



May 24, 2004

The Bus Stopped by Tabish Khair

By Alev Adil

A lyrical journey through small-town India

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The varied cast of characters on the trip provides a glimpse of some of the many facets of modern India. Disparate lives intersect on the journey: the foul-mouthed driver Mangal Singh, a novelist manqué, abandoned by his wife and exploited by his cousin and employer; Mrs Mirchandani, a smug and prosperous Hindu matriarch; Farhana Begum, a eunuch nostalgic for the glory days when *hijras* were more than prostitutes and beggars at weddings; Rasmus, a frustrated businessman of mixed Indian and Danish descent; Chottu, the servant boy, fleeing the scene of a terrible crime; Zeenat a sexy "street woman", and a tribal woman carrying a tragic bundle.

Yet Khair is more engaged by points of departure and destination than by the journey itself. The moments at the beginning and the close of the novel, when the first-person narrator describes his childhood home, are the most beautifully written passages in the book.

This is a novel haunted by houses, by "their scratched geography, their shadowed histories, their many voices of noon and curtailment, evening and smokiness".

Khair's prose is arrestingly beautiful when he describes the echoes and intersections of life: both in the once grand, now diminished, homes of the aristocracy, and in the modern lower middle-class apartment blocks of Patna, where "the walls are membranes through whose tight secrecy permeates much that can only be heard, not seen".

At times, Khair's lightness of touch, his eye for detail and benevolent affection for his characters, recalls the writing of Amit Chaudhuri. Like Chaudhuri, Khair can be both lyrical and observant, imbuing the quotidian with emotional depth. The crucial difference between the two writers is that realism is a moral imperative in Chaudhuri's work; his vision is driven by a writerly fidelity to his characters, whereas Khair is always more engaged by the message he is trying to convey than by his novelistic duty towards his creations.

Khair's realism is also compromised by his taste for the melodramatic. The conclusion of *The Bus Stopped* punishes the parochial prejudices of Hindu nationalists, but does so in a way that stretches the reader's credulity beyond endurance, highlighting all that is unsatisfying about the storyline. Khair is a remarkable writer and the fragments of a great book are buried here, glimpsed in the gorgeously poetic first- and second-person portraits of life in small-town India. But, as a novel, *The Bus Stopped* adds up to less than the sum of its parts.

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