

Tabish Khair, *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position* (Fourth Estate, 2012)

A bus trip between small towns in northern India, a Berlin-based student researching cinema history, a dispute between phrenologists in Victorian London, and three men sharing a flat in contemporary Århus, Denmark: what could be the link between these four situations? The answer is that they are all encompassed by the creative imagination of Tabish Khair in his four novels: *The Bus Stopped* (2004), *Filming* (2007), *The Thing about Thugs* (2010) and *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position*, published earlier this year. Clearly each of these novels takes a very different trajectory, but there is a common root in the Indian state of Bihar, where Khair was born. He now lives and works, like his unnamed narrator in *How to Fight Islamist Terror*, in Denmark, but the reader will realise quite soon that this is far from autobiography, and that there is considerable distance between the author and his creation.

Khair is endlessly inventive, without indulging in the 'lazy evasiveness' he complains of in many recent 'post-colonial' novels.¹ His first novel, *The Bus Stopped*, is the only successful novel I know of which has no main characters. *Filming* is a lovely, mysterious work, based on the early days of Indian cinema, pre-Bollywood. *The Thing about Thugs* shows Victorian London, so familiar from Sherlock Holmes books, from an unfamiliar and highly ironised perspective. And *How to Fight Islamist Terror* is an unreliable first-person narrative addressed to an implied reader who is presumed to know the ending, which for the first-time reader is, of course, impossible.

That fact is not immediately obvious, though. When he first claims that 'I am not writing a novel. This is an account of events that you have read about' (52), the reader will probably think he is referring to the Danish cartoons affair of 2005, or the Norway shootings in 2011. But these events come and go in the background without playing a significant role in the plot. Despite the explicit intention of the narrator to relate the events leading up to the infamous events he mentions, which we are led to expect, both by the title and by the hints of the narrator, will involve some kind of Islamist terror, the engine that drives this novel is a really a story of friendship and love, misunderstanding, betrayal and pain.

The narrator, an English literature academic at the university in Århus, in his 'first full-time position, with the carrot of tenure tied to its stick of pedagogic overwork' (3) (clearly universities are the same all over the world) is from a Pakistani Muslim family, but is an intolerant unbeliever. Together with his friend Ravi, an Indian Hindu, he moves in with another Indian, a devout Muslim named Karim, older than both of them by ten years or so. Ravi seems intrigued and impressed by Karim's religious rituals and starts to attend his regular discussion meetings, while the narrator scorns them: 'I grew up with politics beating down on me. Basically, it boils down to three points: the Quran is the final hand-autographed word of God; the West is fucking us; the Jews are fucking us via the West' (30). Ravi retorts, 'Listen to yourself, yaar. You sound like a Danish tabloid.'

Khair's genius for characterisation is demonstrated on every page. Ravi, especially, is a wonderfully vivid character, brilliant in every way, attractive, witty, and more broadminded than his friend despite his sharp tongue. He is an inveterately nosy gossip: he has within him

¹ Tabish Khair, 'The Laziness of Magical Realism,' *Hindu* 5 August 2007.

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what the narrator calls his ‘aunts’, irrepressibly curious about other people’s business. But ‘there was a kind of cynicism in Ravi that either denoted too much knowledge or too much innocence’ (26), especially in his relations with the opposite sex. Then he meets the beautiful, poised and flawless Lena, a Danish girl, and falls in love seriously for the first time. Khair, a renowned poet as well as a novelist, hits on the perfect words to convey precisely how the narrator comes to realise that something is different: ‘Ravi had never offered to introduce me to any of his girlfriends in the past and that too with such brusque tentativeness’ (66). Later, when things are not going well between the couple, the narrator is reluctant to question Ravi about it. ‘It was not just the suffering in his eyes that prevented me; it was his need to hide the suffering’ (160).

Despite these flashes of perceptiveness, the narrator has several blind spots. Like Jane Austen’s Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse, he lets his prejudices influence his judgement. The narrator of *The Thing About Thugs* is reluctantly impressed, despite post-colonial reservations, by Austen’s insight, and this novel, too, is suffused with her spirit in many ways – along with that of many of the other ‘Eng Lit’ writers the narrator teaches. I wonder if Lena does not owe something to Austen’s Jane Fairfax: the perfect, composed, accomplished young woman who turns out to be more vulnerable than she seems. Nowhere is Khair’s consummate skill more evident than in his portrait of Lena. The narrator dislikes her, and blames her for Ravi’s anguish, and this is clearest when he says, ‘Let me try and be fair to Lena. I know my vision of her is clouded by the pain that I thought I detected on Ravi’s face’ (155). But this is actually more of a comment on the narrator than on Lena: we have already, behind the narrator’s back, as it were, formed a different picture of her. She is a fragile spirit, easily hurt but hampered by her upbringing from showing her pain and, in the end, losing everything by her appearance of poise and control.

I have perhaps given the impression that *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position* is a sombre book about unhappy love and troubled minority politics. Partly it is, but it is also playful, postmodern in the best sense (we’ll forgive Khair the wry metafictional reference to a story ‘by an Indian writer – a chap called Khair’ [160]), and sublimely entertaining. Tabish Khair has won an All India Poetry prize, but hasn’t yet cracked a major fiction prize, despite being frequently shortlisted. I don’t know why this should be, since he is writing some of the most subtle, accomplished and enjoyable novels being published today.

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