up arms against the US interests in the region. Aysha's husband is one such example whose affiliation with the militant Islam grows because of the US policy of drones in Waziristan. When he is killed in yet another drone strike, his brother Shakeel proves to be more anti-American who shifts his activities to Zamana. Shakeel is a hard core militant, not only anti-American but also anti-Indian. He was very furious "when he had overheard a group of youths mockingly refer to him and Aysha's deceased husband as the 'drone brothers'" (304). In an anti-Indian gesture, Shakeel and his associates "spread an Indian flag on the ground and cut the cow's throat onto it, an ugly gesture of soaking the flag with the blood of the animal that was sacred to Hindus" (93). They take photographs and film the whole episode in order to, later, upload the video on the internet so that they can get more public support for their anti-American and anti-Indian ideology. According to Hasian (2016), for those people who favour America's drone policy in the region "all of this is mere sentimentalism, emotive theatrics that may or may not have been funded by Pakistani intelligence, conservative Islamic clerics, or foreign militants who want to fan the flames of anti-Americanism" (93). The national flags of USA, Israel, India, France, and Denmark are painted on the floors of shops for customers to walk in and defile. Though "the Pakistan government took responsibility for drone strikes or remained silent in the face of their deadly attacks, the tribesmen took revenge on anything they thought represented the government" (Ahmed 81). The subversive activities like an attack on an American professor in Zamana and bank robberies to finance the purchasing of weapons and vehicles become common. A Kashmiri young man Imran who comes to Pakistan to acquire jihadi training for the liberation of his homeland unknowingly becomes part of the jihadists' anti-American activities. Once he drives a bicycle through the city while his pillion rider aims to shoot a car driver. He later learns, to his shock, that "his pillion rider had received training in Waziristan from the deputy head of al-Qaeda in Pakistan, a man who had been killed in an American drone strike only the previous week" (129). The extremists want to give a religious coloring to the murder of Massud at the hands of an American diplomat on a road of Zamana. They do not want Nargis to forgive the killer of her husband.

The uncontrolled drone strikes in Pakistan make the life of the minorities in Pakistan much more difficult. The action of the novel takes place in an area in which “law and order have been engulfed by competing violent extremist forces” (Miller 347). Religious extremism is on the rise in Zamana in the wake of drone attacks and an American citizen’s shooting of three Pakistanis. The anti-American people like Shakeel turn their attention to the minorities in Pakistan especially Christians. They find different ways of harassing and, in their opinion, avenging themselves on the Christians. Lily, a Christian rickshaw driver, and his daughter Helen become the target of Muslim mob’s attack on the Christian neighborhood. Lily and Aysha have a secret love affair which, when comes to light, sparks a Muslim-Christian riot. After several outdoor meetings with Aysha, Lily goes on a nocturnal visit to her in her house attached to the mosque. Lily is said to have violated the cultural boundary by sneaking into the mosque, a place normally forbidden to the non-Muslims amidst the prevailing interfaith disharmony in the country. During one of his secret meetings with Aysha, Lily loses his crucifix somewhere in the mosque without his notice. He is in her room when someone finds Lily’s crucifix and detects his presence in Aysha’s room. A mob gathers outside the cleric’s house knocking at the door and demanding that Lily Masih’s be handed over to them. But Lily manages to escape. He changes his identity and roams the streets of the city in search of some work and food. He adopts a false name Sadiq Munawar only to get some job as a labourer. He is labelled as a blasphemer, and there are thousands of posters pasted on the walls bearing his and his daughter’s name as most wanted. The mob sets many Christian residences to fire in Badami Bagh when it is revealed that a Christian man is having an affair with a Muslim woman. Moreover, the mob wants “to drive Christians out of Badami Bagh, kill as many of them as possible in the dead-end street” (142).

The anti-American and anti-Christian sentiments of the terrorists lead them to attack other easy targets like shrines. An explosion takes place at the mausoleum of the saint Charagar in Zamana in which a lot of Muslims get killed. The USA is blamed for the explosions like this. Aysha overhears Shakeel and his friends celebrating the suicide attacks. They praise the courage of the suicide bombers.

[L]ater she listened to him give a sermon over the loudspeaker, telling everyone that the bombings had been carried out by the Americans who were ‘no longer content in just killing us with drones, but want to kill us openly

on our streets – as one of them did last month right here in Zamana – *and* in our sacred houses of worship – as they have now done with the Charagar mausoleum’. (304)

Aysha’s father who is a moderate Muslim cleric loses control of the mosque as Shakeel and his radicalized friends take hold of the affairs of the mosque. He often considers himself responsible for Aysha’s tragedy as it was he who got her married to a man in a far-off area. He is despaired by the loss of control over the mosque and “the long years of loneliness to which his daughter seemed condemned, the little grandson maimed by the American missile” (60). The character of the cleric stands for the old Muslim-Christian harmony that has been replaced by a radicalized version of Islam to which the US policy of drone attacks in Pakistan has also contributed.

The paper offers a critique on what Shaw (2013) calls the “‘dronified’ US national security strategy” (536). By analyzing selected fictional works by Mohsin Hamid and Nadeem Aslam, the article argues that the authors challenge the official narratives on the drone strikes in the tribal areas of Pakistan by foregrounding the voices of the people who have directly experienced the drones. The authors bring the victims of drone warfare out of what Kanwal (2020) calls “the zone of invisibility or silence to give meaning to their deaths that can otherwise be lost in the larger web of colonial narratives” (16). The narratives of the children, women and journalists witness to the drone attacks have been analyzed to support the claim that despite a lot of civilian killings by drones in Pakistan, the spectrality of 9/11 still hegemonizes the narratives surrounding the war on terror while the tragedies of countless civilian victims have largely remained unacknowledged and have been systematically obfuscated.

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