

Writing Social Change: Tabish Khair's Literature as Political and Cultural Critique

Jyotsna Kumari

Research scholar

Patliputra university, Patna, Bihar

Supervisor

Dr. Norah Nivedita Shaw

Head & associate professor

Department of English

Sri Arvind Mahila College

Patna, Bihar

Abstract

This paper explores the literary contributions of Tabish Khair as a vital intervention in the discourse on literature and social change. Khair's fiction, rooted in postcolonial, transnational, and diasporic contexts, critically examines socio-political structures that perpetuate inequality, violence, and exclusion. Through a close reading of three of his major works—*The Thing About Thugs*, *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position*, and *Night of Happiness*—the paper argues that Khair's writing functions as a cultural and political critique. It not only contests hegemonic narratives but also offers an alternative, empathetic vision of understanding identity, history, and resistance.

Keywords: Tabish Khair, social change, postcolonial literature, migration, identity, political critique

Introduction

Literature has long been a site for social and political intervention. From anti-colonial resistance to contemporary movements for justice, writers have used fiction to interrogate power structures and voice the concerns of the marginalized. Tabish Khair, an Indian-born writer and academic based in Denmark, exemplifies this tradition through his deeply political and culturally reflective body of work. His fiction is informed by his own transnational experience and engages themes such as identity, migration, extremism, and historical trauma. Unlike polemical writings, Khair's narratives rely on subtlety, irony, and layered characterization, encouraging readers to question established ideologies.

Khair's Transnational Lens

Khair's positionality as a diasporic writer allows him to bridge the East and West, interrogating both colonial legacies and contemporary forms of cultural imperialism. His characters often inhabit liminal spaces, revealing how identity is constantly negotiated in a globalized world. This perspective makes Khair's literature especially relevant in an era marked by polarized discourses on race, religion, and migration (Bhabha; Said).

The Thing About Thugs: Rewriting the Colonial Archive

In *The Thing About Thugs*, Khair revisits Victorian London through the perspective of Amir Ali, a supposed thug who challenges the colonial discourse that branded Indian rebels as inherently criminal. By drawing on historical sources and blending them with fiction, Khair exposes the epistemic violence of the British Empire. The novel critiques how racialized and exoticized identities were manufactured to serve imperial interests—narratives that continue to echo in contemporary representations of South Asians and Muslims (Khair, *Thing About Thugs*).

Satire and Social Complexity in *How to Fight Islamist Terror* from the Missionary Position

Khair's novel uses humor and irony to explore the intersection of secular liberalism, Islamic fundamentalism, and immigrant identity in the West. By presenting three South Asian men living in Denmark, Khair avoids simplistic binaries and critiques both Western stereotyping and internal communal dogmatism. The novel invites readers to reflect on how terrorism is often framed in narrow, culturalist terms, ignoring socio-economic and political dimensions (Khair, *How to Fight*).

Night of Happiness: Memory, Silence, and Historical Violence

Night of Happiness centers on Ahmed, a loyal employee with a concealed past marked by communal violence. The novel subtly probes the personal cost of political strife and the psychological burden of silence. It offers a moving meditation on the aftermath of sectarian

violence and critiques the tendency to erase painful histories in favor of sanitized national narratives (Khair, *Night of Happiness*)

Conclusion

Tabish Khair's fiction powerfully demonstrates how literature can serve as a vehicle for cultural resistance and social critique. Through complex characters, intertextual narratives, and a transnational lens, Khair challenges hegemonic discourses and provides new frameworks for understanding identity, violence, and belonging. His work affirms that literature is not merely a reflection of society, but an active agent in shaping how society is understood and transformed.

References

Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.

Khair, Tabish. *The Thing About Thugs*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010.

Khair, Tabish. *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position*. Interlink Books, 2012.

Khair, Tabish. *Night of Happiness*. Picador India, 2018.

Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books, 1978.