

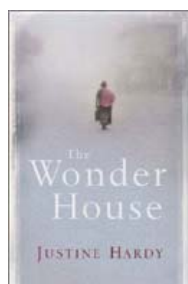
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## Bleak house

Tabish Khair enjoys Justine Hardy's *The Wonder House*, a new spin on an old tale of Indo-British love

**Tabish Khair**

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### **The Wonder House**

by Justine Hardy

370pp, Atlantic Books, £12.99

Justine Hardy's debut novel is partly an elegy to Nehruvian secularism in India and to Kashmir. As was the case with her interview-based bestseller about the Bombay film world, *Bollywood Boy*, it presents a readable and sympathetic account of recent times but lacks historical and, at times, political depth.

*The Wonder House* is a houseboat on Nagin Lake in Kashmir, where Gracie Singh, sorrowing English widow of an Indian prince, spends her days, attended by mute Suriya and her beautiful daughter Lila. Enter Hal, a journalist from England. He falls in love with Lila and, as Islamic militants and the Indian military tear at the lives and loyalties of the local people, a different but not unrelated personal tragedy unfolds.

If this two-generation Indo-British love-plot sounds familiar, it has to be added that Hardy has given such a contemporary veneer to an old sub-genre that one almost fails to notice its formulaic nature. More significantly, the formula does not interfere with the immediacy and flow of Hardy's narrative. Her novel often goes beyond the Raj-romance sub-genre in time and thematic relevance and narrates an India in which the Raj is only one of many past or present factors.

In the process, Hardy provides not only a rather engrossing love story but also a troubling picture of the "Kashmir problem". Her narrative has its class-cultural bias: for instance, there is an undue emphasis on secularism as a failed Nehruvian construct and the problem of Kashmir as a religious one. This obscures the basis of Indian secularism in pre-colonial "multiculturalism" and the roots of the Kashmir problem in late colonial politics as well as its early history as a basically secular fight for "Kashmiriyat" (before it got hijacked by Islamic fundamentalism).

Still, when Hardy writes of human hopes and limitations, she writes movingly and perceptively. Delineating the individual aspects of a larger tragedy is her strength, and it provides her with her ending. Her pictures of Gracie Singh, empathic, limited, half-colonial, lonely, calling to her aid the Djinn of Gin and Thing; of Masood Abdullah, turned by circumstance into an anxious and at times dogmatic father where once he was an open young man; of Irfan, a confused adolescent pushed into the icy waters of a mad "war"; and of various minor characters - these linger in the mind, perhaps more than Hal and Lila.

Hardy writes with empathy for the place and people of her narrative and some fidelity to the other languages that frame their universe, though there are minor lapses. Jama Masjid, for instance, cannot be glossed as "Friday Mosque" (though many Indians do so too), for the word for Friday is "juma". In general, however, such slips do not come anywhere near the inadvertent mixing of Hindu and Muslim names and similar blunders that one has encountered in some recent novels, including two Booker prize-winners. The Wonder House remains a novel that is always poised, often engrossing, and sometimes perceptive and moving. I, for one, will await her next novel with some eagerness.

• Tabish Khair's novel, *The Bus Stopped*, is published by Picador. To order *The Wonder House* for £11.99 with free UK p&p call Guardian book service on 0870 836 0870.

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