Tabish Khair, *Filming: A Love Story* (Picador 2006)

Tabish Khair’s *Filming: A Love Story* does not open with the expected Table of Contents; instead a cast of characters ushers us in to the viewing of ‘Reel 1’. At first glance the emphatic presentation (‘AND A HOST OF MINOR ACTORS!!!’) and the substitution of reels for chapters suggest parody, if not melodrama, but the tone of the story, which begins with ‘Rasa Terrible’, quickly removes any notion of play. Khair is not parodying a Hindi movie, he *is filming* a Hindi movie. From the doubling of characters, to the flashbacks and absence of linearity, to the structuring according to rasas, readers of *Filming* are not supposed to have the sense of reading a book, but rather of watching raw footage: flitting images, frames not yet spliced together, contradicting versions told from different perspectives.

Set in both pre-Partition India and modern-day Copenhagen, Khair’s film-in-progress begins with the rise of cinema in India – a traveling magic lantern show, packed into a wooden cart that rambles between dusty villages in 1929. The main story is told through the memories of an aging scriptwriter named Batin, now living in Copenhagen, to his interviewer, a young scholar in film studies. Although Batin’s identity is not fully revealed until the end of the ‘film’, his insider knowledge enables him to narrate the stories of those involved with Rajkunwar Studio Films in 1940s Bombay, a studio begun by two men with a dream.

Lurking in the background of the studio’s success, however, is the story of how the two men, Hari and Rajkunwar, struck a secret deal with Rajkunwar’s wealthy family: the trade of Hari’s seven-year-old son for enough cash to fund the productions. The plan is sold to the boy’s mother, Bhuvaneshwari, as a way to show her love: she must play the real-life role of the goddesses in the ‘mythologicals’ and sacrifice her son. Much of the glitz and glamour of the silver screen is muddied by these ‘behind-the-scene’ stories: two children left homeless and parentless by the torching of their village, the fighting between Muslims and Hindus, general strikes, the assassination of Ghandi – all driving a wedge between the dreams of the cinema and the reality of life in India.

*Filming* overflows with dreams. Dreams of home, dreams of money and fame, and the dream of making movies that, at least for a while, unites an entire nation, Muslims and Hindus alike. But these dreams are set alongside the blurry, almost incoherent dream sequences of a young, angry man – one who wishes to kill dreams – who is involved in plans to rid India of its Muslims. The outer frame interview with Batin may also be a dream as it takes place throughout a single night. Indeed, at the film’s end the narrator is dreaming about the interview.

The mix of real world and dream world, coupled with discontinuities in time and space can be jarring and lead to re-readings of earlier portions of the book, but given that this is *not* a novel, the work demands admiration for its ingenuity. Readers cannot walk away from Khair’s film without feeling unsettled, due both to the sense of despair over the realities of India’s history, as well as the uncertainty surrounding the story’s ending. While the ‘love story’ of the title could refer to the subtly

mentioned relationship between the film star Saleem and Bhuvaneshwari, the larger romance in this story is between the Indian cinema and its devotees (Batin and his film scholar included). But does this love story end happily-ever-after or not? Batin tells his interviewer that if he has listened carefully he will be able to fill in the gaps in his story – a charge for the reader as well.

To understand the structure of the book, it is helpful to understand a bit about the aesthetics of rasa (the pure expression of emotion transferred to an audience through a given performance). Rasa is cited as the main difference between Hollywood films and films produced in India; while the aim of a Hollywood actor is to ‘become’ a character and thus gain the audience’s sympathy or empathy, in Hindi cinema films concentrate on transferring pure emotion to the audience. Thus a Hindi film might begin with the rasa of energy and move to humour and love, but in the second half switch to portraying the rasas of anger, disgust, and pity. The change in rasas signals a change in tone from a movie that, for example, begins happily but ends in despair. Each of the ‘reels’ in Khair’s book opens with a rasa (‘Rasa Terrible’, ‘Rasa Heroic’, ‘Rasa Marvellous’, etc.), and these shifting emotions provide an important structure to the otherwise loosely held together narrative fragments.

Filming will have added depth for those familiar with the history of Indian cinema and its key players (the book is written in memory of Saadat Hasan Manto (1912-1955), a popular film writer in Bombay who, like many other Muslims, immigrated to Pakistan in 1948, a move that subsequently ended his film career). But, for those without knowledge of Hindi cinema, the story can also be read for its transnational subtext: cultural differences, the condition of the immigrant, and the longing for home. These are subjects Khair knows well. Born into a Muslim family in Bihar, he eventually left for Delhi after threats from fundamentalists over articles he had written for The Times of India that unwittingly stirred up debates between Hindus and Muslims. For unrelated reasons, he moved to Denmark in 2000, where he still resides in a self-described ‘in-between space’. The transnational also pervades Khair’s The Bus Stopped (2004), in which a bus journey acts as a coalescing force for the mixing of different cultures, religions, nationalities, genders and classes.

The real beauty of Filming is Khair’s revitalization of the same dream that brought all of the characters of his book together: the tremendously powerful love story for film. Erasing all borders, the very act of filming moves effortlessly between the stories of Hindus and Muslims, Europe and India, past and present. One need only to look at the worldwide success of Slumdog Millionaire, or the millions earned by Avatar in India and China, to see that film might truly be our common denominator.

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