

Classic Poetry Series

Tabish Khair
- poems -

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Tabish Khair(1966 -)

Tabish Khair (Hindi: ????? ???) is an Indian English author and associate professor in the Department of English, University of Aarhus in Denmark.

His books include Babu Fictions (2001), The Bus Stopped (2004), which was shortlisted for the Encore Award (UK) and The Thing About Thugs (2010), which has been shortlisted for a number of prizes, including the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature and the Man Asian Literary Prize.

 Birth and Early Life

Khair was born in Ranchi (then part of Bihar, now the capital of Jharkhand) and grew up in his hometown, Gaya, a small but historically-significant town in Bihar, India.

Khair finished secondary school from the local Nazareth Academy and, after dropping out of medical studies, went on to do a BA in History, Sociology and English from Gaya College and a Masters in English from the local Magadh University. While a college student, he also worked as the district reporter for the Patna Edition of the Times of India. Later, following some trouble with local fundamentalists, he left for Delhi, where he worked as a Staff Reporter for the Times of India.

 Literary Career

Khair had his first collection of poems, 'My World', accepted for publication by a major national house (Rupa & Co., Delhi) before he left his hometown. It was favourably reviewed by senior poets and critics like Keki N. Daruwalla, Adil Jussawalla, Vilas Sarang and Shiv K. Kumar. While in Delhi, Khair brought out two other collections and started working on his first novel, 'An Angel in Pyjamas', which was later published by Harper Collins and described by India Today as "the calling card of a writer with the power to fascinate."

After about four years as a staff reporter, Khair left for Copenhagen, Denmark, to do a PhD, which he completed in 2000. It was published as 'Babu Fictions' by Oxford University Press in 2001 (a paperback edition came out in 2005) and has since become one of the important secondary texts on Indian English fiction.

In 2000, Khair also published a collection of poems, 'Where Parallel Lines Meet' (Penguin), which is considered to be "one of the most significant collections in

recent years by an Indian writing in English." It included poems for which he had won the prestigious All India Poetry Prize.

Khair's second novel, 'The Bus Stopped', was published by Picador in 2004. Along with novels by Hari Kunzru and Nadeem Aslam, it was short-listed for the Encore Award (UK). Khair has also co-edited various books and journals, including a casebook of essays on Amitav Ghosh (Permanent Black, Delhi) and 'Other Routes', an anthology of pre-1900 Asian and African travel writing, with a foreword by Amitav Ghosh (Signal Books, Oxford, and Indiana UP).

Almost Sonnet

At one instant it seemed to be within my grasp:
Your love was a jewel I could reach out and feel.
It made me come alive as nothing had before;
I felt no need to keep it in a selfish clasp.
I knew it was something no one could ever steal,
It had no need for locks; it was a magic door.

I sit here now and think of what I would have found
If I had walked the way my heart still bids me go
(The closest word I know is "paradise"),
But here my body's tied to a stake in the ground
Of many yesterdays and not one tomorrow,
And though it may implore and struggle, still it lies

In all the mud of language that turns doors to walls
And makes the best of truths, despite us, false.

Tabish Khair

Amma

Down the stairs of this house where plaster flakes and falls,
Through the intimate emptiness of its rooms and hall,
I hear your slow footsteps, grandmother, echo or pause

As they used to through long summer afternoons spent within
The watered-down four walls of khus and fragile drinks
Of ice, mango or lemon, the circle of water-melon crescents.

Slowly you shuffle examining each new tear in the curtains
Which will have to be mended when the first monsoon rain
Provides a respite from sun, curtails the need for shade.

Slowly on arthritic joints you move from room to room
Marking the damage of the years, evaluating how soon
The past will collapse or how long the present last.

You never need glasses to mark the contours of your house
Though you can't see grandsons at a distance, once wore a blouse
Inside out. Nothing has changed, grandmother, no, not yet;

Though your collected steps never turn the corner into you
In a starched and white sari, the fragrance of soap around you.
And all the curtains have long been taken down.

Tabish Khair

Homily

She knows it's neither strange nor hard
To raise children on graveyards.

All you need
Is a terrible deed -
Then you bury the dead,
And forget.

(Based on H. C. Andersen's 'By the Almshouse Window')

[From the book 'Man of Glass']

Tabish Khair

Immigrant

It hurts to walk on new legs:
The curse of consonants, the wobble of vowels.

And you for whom I gave up a kingdom
Can never love that thing I was.

When you look into my past
You see
Only
Weeds and scales.

Once I had a voice.
Now I have legs.

Sometimes I wonder
Was it fair trade?

(Based on H. C. Andersen's 'The Little Mermaid')

[From: Man of Glass]

Tabish Khair

Nurse's Tales, Retold

Because the east wind bears the semen smell of rain,
A warm smell like that of shawls worn by young women
Over a long journey of sea, plain and mountains,
The peacock spreads the Japanese fan of its tail and dances,
And dances until it catches sight of its scaled and ugly feet.

Because the koel cannot raise its own chicks —
Nature's fickle mother who leaves her children on doorsteps
In the thick of nights, wrapped in controversy and storm —
Because the koel will remain eternally young, untied,
It fills the long and empty afternoons with sad and sweet songs.

Because the rare Surkhaab loves but once, marries for life,
The survivor circles the spot of its partner's death uttering cries,
Until, shot by kind hunters or emaciated by hunger and loss,
It falls to the ground, moulting feathers, searching for death.
O child, my nurse had said, may you never see a Surkhaab die.

[From: Where Parallel Lines Meet]

Tabish Khair

Prayer

Grant me a little child
I can hide
When the mullahs come home to pray,
When planes are birds of prey.

Someone
Smaller than my thumb
I can put in my pocket and run.

[It draws upon the 'fairy tale' by H. C. Andersen]

Tabish Khair

Rumi And The Reed

Listen to the song of the reed flute:

It sings of separation.

Torn from the leaf-layered, wind-voiced

Banks of the pond,

It is joined to sorrow and joy

By a slender sound.

Who, asked Rumi, can understand

The reed's longing to return?

Let its raw lips rest then;

Let all words be brief then.

And I, O Believers, cried Rumi

(Having lost the man he loved),

I who am not of the East

Nor of the West, un-Christian,

Not Muslim or Jew, neither

Born of Adam nor Eve,

What can I love but the world itself,

What can I kiss but flesh?

Let my raw lips rest then;

Let all words be brief.

[From: Where Parallel Lines Meet]

Tabish Khair

The Soldier Home From Iraq

What could I do being what I was:
Saviour of old women, their killer too.
On my chest there sat a big dog;
Trained to get answers, move it, jump jump jump,
I picked up my M16A2 and shot her.
There she lay. There they lay.

Back home I was rich like anyone else,
Princesses clutched my dog hairs
In fantasy, in ecstasy.
Later we slept.

I had my will
Until

The shades of a prison-house closed upon me
And I remembered I had forgotten
Something.
It eludes me still.
Was it a candle, a wick, a tinderbox?
Something to do with light surely.
Something that would have set me free.

Tabish Khair