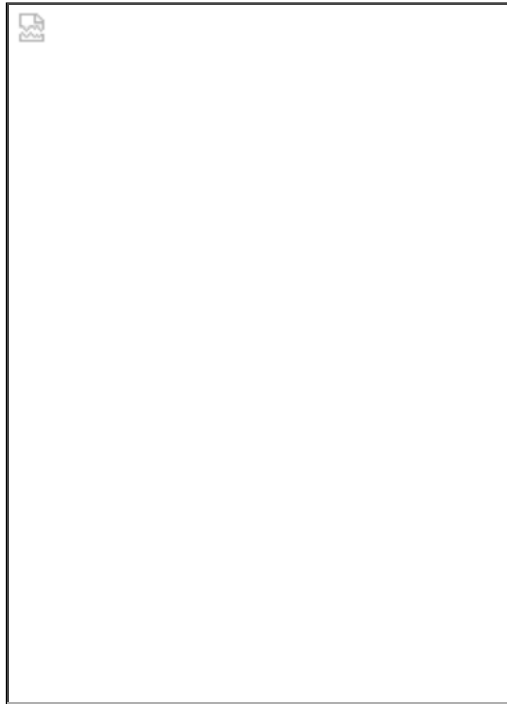


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Not just social realism...



Tabish Khair ... journeys and arrivals.

*Denmark-based TABISH KHAIR, whose novel **The Bus Stopped** was recently published, talks to AMULYA GOPALAKRISHNAN about representation, issues of belonging and other considerations that went into the making of the novel.*

HOW did this book evolve? Tell me something about your journey to becoming a writer, and about this book in this particular finished form...

This book was slow in evolving. I was interested in exploring a number of things when I set out to write this book about four years ago. Or further back. I was interested in issues such as belonging, moving, immigrating, connecting or failing to connect. I was interested in the relationship of life to creativity, and the issue of representation in the context of writing, particularly Indian English writing. I also wanted to write about places (such as the provinces) and people — servants, for example — who are both central and marginal to the middle class Indian experience. I guess some of this had to do with the fact that I spent the first 24 years of my life in Gaya, that I moved to Denmark. But it would be a mistake to read **The Bus Stopped** simply along these lines. Social realism is not what it is all about. The book in its finished form contains a number of indicators that the reader is supposed to follow. These indicators take one away from a simplistic social realist interpretation. Unfortunately, most reviewers do not even seem to have noticed that the journey in the book starts in a real town and ends in a fictional one. What is the significance of this?

I was interested not only in writing about provincial places and servants etc., but also exploring the relationship between their narration (and their realities) in Indian English fiction and the position of the narrator, of someone who is always (by definition) like me or even more Anglophone and middle class.

Speaking of influences, how do you fit into that clunky, cobbled-together thing called Indian Writing In English? Can you identify a literary legacy for yourself? What kind of reading has shaped your writing?

It depends on what you mean by "cobbled together". Much of what has been cobbled together is not necessarily bad. Not only some very good literature has been cobbled together, even entire nations have been cobbled together: the United States, Germany, Italy, India... Depends on what one does with the entity and what one leaves out or includes in the act of cobbling together.

But yes, if you mean the description "Indian English", it is true that the term is partly a joke. To think of Naipaul, Rushdie, Seth, Ghosh, Pankaj Mishra, Amit Chaudhuri etc as "Indian English" is to obscure their differences. But then one can say so of American literature too.

Literary legacies are difficult matters too, and even more so for someone like me. Not just because I am effectively multi-lingual, but also because I come from the sort of background that so few Indian English writers seem to have. I grew up and got most of my education in a small provincial town, I did not go to big prestigious U.S. or U.K. universities for further education, I do not feel "diasporic" even today. But still, I guess we all cobble together our own legacies: mine has bits and pieces of Ghalib and Rumi, Harivansh Rai and Nirmal Verma, Bronte and Twain and Dickens and Hardy, Gogol and Kafka, Mahasweta Devi and John Berger and many others stitched into it. And then my grandfather and my father had a fairly decent collection of Russian, French, Urdu, Persian, Arabic, Sanskrit and British literature until the 1950s. Also a bit of German philosophy, and some American fiction. Of course, I had to educate myself beyond the 1950s much later. That took some doing, and moving out of India helped in that regard.

You touch on brutal exploitation, on societal churning, anomie — but it's difficult to tell where you're coming from. Is that deliberate, do you think that fiction can take you places that politics cannot?

I do not see fiction as separate from politics, but their registers are different. They operate differently. My concern with anomie, for instance, is not simply a critique of certain factors in India; it is a depiction of the times as experienced in a place from a certain perspective. The anomie that you mention is not just the property of this place in "Bihar" but a consequence of its relationship to other places. So, unlike a political statement, fiction is more inclusive, more introspective and less categorical. So, fiction does not stop at political commentary, though, like all language, like all play with representation, it remains political in the larger sense.

You clearly pay a lot of attention to the texture, the shape and sound of words in the head. Could you explain how your language fits into your craft? Would you call yourself a writerly writer?

In this book, the texture of language was doubly important. It was one of the indicators warning against a simple social realistic reading, as were the short chapters: the language served to aestheticise the narrative and the short chapters served to alienate novelistic expectations, both being features that argued against a simple verbatim "realist" reportage. It was also important because the book is partly about living, about life. But yes, generally speaking, I do pay attention to my language. Partly because that is my idea of good literature,

partly because the way I work includes many and frequent repetitions, and partly because I am growing to dislike long fiction.

Do you sense a tension between your lyrical sensibility and the sordid realities you describe in *The Bus Stopped*?

The tension is intentional. For I am not just talking about sordid realities, I am also talking about the beauty of life, and the fact that people manage. It is not a despairing novel.

Tell me something about the core of the book, the journey metaphor.

The journey metaphor was a challenge, because it was meant to be both metaphor and description. One critic has read it as an allegory for life, which is what it was partly. But above all it was necessary to explore the relationship between home and not-home (issues of belonging, whether in a house or in a nation) and the relationship between narrating and representing. The journey narratives are sandwiched between two home narratives. But the journey narratives are also about homes and the home narratives are about journeys too. Then, I wanted to counter the prevalent discourse of East-to-West "diaspora" by narrating how mobile many people are in "provincial" places too. I find the East-equals-tradition-and-stasis and the West-equals-modernity-and-change divide deeply irritating and colonial.

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