

‘Every Reader is a Stranger’: The Novels of Tabish Khair.

Gillian Dooley, Flinders University

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This is the author’s manuscript.

Tabish Khair is not well known in Australia. His books are not published here, and have not been reviewed in Australian publications. Although I assume this is an accident of geography as much as anything – Khair, like his character Batin in *Filming*, lives and writes in Denmark and ‘London might have made him visible but Copenhagen was removed from all established routes of Urdu, Commonwealth or postcolonial narratibility’¹ – it is a pity that this accomplished writer has not yet managed to find a truly international readership.

Khair himself is an eclectic scholar and has written many interesting articles on aspects of literature. In an article in *The Independent*, for example, he writes, ‘It is not the language, plot and gothic elements of *Wuthering Heights* that fascinate me, but its tendency to narrate at a tangent.’ Such novels ‘said more than they seemed to because they did not say everything; communicated more of life because they did not try to explain it away. Above all, they respected the reader’s ability to read, not just to consume.’² In his two novels *The Bus Stopped* and *Filming*, he follows the lead of such great classic novels not by imitating them but by crafting the structure of his narrative very carefully, providing a variety of points of view and expecting the reader to share the characters’ intellectual journey through the landscape of the novel. Tabish Khair is a writer who makes demands on his readers.

However, though the novels are demanding they are not ‘difficult’. The prose is not heavy or overwrought with elaborate imagery, but lucid and direct, flavoured with the language and idiom of his characters. The novels require attention, but they

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also richly reward attention. There is no glib ‘magical realism’ to interfere with the coherence of the narrative, none of the ‘lazy evasiveness’ in his encounter with reality which Khair finds in many modern-day ‘post-colonial’ novels.³ He may challenge the reader to trust him, to read with mind both open and engaged, but he is careful not to cast us loose from the moorings of realism and the internal logic of the narrative.

Khair uses a rich and varied palette in these two novels. I counted nine different points of view in *The Bus Stopped*. Firstly there is the first-person account by someone who grew up in a large house in a family compound with servants who, ‘More than the sahibs, bibis and babus, ... knew the lay of the two houses’.⁴ He – although it is not made clear that this voice is male, let us assume for the purposes of this essay that it is – describes, in particular, the khansamah, or chef, Wazir Mian. This persona is the voice of the narrator who, at the end of the novel, offers an epilogue, reflecting on the events and characters of the narrative, and the nature of homes and houses, but who disclaims omniscience: ‘I am not a magician,’ he says: ‘There are things I cannot see in books’ (BS 197, 198). This character is not on the bus, but each narrative ‘locus’ contributes one passenger and in this case it is the son of Wazir Mian.

The second voice is that of Mangal Singh, the bus driver, and he stays with us throughout the action of the novel. Every second chapter (some of them extremely short) is focalised through his point of view, though in the third person. Mangal Singh is a bitter man, a failed novelist, but an observant one who ‘sees life in still small images, almost frozen’ (BS 12). These small images, brought together in a sequence, allow us to build up a picture of the events culminating in that dramatic moment when the bus stops on its journey from Gaya to the fictional town of Phansa.

Thirdly, we have another first-person narrator, a hijra or eunuch. He/she is leaving the town where she has grown up, to escape the increasing attentions of ‘new religio-political parties’ which have been making life in her gharana difficult. As she boards the bus she changes identity from Farhana, a Muslim name, to the Hindu Parvati – foreshadowing a similar shift in the later novel *Filming*. Her narrative is elegant, and rather wistful and elegiac, with a ‘happy ending’ of sorts.

The fourth narrator is another first-person voice, a man remembering the attractions of a servant, Zeenat, who had tried to seduce him in his teenage years. Interestingly this voice is not contemporary with the action of the novel: this man, Irfan, is looking back on these events from years later, and at the end of his account he recounts how he had heard that Zeenat had ‘caught a preevaat bus to Phansa’ (BS 110).

Fifthly, there is the strangely disembodied voice of a second-person narrator. This person lives alone among other families in the Kanchenjunga Apartments in Patna, and observes other lives by listening. The way this thread of the narrative is obliquely narrated builds up a threatening, sinister atmosphere. The passenger from this scenario is Chottu, the servant of an elderly woman living alone, who, with ill-advised, patronising benevolence, insists on educating him. He resents this imposition so much that he conspires in her murder and attempts to escape on the Gaya-Phansa bus.

The next situation is a third-person narrative involving a Danish businessman and his driver, Hari. Hari is supposed to be driving Rasmus from Gaya to Phansa but mischievously pretends on the way that his car has broken down so that Rasmus has to catch the bus. This is the most comical situation of the novel, with the discomfiture

of Rasmus, who is carrying a large amount of money to bribe an official in Phansa, Gillian Dooley. ‘Every Reader is a Stranger’: The Novels of Tabish Khair. In *Tabish Khair: A Critical Companion* edited by Om Prakash Dwivedi. London: Roman Books, 2013. 94-105.
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played off against Hari's dissembling and cunning in a classic master/servant scenario. The focalisation moves between the two characters, so it could be said that their respective points of view are sixth and seventh, though they are mingled in the one strand of narrative.

The eighth point of view is that of the bus conductor, Shankar, a fourth first-person narrator. He provides another perspective on Mangal Singh, the driver, whom he regards as 'rapacious, a womaniser, a drunkard' (BS 149). They have a running argument about how much to cheat their boss: Shankar is more cautious and patient, while Mangal Singh accuses him of being pious and timid. Although we do not hear the conductor's own voice until page 118, we have seen the conductor already through the eyes of the hijra, who observes his obsequious behaviour to the rich old woman sitting next to her.

The ninth and last point of view is that of a young man at Vilaspur. He does not board the bus; he is sitting idly at the bus stop and observes the scene when the bus stops, the driver and the conductor argue, then the bus moves off and stops again when it is discovered that one of the passengers is carrying a dead baby. His strand of narrative follows him back to his village, where the police come to question him not, as he expects, about the dead baby but about Chottu, who had left the bus at this stop; and thence to his sleeping that night, 'fitfully, like a bus passenger' (BS 192). It is a third-person narrative, able to give a background context to this young man who, though nineteen or twenty was not a college student but still at school, because 'Young men like him had much to take care of at home and took long to finish their school education. If they ever finished it, that is' (BS 144).

The climax of the novel, the event to which all these narrative threads have been leading, is the scene where the tribal woman is discovered to be carrying a dead

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child. Each character reveals something of themselves in their reaction to this event, whether they lecture the woman, insist on burying the child, or try to comfort her. We do not learn any of the tribal woman's 'back story': we see her only as the other passengers see her, so it is in a way rather odd that she should be at the centre of the climactic event of the novel. This emphasises the fact that Khair is not writing a standard plot-driven novel but a kaleidoscopic narrative: the elements are brought together fortuitously and temporarily before dispersing again into their separate realms. During the journey Mangal Singh observes his passengers,

when he can turn around and survey those he is driving to their different destinations, their many separate stories merging only for those few moments into one narrative of sleep and travel, a novel of travel, he thinks, and laughs.

(BS 112)

He feels himself, ironically, to be a novelist, bringing these narrative strands together for a short time while they are on the bus, but in reality the eight strands of the narrative meet only briefly at that bus stop, and interact only superficially. 'Parvati', the hijra, finds that the event 'continued to haunt me all the way to Phansa' (BS 180). The young man at the bus stop is in shock: 'He had felt like laughing for hours after the bus left. Laughing, but not from happiness or ridicule. He could not fathom the wells of this desire to laugh' (BS 179). Some of the characters hardly remember the event: Rasmus, for example, 'even forgot the dead child and remembered it only later, in Copenhagen, as an instance of the extremities of India' (BS 187). The narrator himself says he cannot tell us what happened to the tribal woman: 'There are things I cannot see in books,' he says (BS 198).

Speaking about *The Bus Stopped*, Khair says, 'I was afraid it would be read as social realism – that it was a book about poor people. ... when we think of travel, we

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don't tend to see that even in backward areas people travel between cultures, identities, cities and sexualities. That was the driving force behind the novel. This is not visible travel – not travel that has been written about. These areas are not static, not that traditional.⁵ Indeed, the interest of this novel is not in the plot, it is in the journeys these characters are making, and why they are travelling, where they have come from and where they are heading. But the concept of travel is measured against the concept of home:

Look, say those who believe that they have deep-rooted homes, stop, stop, they exclaim as we pass their counters and gardens, look, look, look, they shout, for after centuries of eradicating the homeless, the gypsies, the wandering Jew, the bums, the lumpen proletariat, after centuries of planting people like trees, they still have us, and so they raise their fingers and shout, thief murderer stowaway immigrant.

I too know the dread of pointed fingers; I too can read what those distant lips frame. (BS 199)

This poetic and passionate passage begins to sound a little like the 'social realism' Khair says he is trying to avoid. Indeed, he has also said,

I write in a material world: I am not willing to abandon an engagement with 'reality' in favour of some easy-if-clever toying around with language *qua* language or texts *qua* texts. ... I would see little point in writing just as a literary exercise.⁶

His people are not just intellectual constructs: they are grounded in reality. But neither are they merely stereotypical representatives of their class or race or gender. As Khair has written,

Fictional realism, unlike what is often implied, is not the photography of ‘reality’: it is above all a narrative that contains elements standing in a complex mutual relationship, which is internal to their existence in the world of the narrative (and in the world on which the narrative is based).⁷

The Bus Stopped shows us the complex relationships, the many threads making up each individual life, and the way they can intersect at one moment only to diverge and follow totally separate paths thereafter. The variety of points of view provides different perceptions of the other characters but the novel as a whole is like a combination of several novels: the comedy of Rasmus and Hari, the elegant fairy-tale of the hijra Parvati, the bitterly sardonic internal monologue of Mangal Singh, all combine to provide a picture of a society on the move at a particular time in a particular region. However, despite its fascinating surface and tantalising glimpse of individual lives, it does not really add up to more than the sum of its parts.

Filming does something rather different. It is more like a mystery story, in which the reader is taken on an intellectual journey along with a Berlin-based Indian student who is trying to research the life of a Muslim scriptwriter named Batin. As the novel progresses, we are able to see through layers of deception and misperception to an inkling of the truth about Batin and the events of a certain day in 1948, shortly after Indian independence and the partition.

The novel is structured in seven parts (or ‘reels’) with a brief intermission between the third and fourth part. Each of these ‘reels’ begins with a short chapter named after one of Bharatamuni’s eight dramatic ‘Sentiments’, or Rasas (as listed among the novel’s epigraphs): there is Rasa Terrible, Rasa Heroic, Rasa Erotic, Rasa Marvellous, Rasa Pathetic, Rasa Furious and Rasa Idious. Rasa Comic is absent: this

young man takes himself very seriously. The subject of these chapters is dreaming,

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and the dreams are presented in breathless, unpunctuated prose, carrying the reader forward. The dreams take place as he sleeps outdoors during a week in January 1948. We gradually come to realise who he is and why he is sleeping outside in a village far from his home city during these winter days, and other parts of the narrative allow us to realise how he has been manipulated by cynical political forces which exploit his Hindu nationalism and idealism. At first the dreams are narrated in the first person, but as soon as he wakes he becomes ‘the man with the binoculars’ (F 261) – in the third person. *Rasa Furious*, however, at the beginning of Part VI, frames his dream within a memory from later years: ‘In later years he would remember this as the last dream, a strangely prescient nightmare’ – a dream of killing Mahatma Gandhi, two days before Gandhi’s actual assassination. The last part opens with *Rasa Odious*, not a dream but a reflection from later times: ‘Hé Ram: Was that the elusive phrase of his dreams, he wondered in later years...’ (F 341). The phrase ‘Hé Ram’ (‘Oh God’), believed to be Gandhi’s last words, is inscribed on his memorial in New Delhi.

That this self-important young man, so proud of having been chosen to lead the siege of the Rajkunwar Studios in the village of Dallam, which he believes are ‘festering with Muslims, communists, traitors, immoral men and women, so that even the light from the chinks in its windows seems to him to be viscous and yellow, oozing like pus’ (F 262), is presented primarily to us as he is being buffeted by dreams – often violent, sometimes erotic – perhaps indicates his general powerlessness. He is clearly on the side of the forces which are threatening the lives of the other characters in the novel – the main characters – but we gradually realise intellectually what has been implied by this presentation: that he is as much at the mercy of forces beyond his control and comprehension as are the characters in the studio, whom we have come to sympathise and, perhaps, identify with.

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After the first of these dreams, ‘Reel I’ continues with a seemingly straightforward narrative, so traditional that it begins, ‘Once upon a time ...’ (F 7). But after a few pages this story of the arrival of the bioscope-wallah and his wife and child at a haweli outside the village of Anjangarh is interrupted by a passage in italics, enclosed in quotation marks, about Seth Dharamchand’s business interests in film and barbed wire, which seems to have little bearing on the story currently being narrated. The speaker realises this and apologises:

‘If I remember correctly, young man, Seth Dharamchand had an unofficial monopoly on all government contracts, before and after Independence. But I haven’t told you about the Seth yet, have I? I am sorry, I forgot: we are still almost two decades from Independence.’ (F 11)

In this way, what has seemed like a neutral third-person point of view is revealed to be a story told by someone, years later, to a young man. After a few more pages, there is a passage in bold italics, which is clearly an interpolation into Batin’s own narrative by the young scholar, explaining how he came to be interviewing Batin – more because of his availability than from any significance he thought him to have. This pattern continues throughout the novel, and as we come to realise toward the end, the bulk of the narrative is in fact told by Batin, and the reason he knows so much about all these people – the Chotte Thakur/Rajkunwar, Harihar/Hari Babu, Durga/Bhuvaneshwari and Saleem Lahori (a question which has puzzled the scholar to the point of exasperation) is that he and his wife were both major players in the story he is relating. Batin says to the young man, ‘stories are impossible to fence in either time or space, and I was told this story by three different people, from three different perspectives’ (F 71). Only gradually do we, and the young scholar, come to

realise that Batin is failing to declare his own place in the story, but doing so in a way
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which draws attention to the mystery: in fact, he seems to be begging the young man to find him out. His last words to the scholar are, '*If you have listened to my account, surely you will be able to fill in the blanks. If you have listened*' (F 362). This challenge from Batin to the young man is also an indirect challenge from the author to the reader: read with attention and you will understand this novel.

But Batin doesn't have a monopoly on this narrative. Apart from the young Hindu extremist with the colourful dreams, there is a woman doctor in a provincial Indian town, who recounts to the same young scholar a visit to the cinema with her parents some twenty years before, in the early 1970s. We come to realise that this is the daughter of Ashok, the son of Durga and Harihar, and the film they saw at the cinema that night, *Aakhri Raat*, was Harihar's account of the dramatic occurrences in the haweli back in 1929, the film which caused violent arguments between Hari Babu and Rajkunwar at the time of its filming, as recounted by Batin. The woman doctor recollects the discussion between her parents after seeing the film, about his adoption by the Thakur family and what he remembered of his birth parents.

Then there is an enigmatic 'Intermission' between Reels III and IV: a monologue from Saadat Hassan Manto dated 16 January 1955. Manto, the Urdu writer who left India for Lahore in 1948, died on 18 January 1955 of cirrhosis of the liver. In this monologue he addresses a nameless friend, whom we may deduce is Batin/Saleem Lahori, though this may only become clear on a second reading of the novel. Manto says:

What a story you could tell, my friend, if you decided to. But I know you have pledged not to do so. It is part of your choice of life: what you write will only be fiction. But the facts of your life, you living ghost, what about the facts of

your life that are stranger than any fiction? Will you, the writer and the
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showman in you be able to resist and take them to the grave? Or will you leave some clues behind, cryptic like those literary quotes with which you could pepper a late-night drinking round in Bombay? (F 202)

Here is a clue to this novel: Batin, without going back on his pledge not to tell his story directly, seizes the opportunity of narrating it by hints and implications to the young scholar who might just be bright enough to understand what the reader has by now worked out: after his interview with Ashok's daughter it comes to him in a dream that there was no reason to suppose that Saleem Lahori and Bhuvaneshwari could not have escaped the studio fire in which they were thought to have perished, with the two children they had adopted, and fled to Pakistan under the assumed name of Batin. The dream is a nice touch: the young man, perhaps, thinks too much, allows preconceptions to get in the way of comprehension, and only in a dream can he allow his mind to make the connections which Batin has urged him to make. The novel ends with the young man opening a blank notebook to begin writing: now that he has worked out the story, he can start writing his account of it, which is, presumably, the novel we have just read.

So we are able to piece together a story which really hangs between two dramatic events: the first in 1929, when Harihar gives Ashok up to the Thakur family in exchange for a partnership with the Chotte Thakur in a film studio, and the second in 1948, when the studio is attacked and burned by Hindu nationalists. There are several perspectives on these events, most of them oblique, 'narrated at a tangent'. Not only are there different people telling the story, with different sets of knowledge about the facts, but for some characters discovering the truth is part of the story.

Durga/Bhuvaneshwari, for example, only discovers in 1947 exactly what had gone on between Harihar and the Chotte Thakur back in 1929: 'the secret – they had not given
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away Ashok for his own good but sold him for their dreams' (F 319). Bhuvaneshwari loses touch with her son, but we hear something about his subsequent life from his daughter's interview with the young film scholar, her knowledge having been obtained by eavesdropping on a conversation between her parents when she was a child. Facts revealed in this indirect way build up a haunting and memorable narrative, more powerful than a simple chronological account told from a neutral point of view could ever be. The reader is actively engaged in constructing the story line, not just passively consuming a plot.

The points of view in *Filming* are not so clearly demarcated as those in *The Bus Stopped*. The angles of vision could be said to be four-dimensional, where those in the earlier novel are mainly three dimensional: that is, though in both novels the points of view are quite diverse geographically, in *The Bus Stopped* most (though not all) of the narrative is related from various rhetorical positions not very distant in time from the main events which took place during the bus trip, while in *Filming* the action of the novel, though centring on the events of January 1948, begins nearly twenty years earlier and takes in points of view some decades later, as the young film scholar talks to Batin in Denmark in 1988, and to the woman doctor in the fictional Indian town of Phansa (which of course also features in *The Bus Stopped*) in 1992.

Khair carefully but very subtly provides readers from other linguistic backgrounds with all the information needed to understand the many unfamiliar words he uses. For example, in *Filming* when he introduces the Chotte Thakur, a western reader assumes that Chotte is his first name. (Even though it is unusual to have the definite article preceding a given name, it is easy enough to fail to notice small, common words like 'the' when reading.) However, later there is a conversation between Ashok and the Chotte Thakur's sister-in-law Maalkini:

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Don't call us Maalkini. All children here call us Badi Ma.

Ashok knew by now that the children of her extended family called her Badi Ma but had not heard any of the children of servants calling her that and doubted that children from outside her family would dare claim the intimacy of referring to her as their 'elder mother'. He hesitated.

But I have a Ma, he replied, finally.

She smiled, patiently, perhaps even sadly.

She is your Chotti Ma. From now on we are your Badi Ma. (F116)

The alert reader can put this information together with the fact that the Chotte Thakur's elder brother is called 'Bade Thakur', and deduce that Bade/Badi are the masculine and feminine versions of a word for 'elder', while Chotte/Chotti mean 'younger'. This is never blatant: non-English words are not italicised or set apart from the narrative, or explicitly defined, but there is always some means of working out their meaning, either from the context or from information unobtrusively provided. Using these words is essential to his art: as he writes in the *Guardian*, 'my universe is not framed only or largely by English: I see the world through the windows of Hindi, Urdu, smatterings of Bhojpuri, Sanskrit, Farsi, Punjabi, Bangla.'⁸ The use of non-English words forms part of the way he has developed to 'write in English about people who never speak a word of it.' He says, 'I want the reader to be able to tell when a certain narrative is supposed to be a transcription or a translation.'⁹ The vocabulary of his characters is, in fact, an integral part of their point of view.

In his interview with Ahmed Hussain, Khair discussed the question of non-Western writers writing for audiences outside of their own culture:

A degree of interpretation is part of any narrative: we do not see the same

reality in exactly the same way. Even if you write for your own brother or
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sister, you will be presenting your own interpretation of the subject. It is true that if you write for ‘outsiders’, you might be tempted to over-interpret, over-explain. And that will affect your art, reduce the depth of your engagement with the subject matter and with languages. But even there, let us not assume that writing for the same linguistic community removes the problem to communicating to ‘strangers’. 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.¹⁰

The challenge for any writer is to engage his readers, the strangers who have strayed into his world by picking up his book, and convince them to suspend their disbelief, ignore their own concerns for a while, and accompany him on a journey of discovery. Tabish Khair has succeeded quite magnificently with these two novels, especially with *Filming*, which continues to haunt the echo chambers of the mind long after the last page has been read. The story, refracted as it is through so many points of view, takes on a mythical, enigmatic quality, and the work the reader has to do to reconstruct and interpret the facts encourages the feeling of a shared experience, more valuable than the kind of commodified ‘storytelling’ fiction he criticises, which is aimed at ‘consumers’ rather than readers:

We are increasingly told stories that can be pulled off the shelves of our age’s discursive supermarkets and do not have to be retrieved from some remote corner-shop; they are stories that encourage us not to think too much.¹¹

The delightful corner-shop that is Tabish Khair’s realm is well worth the visit, and I hope will soon provide further delicacies for us to savour.

¹ Tabish Khair, *Filming* (London: Picador, 2007) 21. Further page references to this novel will be included in parentheses within the text, prefaced by ‘F’.

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- ² Tabish Khair, 'Wuthering Heights, Emily Bronte,' *The Independent* 20 July 2007.
- ³ Tabish Khair, 'The Laziness of Magical Realism,' *The Hindu* 5 August 2007.
- ⁴ Tabish Khair, *The Bus Stopped* (London: Picador, 2004) 3. Further page references to this novel will be included in parentheses within the text, prefaced by 'BS'.
- ⁵ Saran, 'The Ride Stuff.'
- ⁶ Tabish Khair, 'Top of Form Bottom of Form: Ahmede Hussain in Conversation with Tabish Khair,' *Journal of Contemporary Literature* (1:1 January 2009) 124-5.
- ⁷ Khair, 'Laziness'.
- ⁸ Tabish Khair, 'Whose Identity Is It Anyway?: Questions About the Indian Diaspora are Irrelevant to Literature,' *The Guardian* 12 November 2005.
- ⁹ Mishi Saran, 'The Ride Stuff – Not All Journeys in Tabish Khair's Latest Novel Are Road Trips,' *South China Morning Post* 19 December 2004.
- ¹⁰ Khair, 'Top of Form', 119.
- ¹¹ Tabish Khair, "'Share"-value of stories today,' *The Hindu* 1 April 2007.