

Tabish Khair

Tabish Khair:
Critical Perspectives

Edited by

Cristina M. Gámez-Fernández
and Om Prakash Dwivedi

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P U B L I S H I N G

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INTRODUCTION

The fundamental flaw which lies behind the so-called “civilized” Western way of understanding the world, in one form or another, is based on how disconnected and compartmentalized that world has become over centuries of evolution; on how an encompassing comprehension of immediate reality is more and more biased by fixed categorizations; and on how much humans, irrespective of where they come from, their religion, race, gender, etc., cannot escape traditional sets of beliefs and assumptions inherited through culture. Being able to disentangle oneself from these very rooted conceptions and to realize that an advanced society does not necessarily equate to noble human ideals turns out to be a very difficult task, since it entails breaking with those recurrent received thoughts and discourses which speak through human beings. This same border-crossing and uneasy feeling of unexpectedly leaving behind one’s own presuppositions springs within any reader when measuring Tabish Khair’s writings.

Tabish Khair was born in 1966 in Ranchi and grew up in Gaya, a small Indian town of historical interest in Bihar, in a Muslim middle class family. Despite being situated in very rich and fertile plains, traversed by the Ganges River and some of its tributaries like Gandak, Koshi and the Bagmati, among others, and despite its holy significance for Buddhists (its name *Bihar* derives from the word “vihāra” in Sanskrit, which means *abode* or *refuge*, and makes reference to Buddhist temples), the region is one of the most deprived areas in India.

He attended a Roman Catholic Primary school and his Secondary Education was at a school run by the international congregation The Sisters of Charity of Nazareth. He was expected to follow the medical tradition in his family, but he dropped it in order to pursue a BA in History, Sociology and English at Gaya College and a Masters in English from Magadh University. Khair’s early commitment with social and political issues and with writing led him to work as the district reporter for the Patna Edition of *The Times of India*. After troubles with fundamentalists, he moved to Delhi, where he became a staff reporter for the same prestigious newspaper. Four years afterward, at the age of thirty, Khair moved to Copenhagen, Denmark, to undertake his PhD while he earned his living by dish-washing, floor-cleaning and other menial labor forced

upon immigrants. When he finished in 2000, there were no academic opportunities there, so he moved to Aarhus, where he is currently an Associate Professor in the Department of English at the University of Aarhus.

His early writings include poetry as well as fiction. He first published the poetry collection entitled *My World* (1991) by the prestigious publishing house Rupa & Co. *A Reporter's Diary* (1993) and *The Book of Heroes: A Collection of Light Verse and Much Worse* (1995) are also early poetry collections. His mature voice as a writer, Khair has often claimed, emerges with the publication of his next volume of poems, entitled *Where Parallel Lines Meet* (2000). His latest poetry book, *Man of Glass: Poems* (2010), completes the list of his verse to date. In addition, Khair was honorary fellow of creative writing at the Baptist University of Hong Kong in 2004, and he has also been awarded other fellowships and scholarships at Copenhagen University, Oxford University (UK), Jamia Millia Islamia University (Delhi), and University of Delhi. Khair cannot be defined as a poet, a novelist, a playwright, a reporter, or a scholar, but all of these together.

After the publication of his first novel, *An Angel in Pyjamas* in 1996, by Harper Collins, Khair did not publish any fiction until 2004, when he brought to light *The Bus Stopped*, a novel which deepens in the inexorable pace of the world, subsuming human nature and life. *The Bus Stopped*, set in an Indian state in the 90s, evinces his mature narrative voice. *Filming: A Love Story* (2007) explores essential human conflicts such as religious intolerance and deals with the Bombay film industry in the 1930s and 1940s with the Partition of India as its backdrop. His next novel, *The Thing about Thugs* (2010), is based in Victorian London and examines the intricacies of human interaction as well as connections between cultures. His latest novel, entitled *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position* (2012), takes a more satirical, sour and contemporary tone as it engages issues related to Islamic terrorism in an attempt to deeply consider current prejudices against difference and identity. His works have been—and continue to be—translated into Portuguese, Italian, Russian, French and Danish.

His scholarly work is inaugurated by *Babu Fictions: Alienation in Indian English Novels* (2001), an insightful resource book which deals with essential questions such as alienation, exile and language issues in Indian writing. The volume, published by Oxford University Press, comprises his PhD thesis, which has progressively gained influence among postcolonial scholars with an interest in Indian literature, since Khair's proposal provides new possibilities for the critical modes employed in

Indian fiction written in English. *Other Routes* (2005), co-edited by Khair with Martin Leer, Justin D. Edwards and Hanna Ziadeh, is an anthology of travel writing undertaken by Africans and Asians, which sheds light on the biased view that only Westerners embarked on these dangerous and enriching explorations. *The Gothic, Postcolonialism and Otherness: Ghosts from Elsewhere* (2009) is an academic study in which Khair tackles controversial issues of Otherness and Sameness, the use of Gothic elements in the distinction between difference and similarity and its ulterior interpretation by postcolonial tenets. The volume entitled *Reading Literature Today* (2011), co-authored with Sébastien Doubinsky, is his most recent contribution to the field. His unique insights on the new and emergent relationship between the author and the reader, and the marketability of literature in this increasingly globalized world are brilliantly described and sustained in its pages.

He holds his own views on the fast-growing postcolonial stance and claims for an accurate use of terms and concepts in postcolonial discourse, both from his experience as a scholar but also from his experience as a writer who has often been hastily and wrongly described with terms such as *diasporic*. In 2005, Khair stated that he writes “for South Asians who read English and for the significant minority of western readers interested in going beyond the west’s dominant discourses” (Khair 2005, n. pag.). Indeed he has often spoken of his understanding of “minorities” as a shaping element in his life and work. This leads him to reflect on individual memory and personal experience in contrast with collective discourses (either national, religious, social and so on). His particular consideration of issues such as Indian writing both in India and abroad, religious intolerance, social injustice and rich Indian cultural heritage is skillfully combined with his subtle, lyrical, harsh and hilarious writing. For, as Khair affirmed in 2010, what is the value of a book if it does not make you think anew (Khair 2010b, n. pag.). Yet the author often elaborates on the act of reading and writing, and on commonly held prejudices about the role of the writer in the postcolonial era. Khair, when asked in an interview if he, as a South Asian writer whose readership may not be familiar with his cultural, social and historical reality, has to take extra responsibility in translating the reality along with his first purpose of interpreting and analyzing it, declares that

every reader is a stranger. Every reader, to some extent, is an outsider: she stands outside the text, outside your mind, outside your personal language. . . . I am not thinking of “outsiders” in the sense of Europeans or Americans; I am thinking of “outsiders” within my own cultural heritage of Hindustan. (Hussain 2008, n. pag.)

This is the reason why Khair works out his particular narrative style that provides textual clues which readers have to connect, irrespective of one's origins or traditions. This idea unequivocally leads to Khair's conception of literature as an art, instead of literature conceived as an authentic representation of reality. To Khair, literature is an art whose first aim is to tell stories from the writer's prism. Thus "fiction does not really make truth claims, at least by definition" (Agarwal 2008, 81). Indeed, his definition of literature must turn to the very matter it is composed of: language. Khair explains the issue as follows:

First, literature is written in language. Second, literature is not just about language. In other words, literature is written in language about that which cannot and will not be confined to language. Literary language, in particular, refuses to delimit its meanings and concerns . . . Hence, literature is where the problems, possibilities and limits of language can no longer be avoided. . . . In short, literature is that which presses against the limits of language in life. (Khair 2010a, n. pag)

In fact, Khair confesses that he writes "from a compulsion to tell certain stories, explore certain ideas, explode certain myths: if I have a readership in mind, it consists of people who are interested in similar ideas, themes, stories, experiences and/or the same endeavour to question and explore" (Khair 2010a, n. pag). His conception of literature leads Sébastien Doubinsky to ask the writer in 2012 if he considers himself a political writer. The enlightening reply surely proves that Khair's notion of literature and language is deeply intertwined with reality:

I am not a political writer in the sense of writing protest literature . . . one can only talk of good writing and bad writing, but I also believe that good writing is always in the larger sense. After all, to be political in the larger sense is to be aware of how human beings respond to each other and sociopolitical organisms, like states or established religion, in their daily lives, and how can one write good literature without this awareness? Politics in that sense is part of the way we deal with each other and all that exists around us, including nature. . . . I consider it a real compliment when one writes a novel that is not narrowly political but still addresses issues which hold a political resonance for one's readers. It means one is engaging with life and language at the necessary levels. After all, language itself—being what we mostly use to communicate and clash—is always political in some ways, even aesthetic language. (Doubinsky 2012, n. pag.)

Back in 2007, Lucy Beresford, in reviewing Khair's *Filming: A Love Story*, affirmed that the writer's "skill lies in making us question our own

assumptions about what we do and why we do it” (Beresford 2007, n. pag). Each time readers face Khair’s work, the writer makes them experience Otherness within one’s inner boundaries. He pushes the reader to come to terms with what one’s conception of Otherness and difference is, to understand its nature, to appreciate it, to assume it as one’s own, as a hidden part of oneself that one discovers has just been released from within in the act of reading.

Khair inexorably alters his readers’ perception of the world, but above all, one’s perception of one’s own borders. The *unheimlich*, which usually haunts the individual and distances humans from a reality perceived as unfathomable, progressively turns into a *heimlich* which gives solace and reunites one with an understanding of the kaleidoscopic and angular reality human beings move in, whether that reality is harsh or gentle, interior or exterior.

In his novels, Khair ponders the uncertainty of life and how such quandaries compel individuals to fight for survival and to subvert the current given order which does not completely satisfy human needs, if at all. This human fight is carried out against an order which ensures an unequal difference. Thus the situation brings about a constant force which presses against being reduced to that imposed difference. What remains behind it, if one dares to investigate such troubled waters, is the utter sameness, the radical (in the etymological sense of the word) similarity that the imposed order leads one to easily forget. When the whole apparatus fostering such diversity finally reveals its screws, gear wheels and various other mechanisms, then its validity and its unquestionable means and purposes are called into question. It is at that point that individuals can experience the communion within themselves with those hidden aspects usually denied.

The succession of events, of still images, of silences and jubilation in his novels are perfectly weaved together by Khair, who constantly surprises his readers with unexpected tones, modes, situations, just as life itself continually disrupts one’s feelings and often self-complacent stream of consciousness. Therefore, Khair portrays and subtly suggests some of the myriad possibilities that one’s inner being is capable of grasping and one’s intellect of constructing discursively. What is fascinating about Khair’s writing is that he chisels the language with the perfection of an attentive sculptor in order to make the whole literary experience support the representation of the chaotic and multifarious reality.

Gillian Dooley affirms that “Khair is a writer who makes demands on his readers” (Dooley 2013, 94), and so he is. He provides his readers with a glimpse of reality which forces them to abandon the inherited,

convenient discourses and to find a way, an uneasy read, which does not allow them to comfortably enjoy a nice piece of literary art in which readers are mere spectators. Instead, it demands, it exacts from his readers a radical suspension of their inner talks and an active engagement with the story, the characters' natures and motivations, in order to discover how the discourses which operate in his works also do so in his readers' lives. What Khair does not say reveals itself also. There is no need to mention certain topics or issues openly, since what goes unsaid unveils as much as what is dealt with and solidly defines what is stated. This is the case with the silence left in Mrs Prasad's flat, which allows contemplating the sounds and the lives around as measured against the death of the old woman. The difficulty does not lie in the language itself but in the alternation between information and gaps, which is precisely what Mangal Singh, the driver of the bus in *The Bus Stopped*, marveled at, specifically when a writer decides to do away with a whole situation just in one line or when, contrariwise, decides to deeply elaborate on it for pages and pages.

This can irremediably expose one's whole being to an *angst*, an uneasiness that emerges from hinting that there are other possibilities one had not previously contemplated and which one had not believed there could exist. Khair subverts his readers' conscience by making the crevices explicit, the holes that demonstrate that these discourses by which one could make a comfortable living are far from perfect, far from fair and far from real. He brings back the feeling that it is possible to intuit, fuzzy and blurred on the distant horizon, that one has mistaken the whole point by blaming the unknown Other instead of trying to work out an integration of difference, of the Other into one's own inner difference. The professor at Aarhus achieves this by opening one's doors to the situation, to the feared unknown Other, which is, in the end, nothing but an extension of the Self.

The new focus thus reaches further realms of one's received and inherited human condition, historical positioning and cultural tradition. Khair does not openly blame any party, but leaves his literary constructs oddly balanced so that readers are left to ponder and make sense of this unconventional textual architecture. The structure of his colossal constructions is soundly informed by historical facts, utter reality and human nature. Indeed, his exploration ultimately exposes the contradictory and rich human nature, haunted by its fears, somber desires and entertained by its many possibilities and prosperities.

Khair's strength lies in the fact that unlike other postcolonial authors, he does not exoticize the Orientals, but instead provides an alternative to his readers to think over the very idea of humanity and the world in which they live. All his works—academic or non-academic—legitimize this

statement. He is a socially responsible writer who writes not to entertain but to provoke thought and thus augment moral and ethical values in society. His writings are often engaged with discourses which tend to promote the idea of humanity in this increasingly globalized world. In so doing, he emerges as a liberalist and, to be more accurate, a humanist, and for this very reason he always refuses to bracket his works under the rubrics of colonialism/postcolonialism studies.

However, knowledge is impossible to attain in its entirety. Khair, well aware of this, exhibits nuanced portrayals of the whole unfathomable picture. This entails that not all questions can be answered and that humans must learn to handle it healthily. The conundrum that Khair presents his readers with in each novel is there for them to discern the nature of reality and, above all, of one's own perception of it and of oneself. Reading and writing thus become two sides of human nature. Stories coexist, each told from a different angle and, among them, readers have to find how to solve the puzzle, how to fill the gaps. Once readers have done so, then can they attempt to produce their own story, the same as the young Hindu scholar attempts at the end of *Filming: A Love Story*. Khair's writings cannot be described as having happy or unhappy endings. It would probably be more appropriate to state that his endings combine both, as his are usually tragicomedies which leave readers with a bittersweet taste in their reading palates. Khair thus never works out a black or white situation or denouement, since reality does not operate the way in which human consciousness does. Mental schemes must be broken once and again as reality does not yield itself to human calculus.

Journeys are always present in his novels, whether real or figured, as these are so good a metaphor for human impulse towards survival and happiness. Movement is inherent in the human condition, starting from one's never-stopping mind which incessantly carries the individual from one thought to the other, from one experience to the next, from one Other to the next until one's heart stops and blood ceases to circulate through its channels. Khair affirms:

mobility is a condition of human existence. The movements of our limbs, eyes, and lips, the movement of peoples, the movement of ideas, stories, art, craft, science. I don't even think this is a matter of "modernity" . . . The thing is that as human beings we need to be able to see not just our own horizons, but (as a German philosopher puts it) also learn to see other people's horizons to the extent possible. And if you move, well, then your horizon changes a bit too. (Doubinsky 2012, n. pag)

Khair's characters are what they are due in part to their place. The same may be said about Khair himself, who is left out by the publishing market because he happens not to live in a city like London or New York City, but in Denmark.

Khair constantly plays with transcriptions and/or translations from one language to the other and makes a very witty use of fragments, pieces and small linguistic tokens. A great degree of interpretation is always necessary, as that is an integral part of the way humans know and deal with reality. Khair is acutely aware of the malleability of language and of how it connects reality with one's understanding of it, of how every language has strong and weak words according to the speaker's experience, of how those people who speak various languages are aware of this richness and are able to enjoy its twists and turns, and also of how some languages, privileged over others, also favor discrimination. The example of Mangal Singh as a failed novelist is particularly telling. He is only able to see in still images and is unable to connect them in a way that is understandable.

The well-knit architecture of his novels ensures the work of the critic, who is, after all, an expert reader who attempts to help other readers try to explain how this engine is composed and by which means it works flawlessly and is completely self-sufficient. These perfect machineries take readers from the present to the past and from one place to another. Through this incessant movement readers are shown the still landscape within themselves. Khair mirrors how different characters react towards life enigmas and actually provides a portrait of human nature. Despite the linguistic, temporal, cultural, geographical, and intellectual distance, readers are able to witness and assess each of the characters' positioning and are therefore forced to abandon their own identitarian observation tower or, at least, to reckon that their own is only one more, never above, the ones portrayed in the story.

In fact, Khair surveys the boundaries of genres to fruitful limits. His novels cannot easily be described as traditional narratives, but as special concoctions intelligently probing the boundaries defining genres. For instance, the Chottu-Mrs Prasad story in *The Bus Stopped* strongly reminds of picaresque narratives, or Amir Ali's story in *The Thing about Thugs*, with is brilliantly entangled in the novel with the mystery-like narrative of the murders, and the Victorian ingredients.

Despite all these literary merits that Khair possesses, his visibility and recognition as a writer is yet to be acknowledged in academia. But this has been a sadistic feature of Indian Writing in English which focuses more on the positionality of the author rather than the quality of the work. The

global literary market is located in the West; therefore writers need to pander to the tastes of global publishing agents and markets. And this is exactly the kind of practice which Khair has always refused to accept, or even legitimize. Dwivedi argues:

It is the very ambiguity of globalization that has made literature a commodity rather than simply an art; it increases the visibility of writers who are settled in or writing from the centre or metropolitans, while at the same time subdues into darkness lesser privileged writers who write from the margins.. (Dwivedi 2013, 13)

Lisa Lau makes a sharp argument on this issue in her article titled “Re-Orientalism in contemporary Indian Writing in English” wherein she contends that

Western publishers continue to be in the privileged position to commission, select and reward only particular genres, with particular narratives and angles, usually those which they deem are easily recognizable—and therefore easily marketed and sold—to a global English-reading audience. (Lau 2011, 33)

And since Khair doesn’t accept or follow these established trends of the publishing world, it has taken a long time for his visibility in academia.

With this ethical approach in mind to give recognition to valuable literature, rather than select and privilege ones, the editors of the present volume have provided a platform for vibrant discussion on Khair’s writings. It approaches Khair’s art (both his theoretical positions as well as his novels) from diverse angles. Scholars engage from varying critical viewpoints with Khair’s academic writings in a fruitful dialogue, analyze his social, political and religious concerns and elucidate his characteristics as a novelist, deepening in his literary powers. The volume, thus conceived, provides an encompassing prospect on Khair’s academic views and novels, highly committed to recent dilemmas characterizing worldwide issues of the 21st century. The reader will find a uniform outlook on Khair’s multifaceted work. Additionally, this volume is highly enriched by the presence of a hitherto unpublished play by Khair, entitled *The One Percent Agency: A Comedy in Three Acts*.

Tabish Khair: Critical Perspectives, structured in three main sections, firstly covers an analysis of Khair’s theoretical elaborations which deal with the act of reading *per se* and the applicability of Khair’s reading of subaltern theory to British novels set in East-Central Europe respectively. William Clay Kinchen Smith, in his essay entitled “Gaps, Silences,

Noises: How Tabish Khair Uses Literature to Change the World” scrutinizes Khair’s literary theory in connection to Jacques Derrida’s influential conception of literature, in order to investigate the degree to which both authors coincide in their definition of the nature of literature. The scholar skillfully illustrates his arguments by making use of Khair’s academic and fictional works. Smith concludes that Khair seeks to provide fundamental reconsiderations of the limits of literature. Ágnes Harasztoš centers her study in contemporary British fiction with an interest in the area known as East-Central Europe after 1989, as first theorized by Andrew Hammond. Harasztoš, from an informed critical standpoint, examines issues of discursive alienation in a set of novels by making use of Khair’s ideas about Indian novels developed in *Babu Fictions*. This essay, entitled “Can the East-Central European Speak? Tabish Khair’s Theory of Discursive Alienation in British Novels about Post-Wall East-Central Europe” identifies revealing examples of subalternity in such novels which ignore East-Central Europe’s own discourses about itself while imposing alienated British discourses.

The second part of the volume consists of ten essays which read Khair’s novels through the maneuverings of literary criticism, most of them from a postcolonial approach. These chapters are organized by the publication date of the novel studied in each case. However, only those mature novels have been tackled in the volume, that is to say, *An Angel in Pyjamas* has not been covered. Scholars have examined varied aspects of Khair’s novels in depth. A.N. Dwivedi and Adalinda Gasparini have focused on *The Bus Stopped*. In “Temporal and Spatial Consciousness in Tabish Khair’s *The Bus Stopped*”, Dwivedi thoroughly describes very insightful instances in the novel in which Khair’s special consciousness about time and space becomes evident. These enriching examples uphold the thesis that Khair’s notion of time is guided by the age stages in an individual as well as by the essential force and immediacy of the present. Adalinda Gasparini’s essay, in turn, develops her ideas with an exquisite psychological method. “Bhoolbhoolaiya, a Moving Labyrinth. *The Bus Stopped* by Tabish Khair” displays very interesting musings on Khair’s literary proposal, far from downtrodden discourses of colonizers and colonized and in line with inviting the reader to bond with universal human questions. The scholar believes that attentive readers can bring to light a transformation of their inner Self as it emerges from their interior labyrinths since Khair’s novels confront his readers with true human conundrums.

Amardeep Singh, Barnita Bagchi and Farah Ishtiyaque each have investigated idiosyncratic aspects in *Filming: A Love Story*. These scholars

unequivocally affirm that one of Khair's most nourishing considerations is related to his expert examination of the very powerful nature of the act of telling stories. Amardeep Singh's "'The Easier Death': Saadat Hasan Manto and the Ghost of Partition in Tabish Khair's *Filming*" looks at the interesting figure of Manto—short story writer, radio and TV scriptwriter, journalist, and actor—both from a historical perspective and a fictional fabrication in Khair's novel by exploring several interconnected layers of meaning. Singh describes Khair's ability to reflect on Partition through the character and to throw light on issues like survival in the traumatic separation not only as physical existence, but also as literary, as long as Manto's literary potential continues to be exerted. Barnita Bagchi's "'The Ironies of Bollywood': Layered Fictions and Histories of Bombay Films in *Filming* and *Cinema City*" accounts for Khair's *Filming* as a narrative which shows an unexpected and little known facet of the beginnings of Indian cinema, based, on one hand, on innovative political, gender and social stances advocating for fading away class, gender, caste and religious boundaries and, on the other, on the counter-reaction of fundamentalism. Bagchi subtly describes Khair's ability to portray his characters, who are able to face the traumatic situation in creative ways and to re-invent themselves, somehow demonstrating that other options are possible. Farah Ishtiyaque also points out Khair's distinct narration of Partition in the essay "'Each stone is a memory. Each memory is a stone': Narrating Partition Differently in Tabish Khair's *Filming*". Ishtiyaque believes that Khair narrates Partition by replacing the lost tesserae in the mosaic of Partition with his elaboration of little explored concerns about reality with cinematic techniques, among others.

Manali Jain and Rahul Chaturvedi each undertake complementary readings of *The Thing about Thugs*. Manali Jain's essay, entitled "Neo-Victorianism: A Reading of Tabish Khair's *The Thing about Thugs*" puts the emphasis in the fertile dialogue established in the novel between the Victorian era and contemporary times and how the past is revised from the present. Jain elaborates on neo-Victorian fiction multifaceted aspects, such as echoing Victorian writers and their works, the portrayal of the city of London and its people, or the critical consideration of Phrenology, among others. Likewise, Rahul Chaturvedi looks into the ways in which Khair uses Amir Ali, the main character in the novel, as an Indian Caliban who turns the supposed order of the Western civilization upside-down by narrating the story of Thuggees. Chaturvedi's "'Thus Spoke Caliban: The Making and Unmaking of Historical Beast in Tabish Khair's *The Thing about Thugs*" reveals how Khair suggests that imperialism historically

constructed Thuggee as well as pseudo-scientific dogmas which could intellectually justify racism, and therefore oppression.

How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position has been tackled by Vivek Bharti and Rana Randeep, Chun Fu, and Umme Al-wazedi respectively. Vivek Bharti and Rana Randeep, in “Negotiating the Issues of Survival and Identity in Cross-Cultural Context through Assertion of Difference: A Post-Colonial Reading of Tabish Khair’s *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position*”, delve into Khair’s examination of the complicated processes of survival and identity that immigrants undergo in the West, especially at a time in which Middle East migrants are generally distrusted as Islamic terrorists. Chun Fu focuses on the crevices which separate reality and appearance, that is to say, one’s identity and the perception Others impose on one’s identity. His study, entitled “Satiricity, Secularity, and (Dis)Order in *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position*”, draws attention to Khair’s opening of new possibilities for the three characters in the novel. This section is closed by Umme Al-wazedi’s essay, in which the scholar jointly discusses the issue of “homegrown terror” in the works of Hanif Kureishi’s “My Son the Fanatic”, Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, and Khair’s *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position*. Al-wazedi’s “‘Under Western Eyes’: The Face of Homegrown Terror in Three Texts” argues that these narratives probe the very nature of homegrown terror, weigh its origin and its effects, as well as propose to ponder on the phenomenon from a multifarious stance.

Finally, the third part of the volume perfectly combines with the preceding material, adding to the academic tone one unpublished play authored by Tabish Khair. *The One Percent Agency: A Comedy in Three Acts*, interrogates a tourism agency specializing in bringing “Bollywood”-style Indian weddings to foreign tourists. In the process, it becomes a satirical commentary of the packaging of international tourism as well as the ability of common Indians to adapt and thrive. It depicts the “metropolitan” India of the new millennium and inter-community relations in subtle and powerful ways.

With this book, the editors intend to call attention to the unquestionable literary value of Khair’s production. More often than not, the inextricable machinery of publishing industries does not consider talent as one of the requisites for its markets, yet the work of scholars in such cases can contribute to cease or to restrain such tendency by focusing on those valuable literary pearls hidden in the sand. Those attempts diverge in two complementary synergies: first, by recognizing the author’s literary craft and divulging it to the general public as well as to other colleagues;

second, by making the publishing industry give room for those exquisite artistic contributions previously unacknowledged.

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PART I.

**LOOKING INTO TABISH KHAIR'S
THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES**

CHAPTER ONE

GAPS, SILENCES, NOISES: HOW TABISH KHAIR USES LITERATURE TO CHANGE THE WORLD

WILLIAM CLAY KINCHEN SMITH

When Tabish Khair defines “gaps, silences, and noises” in *Reading Literature Today* as “the most literary of literary devices” (2010, 20), he articulates the central concept of his literary theory and one of the many points of similarity between his theory and Jacques Derrida’s.¹ For example, both promote literature’s potential and obligation to radically revise self and society. In that sense, both theories agree on the *what* and *why* of literature. However, such comparison also reveals that they differ on *how* literature should do so. Ultimately, this difference informs how Khair seeks to maximize literature’s potential by using popular modalities instead of confining it to philosophical modalities.

The similarities in their literary theories are readily apparent when their definitions of literature are set side by side. Khair’s definition is relatively specific:

Literature is always that which, consciously or not, presses against the limits of language, given its twin-allegiance to that which exists outside language. It is this that distinguishes a literary use of language from ordinary or scientific use. And it is this that underlines the relevance of literature for human existence. . . . Literature, in those terms, is that which perforce uses the language of the Same to register and narrate, to the extent possible, the “order of the Other”. (2010, 74)

Characteristically Derrida’s definition is intentionally vague:

Experience of Being, nothing less, nothing more, on the edge of metaphysics, literature perhaps stands on the edge of everything, almost beyond everything, including itself. It’s the most interesting thing in the world, maybe more interesting than the world, and this is why, if it has no

definition, what is heralded and refused under the name of literature cannot be identified with any other discourse. It will never be scientific, philosophical, conversational. (1992d, 47)

As this comparison shows, both definitions privilege literature—not the conventional aesthetic, but a unique transformative potential—over scientific and everyday language. Specifically both agree that *holes* in *wholes* function to achieve revision. Moreover, both emphasize the positive benefits of literature’s ability to (re)articulate Otherness as an ethical requirement and an achievable goal: literature can and should engage in dialogue with Otherness. In this sense, they agree on *what* literature is.

While they agree on the definition of literature, Khair and Derrida communicate it differently. This difference informs how Khair and Derrida differ on *how* literature should function. Given his longer and more celebrated tenure as theorist and critic, Derrida’s strategy is better known than Khair’s, and so requires less explication. However, his focus on literature warrants a brief summary at this point, especially given his lack of a formal literary theory—a point which is “particularly ironic” for theorists like Jonathan Culler (2005, 870).

As the father of deconstruction, Derrida is (in)famous for his dense theory and often equally dense stylistics. Throughout his work, Derrida employs the double gesture—combinations of “emancipation, revolt, [and] irony” with “scrupulous fidelity” to those texts and textualities from which his gestures seek freedom. His comment on the double gesture reveals its centrality to his work: “I hope this mingling of respect and disrespect in the academic heritage and tradition in general is legible in everything I do” (2001, 43). For Derrida, then, literature (and other texts) should engage textuality through metatextual devices—stylistics that rely on denser word play to underscore their textuality as part of his larger agenda to “reinvent invention” (1989, 60). In this way, Derrida creates literature to initiate change, but his creation is limited to linguistic free play as rearticulated in his philosophical works.

However, Derrida also uses others’ literature to support his agenda. Sometimes he does so extensively when he centers an entire book around literary works—e.g. he uses Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* as the basis for his theory of *hauntology* in *Spectres of Marx* and he combines Hegel and Genet in *Glas* into a two-column book to emphasize the textuality of texts. More often, he promotes literature narrowly, as when he defines his concept of literature’s “singularity” by referencing Blanchot, Bowen, Bronte, Kafka, and Poe. Throughout his uses of literature, Derrida emphasizes how such texts “re-mark” themselves as “literature” through

their reflexive gestures and thereby define themselves as acts of “participation without belonging”, a term which emphasizes the hybridity of those texts, neither in nor out of their generic identities (1992a, 227). Moreover, he argues, such gestures *re-mark* these texts as always already *before* the Law (simultaneously inside and outside of the genre), to use his terminology.

As these summaries indicate, Derrida illustrates his theory with literature in his academic work. Therein lies the primary difference between his and Khair’s theories of literature. Instead of confining literature to an illustrative function or the basis for linguistic word play in theoretical work, Khair combines theory and practice in his academic and nonacademic work. This multipronged approach enables readers to realize their relationships with narrativity.

To better understand his theory, Khair’s definition of literature bears repeating in full:

Narrative gaps of any sort that depend on the reader’s blindness to one side of this relationship [“fiction is not the same as facts and a novel is not sociology or history or autobiography” though they share “an intricate relationship between facts and fiction” (2010, 23)]—say, facts or history—are an insult to both the art of the writer and the skill of the reader. Moreover, . . . they are a waste of the most literary of literary devices: gaps, silences, noises. It is not in what literature says that it becomes literature but in what it tries to say, fails to say and says between the lines or in its gaps. Literature is language that challenges the limits of language. (2010, 23)

While Khair’s concept parallels several of Derrida’s main concepts (e.g. *aporia*, *abyss*, remarkability, iterability, graphemes), it differs from those concepts in the ways in which Khair uses them to create extended narrative spaces for readers and characters, most particularly through his historical fiction, in which Sameness and Otherness can coexist.

To realize such goals, Khair engages narrativity at all levels. One way he does so is by using typographical conventions like italicization and bolding to destabilize their authority in his texts (and by extension all texts). For example, he initially uses those conventions in his novel *Filming* to distinguish certain characters’ dialogue, then transfers that convention to another characters’ dialogue: Khair bolds Batin’s dialogue, then toward the novel’s end stops and begins bolding the narrator’s dialogue. In doing so, Khair elides their distinct identities and problematizes those conventions (and their attendant ideologies of

property, propriety, and identity) and with them the narrativity that they promote.²

Similarly, Khair redefines the traditional forms of novels by using gaps, silences, and noises to emphasize their narrativity. *Filming*, a novel ostensibly about Bombay cinema, employs this technique: first Khair invokes a conventional and thematic structure by titling the novel's chapters as sequential reels of film (e.g. "Reel I", "Reel II"), then upsets that formality by interjecting sub-chapters bearing titles derived from films and specific dates ("The Phantom Bird" and "The Night of 16th January, 1955"). He even structures the novel to have a chapter entitled "Intermission", which he also interrupts with other narratives. Through such techniques, Khair highlights the determinism of narrativity and proposes an alternative in which multiple narratives coexist within the same space. As these exchanges show, the novel becomes a site of disruptive potential for *all* involved.

Khair amplifies this strategy when he designs *The Thing about Thugs*. First he orchestrates this novel to emphasize its construction by dividing it into four formal sections: "Acknowledgement", "Time Past: Text", "Time Present: Context", and "Time Future: Conjecture". Through the last three sections' titles, he disrupts conventional narrative teleology: instead of having the narrative move toward *closure*, he has it move toward *conjecture*—thereby destabilizing the novel's teleology and encouraging readers to engage with the narrative's (de)constructedness. Through such devices, Khair shows how his literary theory can empower readers to confront the reductivism of conventional narrativity, and thereby begin to change the world (2010, 20).

While such strategies are effective, Khair demonstrates how they can achieve their greatest result when they occur inside the body of a novel where he creates complex structures of intersecting narratives and disruptive gestures. To this mix Khair deploys perhaps the most effective element of his strategy using literature for change, the unreliable narrator. Just as he used conventional organization and typography as unsettling elements above, he uses this standard character type to destabilize this novel and narrativity itself.³

Throughout *The Thing about Thugs* Khair demonstrates the fullest range of his literary theory and practice. In other words, this novel enables readers to see *how* and *why* Khair uses literature to change the world. Khair begins this strategy on the novel's first pages by intentionally not defining the narrator as a character or as himself in the "Acknowledgement" section—a technique that he continues throughout this novel and in his nonacademic work. By obscuring the narrator's identity, the novel's authority is now in

question, and with it the readers' desire for the determinacy that a narrator's stable identity would impart.⁴ Moreover, Khair problematizes his own narrative authority in the process, thereby enabling his readers to actively engage with and in the novel's structure so that they can realize the potential of literature.

Khair initiates this strategy at the beginning of this novel by having the narrator reveal that he is an active, constitutive element in the narrative's creation. As the following quote elaborates, the narrator "had to fill many gaps" in the notes that ostensibly form the basis for this novel:

The notes, of course, were not sufficient. Notes never are. I had to fill many gaps in them. I also had to fill the gaps between the notes—with voices that, surprisingly, I found to hand. You might ask, as you may also ask about the provenance of the notes, are these voices authentic?

How can I answer that question? Neither I nor anyone else has heard the voice of England or India in the 1830s. To me, these voices are as authentic as the voices of other characters in books about other places, say, about midnight India in the light of English. Like the authors of those other characters, I write from between texts and spaces, even though I am located in the space of their narration and they in mine. Our mutual commerce runs in opposite directions—and hence, perhaps, your doubts about my authenticity. I accept your doubts with a doubtful smile. And I answer: whether authentic or not, these voices are true. For, in a very basic sense, any story worth retelling is a true story.

It is the ghost of a true story that I will tell in these once white pages. (2012b, 4)

The narrator's insistence on the *truth* stresses the indeterminacy of his authority over and in the story that he relates. Significantly the narrator's last line points out that he is telling an ephemeral iteration of an original story. Moreover Khair stresses how the apparent stability of black ink on white paper is illusory because it is insubstantial, a ghost. This gesture becomes a virtual impossibility for those reading this novel through e-sources.

Khair continues to use such concerted strategies to problematize narrativity throughout this novel. In one of his most significant gestures, Khair makes Amir Ali constantly engage how and why he is narrated, as when he makes Amir express his desire "to leave an account of myself in words other than the ones" used to define him or when he makes Amir engage the larger issues of being narrated by asking "are we then nothing but the playthings of language? When do we tell stories, and when do stories tell us?" (2012b, 26; 2012b, 178). Similarly Khair shows other characters in the novel (e.g. Gunga and the other lascars, Qui Hy) directly

questioning such determinism. Through such a constant focus, Khair sensitizes readers to the ways in which narrativity functions relative to identity and how those narrated can engage with and counter such external narrativization; moreover, he demonstrates how characters (and by extension individuals outside the novel) can coexist in spaces that enable exchange between Sameness and Otherness.

Through these means, this novel reveals Khair's literary theory in action. In an interview with Linda Wertheimer on this novel, Khair explains why he uses that technique:

There were a number of reasons why I wanted narrators not to just tell the story but in some ways sometimes take the story further, sometimes actually contradict some of what has been told, and some time bounce off into one of their related areas. And I wanted to use that technique. I wanted to use different narrative voices to open up these gaps and enable the readers to explore with their own imagination what might or might not have happened. (Wertheimer 2012, n. pag.)

His goal throughout his other works is to create readers who are “diggers” (the term that he has borrowed from Seamus Heaney), actively engaged with the textuality within and through those texts. Khair explains:

I use “digging” to suggest an ongoing act of reading that is not solely or primarily focused on the legible, consensual and linear surface of the text. This does not, *by any means*, imply just an act of postcolonial or feminist “fault-finding”, as is sometimes claimed by antagonistic critics, or an academic drive to ignore the “aesthetic pleasure” of reading. (2011, n. pag.)

Through such distinctions, Khair defines two types of readers and their responses to literature: “a non-reader, as a passive receptor, as a simple celebrator of the text, not as someone who interprets, guesses and digs” (2010, 19). Moreover, he seeks to enable readers to become active agents within the narrativity of his work and by extension all narrativization so that they can change themselves and the world.

Khair implements similar strategies in the body of *The Thing about Thugs*. He continues to problematize the novel's genesis when he moves from the “Acknowledgement” section (missing the conventional *s* on its end) to the “Time Past: Text” chapter. There he includes only a brief unacknowledged quote. This quote is taken from the opening lines of Philip Meadow Taylor's *Confessions of a Thug* (1840), a novel to which this text alludes. He ends that quotation with the line “I have no hesitation in relating the whole . . .” (Khair 2012b, 7). Given the strong correspondence