



# WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



Photo: Chirodeep Chaudhary

## Tabish Khair in Conversation with Ajay K. Chaubey

*Born in Ranchi and educated up to his MA in Gaya, Tabish Khair, PhD (Copenhagen), DPhil (Aarhus), is a Professor of English in Denmark and the author of a number of acclaimed books. Winner of the All India Poetry Prize, Khair's novels – The Bus Stopped (2004), Filming (2007) and The Thing About Thugs (2010) – have been shortlisted for awards including the Hindu Prize, Man Asian Prize, DSC Prize for South Asia. His last novel, How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position, was dubbed the 'best 9/11 novel' by the New Republic and 'unmissable' by the Times (UK). A study by Khair, The New Xenophobia, will be published by Oxford University Press in January 2016.*

*Professor Khair, while being in Denmark, spoke to me through email promptly and positively on several aspects of diaspora, narratives of migration and rationale of 'brain-drain' and the theoretical contours of the Indian diaspora in the backdrop of multiple terrorist attacks in the West.*

Ajay K Chaubey (AKC): Hello Professor Khair! Let us initiate our dialogue with your forthcoming monograph on xenophobia. Do you think that it is overtly and covertly connected with dispersion of human species across the globe? Or is there any exclusive categorisation between 'old' and 'new' xenophobia as you have mentioned in your article 'Capital and the New Xenophobia' published in *Economic and Political Weekly*?<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Tabish Khair, 'Capital and the New Xenophobia,' *Economic and Political Weekly* 21 November 2015, 44-49.

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**Tabish Khair (TK):** That paper was based on my new and forthcoming study, *The New Xenophobia*. It has become relatively easy to spot some forms of xenophobia: the fire bomb in the letter box of an immigrant, the Jew, Muslim or Hindu being chased down a street by skinheads, the persecution of religious minorities in Pakistan, the killing of people of a different 'ethnicity', even the violent imposition of another language or an alien lifestyle on any people. These are what I bracket under 'old xenophobia': forms of xenophobia that we have become aware of largely due to our knowledge of eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth century history, culminating in the holocaust. And yet there seem to be newer forms of xenophobia that do not fit this old and familiar rubric. Generally speaking, my argument is based on the realisation that, with the expansion of human consciousness, also as expressed in social organisation, power inevitably gets more abstract. The physical and material aspect never disappears totally, as all known consciousness is physically and materially embedded or constituted. However, it is also evident that in a complexly conscious society – with a variety of needs, wants and skills, which inevitably translate into extensive production and corresponding exchange or trade – the physical and material enactments of power will be mediated and justified in increasingly abstract ways. The role of money – as medium and social relation – is crucial in this historical context. As crucial is the fact that money aspires towards absolute abstraction as capital: much of capital today just exists as numbers, not even as cash. It is not the transformation into numbers that is the problem; this transformation is more of a symptom. This cumulative process remains embedded in material locations and in physical definitions of power, despite increasing abstraction, as long as money retains its character as medium and social relation. The notion of money as medium and social relation necessitates a conception of in-groups and out-groups in material terms. But as money becomes abstract capital in predominant terms – as in high capitalism – the source of fear and the shape of the stranger change. It is no longer the fear, however abstract, that an embodied sameness feels for an embodied difference. Instead the self of high capitalism increasingly sees itself and its power in such abstract terms that it fails to register the inevitable violence of any exercise in (abstract) power. The stranger of high capitalism is the other who simply offers his brutish body as distasteful evidence of the abstract relations of power that enable high capitalist lifestyles and states. To understand this, I talk of 'new' xenophobia – which is both different and related to old xenophobia, which can act on the victims of old xenophobia but also use forms of old xenophobia to justify itself. That is what I engage with in my book. Old xenophobia is monstrous, spectacular, quickly identifiable. New xenophobia, which must be seen within the context of high capitalism, is less visible, just as 'hard' cash becomes less visible when money transforms into numerical high capital.

**AKC:** Since Man's arrival on the Earth is a consequence of his dispersal from heaven, how far do you agree that man bears the seeds of Diaspora since its genesis?

**TK:** Is it so? I think the arrival of humans on earth has to do with evolutionary matters, not with heaven or hell. However, yes, you are right in thinking of 'diaspora' as essential to humans, because human beings have always moved around.

AKC: Is migration of people within their own country regarded as a category of diaspora? If 'yes', how far? And if 'no', why not?

**TK: A lot of scholars do not talk of diaspora within the nation, and that is problematic to my mind. It indicates that the notion of diaspora – like any such notion – is a particular construct. It presumes nationalism at times, and even when it does not, it obscures the movement of some people in comparison to other people. For instance, it is easy to see me as diasporic, because I am an Indian in Denmark. But what about a Telugu in Punjab? What about a Bihari in Mumbai?**

AKC: The pre-colonial diaspora was labour diaspora as classified by Robin Cohen in his *magnum opus*, *Global Diasporas* (1997).<sup>2</sup> The ancestors of Naipaul were also sent across black sea in the same pursuit. In what context do you see the migrants and their *modus operandi* in post-colonial Diaspora? How far does the *modus operandi* of postcolonial Diaspora differ from the pre-colonial Diaspora?

**TK: What is sometimes referred to as a diaspora in postcolonial terms has national or cultural overtones. By and large, the notion of labour movement has been obscured in the postmodern and postcolonial world. There is an assumption that we live in a global world, but it is often forgotten that capital moves far more freely than labour and that people with lots of capital move far more freely than people who lack capital. That is one of the problems of our world, as I argue in *The New Xenophobia*.**

AKC: What are the factors behind dynamics of Diaspora that has resulted in a progressive journey from labour and victim Diaspora to academic, economic, or technocratic Diaspora?

**TK: There was always an elite or at least middle class diaspora: for instance, kings, princes, lawyers, doctors etc. from India went to UK all through the nineteenth century. As did laskars and *ayahs* etc. I do not think there is any progressive journey. The rise and consolidation of passports etc. simply made it more difficult for people to cross-national borders from the early twentieth century onwards, and the fall of the British Empire added to it. From the 1970s onwards, after the post-war years when a devastated Europe needed cheap labour to rebuild, barriers were gradually erected to prevent the movement of working-class Third-World subjects and allow a controlled number of more educated or technocratic subjects from the Third World. What is seen as an academic or technocratic South Asian diaspora in the West today is partly a consequence of this. Moreover, this kind of diaspora gets written about much more, as all our writers (including me) and academics belong to it.**

AKC: What type of paradigm shift has been caused by political treaties, compromises, multiple socio-economic deals and military agreements in diasporic writings?

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<sup>2</sup> Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* (London & New York: Routledge, 1997).

**TK: Depends on the treaty or deal you have in mind: there are different trajectories. By and large though, from at least the 1970s onwards, there is an attempt (in the West, and elsewhere at times) to allow in only those migrants who are of economic use to the host country. Capital trumps humanity.**

AKC: During my short span in the UK, I found that Bangladeshi and Pakistani nationals were residing in disguise of Indians. Even, I found many Indian restaurants owned by them. What is the position of Indian Diaspora as compared to Pakistani and Bangladeshi Diaspora in the West after 9/11 insurgencies?

**TK: Disguise is not really the right word. South Asians share a vast cultural complex: we are all 'disguised' as one another, if you scratch deep enough. But India is the signifier that sells more in the West: in short, while all South Asians look alike to the average European or American, it is easier to sell the same cuisine or dress as 'Indian' rather than as 'Pakistani' or 'Bangladeshi.' The War against Terror has added to this too. Currently, we are the 'good' South Asians.**

AKC: Younger authors are also writing a lot about India like Rushdie and Naipaul but unlike them, they are slightly positive about India. How are they different from the other younger diasporic writers in the perspectives of India?

**TK: I do not know which writers you have in mind, and in what way you mean that Rushdie or Naipaul were less positive about India than these young writers. They are such complex writers: I would hate to generalise about them. Naipaul was very negative about almost all the postcolonial world, not least Black Caribbean cultures, but he was not that negative about Brahmanism-touched India. Actually, one can argue that it is the only post-colonial cultural heritage that Naipaul does not show a massive disdain for. Rushdie, one can argue, has never been totally negative about India: he sees India as a very fertile source of multiculturalism. He celebrates that aspect of India. He is critical of some tendencies in India, but he is not negative about India as such. And can one be negative or positive about 'India': what India? whose India? India contains so much; it is a universe. A good writer's job is to relate to India the best she can, not to be negative or positive about it. That is the job of politicians and bureaucrats.**

AKC: There are many authors like Arundhati Roy, Aravind Adiga, and Jeet Thayil who live in India but they have pen-pictured the 'exotic tales' of the dark side of India. What is your assessment of this type of writing? (a) Politics for prize-winning; (b) desire to seize popularity by being negative about the nation; OR (c) because of being more realistic?

**TK: I never comment on other living fellow-writers in a direct manner on such issues, unless the person is a huge monument (like Rushdie and Naipaul) and can brush off our comments: just more birdlime on columns of stone. One can tilt at monuments (and windmills), but ordinary people – even bad or excellent writers – are best allowed to live and write the way they want.**

AKC: There are many South Asian authors who prefer to settle down in the 'other' world rather than in the First world viz. Uma Parameswaran, Vassanji, Mistry, Ondaatje and Shyam Selvadurai in Canada; Suneeta Peres da Costa, Yasmine Gooneratne, Chandani Lokugé and Samantha Sirimanne Hyde in Australia; Amulya Malladi and Tabish Khair in Denmark; Sujata Bhat in Germany; Manjushree Thapa and Taslima Nasrin in India and Shehan Karunatilaka in Singapore. Do you think that the First Worlds – the UK, the US and France, etc. are not safer in the backdrop of 9/11 attacks in the US, 7/7 in the UK and, of late, *Charlie Hebdo* and *Betacian Theater* attacks in France? Please comment.

**TK: I did not choose to settle in Denmark; a certain personal trajectory brought me here and personal reasons keep me here. Choice would be a hard word; I did not have too many choices. Moreover, I cannot talk about the other authors: all have different trajectories; some were born in the diaspora, some moved for jobs, some for personal reasons. As for Europe in the light of the terror attacks, I must say I have often criticised Europe and its politics, but there is an admirable aspect to Europe: for every xenophobic or narrow-minded European, there is at least one open-minded, generous European, who cares about matters like democracy and human rights. That Europe has a high percentage of human decency. That Europe knows how to converse, not just argue. I continue to put my faith in such Europeans.**

AKC: Then, what impelled you to leave India? Moreover, how can your novel, *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position* (2012), be seminal in the backdrop of such attacks?

**TK: I had a Danish girlfriend, whom I married. That was the only reason I moved to Denmark. (Otherwise, I would have moved from journalism to academia, but in India or some other Anglophone country – not Denmark.) Initially it was meant to be for 4-5 years, but then things, events – as always happens – took over. I stay on in Denmark now because I have children here, whom I share with my ex-wife and her family. That, to be honest, is the only good reason for me to stay on here: Denmark has no enabling space for a writer of my kind, and even Danish universities use me as an under-valued and over-worked academic, not as a writer. But I am also happy to be here at one other level – to have unwittingly avoided the usual Anglophone circuits of migration. As for my novels, who knows what they might achieve? I think a creative writer should write as well as he can, and then let other people decide whether his work is relevant or not, preferably ten years after his death.**

AKC: Do you think that people are more xenophobic in today's cultural clashes than in earlier polyphonic and multicultural spaces/times? On the other hand, is it 'Clash of Civilizations'?<sup>3</sup>

**TK: No, to return to my book, *The New Xenophobia*, what I argue is also this: that xenophobia is not a matter of emotion or reason; it is a matter of structures of power. People are just as xenophobic as the structures of power around them allow space for. I argue that this is seldom faced up to, and xenophobia is usually treated as a subjective or personal matter. It isn't. Re clashes of civilisations and such glib matters, well, if you define your civilisations in**

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3 Samuel P. Huntington, 'Clash of Civilizations?' *Foreign Affairs* 72.3 (Summer 1993) 22-49.

**certain ways, you can always talk of such clashes. But this usually means a selective or at least slanted reading of your own 'civilisation' and other 'civilisations.' It also often means ignoring how all civilisations have seeped into one another throughout history.**

AKC: What role does Bollywood play in gaining prevalence in abroad and re-uniting the Indian diaspora at the global forum? Do you think that Indian cinema is more accepted in the West than any other film industry of neighbouring countries of India?

**TK: Bollywood is a catch phrase. It leaves out not just the parallel cinema but also the middle cinema of Hrishikesh Mukherjee *et al.* More films are made in Telugu and Tamil than in Hindi, and it is doubtful 'Bollywood' does justice to that either. Also, bear in mind, 'Bollywood' is sustained by the diaspora – Indian, but also Asian and African. These people (Palestinians, Nigerians, even Russians) were watching Indian cinema long before the 'West' discovered 'Bollywood.' It is largely these people – and their descendants – in the West who still watch Bollywood films, not the average American from Kentucky or the average Dane from Aarhus.**

AKC: When you are on tour to abroad or settled there for a long time, what do you think of your homeland? What do you feel about the contours of home and 'not home' suggested by Rushdie in his *tour de force, Imaginary Homelands* (1991)?<sup>4</sup>

**TK: Thinking is not what one really does about the place where one spent the first 25 years of one's life, as I did in Gaya. That experience is part of what one is: it forms the basis of everything that one becomes later on, even when it differs from the beginning. For me my imaginary homeland is not Gaya, which remains the town I visit at least once every year and where I spent the first 25 years of my life; for me, my imaginary homeland is, say, the poetry of Mirza Ghalib. I have other such imaginary homelands too.**

AKC: 'Useless fool is now transcended into powerful tool.' How far this statement is justified in relation to labour/victim diaspora and Brain Drain?

**TK: I think, at least in India, the main problem of 'brain drain' is this: we put very little money into school education and put a lot of money in elite institutions, like IITs and AIIMS. So, in effect, we subsidise the education of our professional middle classes – who sometimes go abroad – and do almost nothing for the education of the poor. Even the schools and colleges that exist in the hinterland are often little better than jokes. A student in Gaya, where I come from, largely has to educate himself. The condition in villages is worse. If Indian politicians are worried about brain drain, they should put much more money into creating a good system of schooling all over India. I do not see this happening even now.**

AKC: There are multiple shades of your personality – Tabish Khair, the novelist, the critic, the teacher, the translator and the excellent orator. Which role you are more contented in?

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4 Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Vintage Books, 1991).

**TK: I like to think that I do not choose the role; the book or piece I need to write dictates it. Some things need to be said as a poem, some as a novel, some as a study and so forth. But I started off as a poet, and I always read books also to be a fiction writer, which I became much later – I see myself basically as a writer. It is not a profession; it is a vocation.**

**AKC: Despite hailing from a small town like Ranchi and Gaya, you have marvellously shined on the literary firmament and now you are an established scholar as well as a reputed novelist based in Denmark. Any message for the budding scholars of literary field who are NOT from elite universities of India?**

**TK: I don't know whether I have 'shined', as you put it so kindly, but yes, I have managed to make my writing visible, nationally and internationally. This has not been easy. Indians who grow up and study in small towns and non-elite universities are overlooked both in India, where metropolitan circles dominate, and abroad (which means the 'West', alas), where most critics and scholars cannot see the difference between someone like Rushdie or Vikram Seth and someone from Gaya or Hazaribagh. Moreover, the stories and positions we 'small town' writers adopt are usually less accessible to all these dominant, reputation-making circles. My notion of cosmopolitanism, for instance, differs from metropolitan definitions of cosmopolitanism, hybridity etc. Even on the Left, they are perfectly willing to champion a 'subaltern' aborigine from, say, Chotta Nagpur, but as subaltern aborigines from Chotta Nagpur do not usually write in English, all this has no real impact on the way reputations are made or texts read immediately within 'Indian English', 'postcolonial' or 'global' literary circles. But I cannot give any real advice: all I did was keep going. That is all I do even today. I have tried to be true to my initial impetus, stay critical (also of my own views) and keep going. If that sounds like advice, I guess it is my advice.**

**AKC: Thank you Professor Khair for your enlightening talk and precious time, of course!**



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*Indian Diaspora for the LITERARIA: An International Journal of New Literatures Across the World* published by Bahri Publications, New Delhi. Dr. Chaubey has attended, participated and presented research papers in conferences, workshops and symposia held in India and England including York St. John University, York; Nottingham Trent University and University of Leicester during June 2014. His latest volume entitled *Mapping South Asian Diaspora: An Anthology of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Criticism* is under publication from Rawat Publications, Jaipur.

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