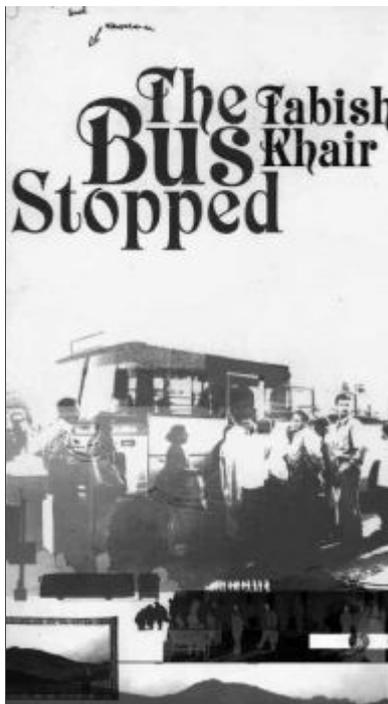


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FICTION

When lives intersect

‘Tabish Khair manages to carry off his tale, or rather tales, with something close to aplomb.’



IT IS a simple literary device: string a set of stories, vignettes round the assorted passengers of a ramshackle bus plying the hinterland — in this case a bus ferrying passengers on the Gaya-Phansa route in one of India's poorest states, Bihar. Give the passengers — a motley crowd of illiterate villagers, slick small town hicks and a striking looking *hijra* (eunuch) on the run among others — an identity, and a character. Imagine their stories, and let them speak in their own voices: and you have **The Bus Stopped**.

In truth, this is a device that is anything but new. Several writers have rooted their stories in similar settings: trains, cars, even ships. But Tabish Khair manages to carry off his tale, or rather tales, with something close to aplomb. In the hands of a less gifted or less sensitive writer, the device can easily look contrived, and fail to work. But Khair makes it work; he manages to be funny and irreverent, serious and compassionate in turn.

The tone of the book is set with the very first paragraph, a wry observation on how, more than the masters, it is the servants who knew the lay of the houses they lived in and served. It's a simple and straightforward opening and all the more effective for it. Too often, writers appear to believe that ponderous, meaning-hidden tracts are what constitutes writing, or at least serious writing; little do they realise that turgid passages do little to hook the readers and carry them along with the narrative.

Khair moves with effortless ease into his story-telling: we are quickly introduced to the characters as the novel zips along. There's Mangal Singh, the angry bus driver, a man abandoned by his wife and full of resentment against the owner, his second cousin's husband. Full of resentments at the unfairness of the world, he is nonetheless an acute observer of what goes on around him: he is in fact a failed writer who had completed 57 pages of a novel in Hindi. And as the author describes him: "He is a man who notices such things, he is a man who only notices such things; it seems to him, if he had noticed other things he would have been another man and not a bus driver plying one of the buses of his second cousin's husband."

Along the way, you run into Farhana Begu aka Parvati, the *hijra* who has decided to get out of the stultifying confines of her *gharana*; the young Irfan (shades of the author himself?) and the 16-year-old's overpowering attraction to the servant woman, Zeenat, she of the average height but supple, firm build; Wazir Mian, the *khansamah* (chef) of the Irfan household, a throwback to the days when life was lived at a more sedate, yet regal style; Shankar, the slightly sanctimonious conductor, always at loggerheads with Mangal Singh over keeping a part of the day's take away from the owner; Chottu, the elderly Mrs. Prasad's roguish servant; Rasmus, the half-Indian, half-Danish executive, with his briefcase full of cash, a "gift" for the ministerji; Hari, Rasmus' driver, who drives his employer to exasperation (a metaphor for timeless India vs Western notions of time) and an opinionated Hindu matriarch.

You also get to peep into the Sharmas' household: Mr. Sharma, a government employee of some obscure department, his harried wife and his three daughters, and their middle-class angsts and aspirations (the eldest one has failed all her three attempts to get into the civil services, it's the younger one's turn now).

Khair is surprisingly evocative when it comes to laying bare their existence: their needs and compulsions, their hopes and aspirations. His tale is quintessentially a tale of a Bihar in transition, and he tells it very well — in short, crisp telegraphic sentences for most part of the time, with an endearing simplicity and candour. His observations are sharp and to the point, capturing the essence of what is happening; it is part story-telling, part psychology, part sociology. Take, for example, his observations on a young villager at a bus stop: he had never eaten the meat of the partridge, for with increasing prosperity, his parents were slowly turning vegetarian, moving up the caste hierarchy like most Yadav and Kurmi families in the region.

All these disparate tales are suddenly brought together as Khair pulls them on the bus, one by one. Their lives intersect in the bus ride for a brief interlude of time; once the journey is over, they will go their separate ways. Along the way, we get a glimpse into what makes them tick, and often we are surprised: the foul-mouthed Mangal Singh shows a gentler side to him, a kindly, compassionate one as the bus moves on; but then again it halts, before proceeding. In the end there is no denouement really to speak of; the reader is left to form his or her own judgments.

The Bus Stopped, *Tabish Khair, Picador India, price not stated.*

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