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## **The Midnight's Grandchildren: Articulating the Postmodern Spirit in English Fiction of India Analyzing Tabish Khair's *The Thing About Thugs***

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### **Abstract**

The phrase Midnight's Grandchildren stands for the generation tending to take forward the remarkable accomplishments made by the Post-Independence era of India towards new dimension. In 1980, "Midnight's Children" was the name which Salman Rushdie gave to India's first Post-Independence generation. Today, as Midnight's Children head into retirement, a new generation of Indians – the Midnight's Grandchildren are entering towards adulthood. Born in the reform era that started in the mid-1980s and then accelerated in 1991, they are, above all, liberalization's children. This article focuses on the tendencies of postmodernism being set by one of those liberalization's children, Tabish Khair through his novel *The Thing About Thugs*.

The phrase Midnight's Grandchildren stands for the generation tending to take forward the remarkable accomplishments made by the Post-Independence era of India towards new dimension. In 1980, "Midnight's Children" was the name which Salman Rushdie gave to India's first Post-Independence generation; which was an echo of the words of country's first Prime Minister, on August 14<sup>th</sup> 1947, as the British Rule came to an end: "At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom."

Today, as Midnight's Children head into retirement, a new generation of Indians – the Midnight's Grandchildren are entering towards adulthood. Born in the reform era that started in the mid-1980s and then accelerated in 1991, they are, above all, liberalization's children.

Over the last two decades, a fresh stream coming from the Western world with the name 'postmodernism' has become a buzzword in numerous fields entering into the lives of this liberal generation of India. Earlier it was used as a cultural phenomenon; but now it has acquired a significant status in all realms. The emerging pop fictions are the best example relating to the postmodern condition in India. Pop fiction books, or 'mass market' books, are a mixed bag of college romances, cubicle battles and the odd mythology-inspired thriller. A good majority deal with urban relationships or life at the IITs and management schools, their plots clearly implying

that they are aimed at the new English reader living in a metro with a corporate job (or aspiring to one), and looking for stories s/he can relate to. Instead, what it does offer for the most part is a bland affair called 'popular fiction'. Says Mita Kapur, founder of literary agency Siyahi, "We still have to learn how to churn out pulp. There are no Indian pulp fiction writers in English." While regional Indian literature boasts a wild and richly sordid tradition filled with gun-toting detectives, voluptuous spies and lovelorn ghosts, Indian English writing has very little to offer in comparison. There are very few contemporary authors doing serious pulp writing with the mixture of the contemporary trends and required tendencies for the Indian culture through their writings. Some of such authors are Amitav Ghosh, Amit Chaudhuri, Arundhati Roy, Pankaj Mishra, Shashi Tharoor, Tabish Khair, Jeet Thayil etc.

This chapter focuses on the tendencies of postmodernism being set by Tabish Khair through his novel *The Thing About Thugs*.

"Facts, fiction, languages did not flock to me, without significant effort on my part. They did to Ravi. They were like the 'plain' women he dated – some of whom were plain only by the standards of a man who had grown up among Bollywood starlets. But flock to him they did, despite what Ravi called his 'absolute honesty': the fact that he made no promise of fidelity, that he actually promised infidelity and impermanence. I am a postmodern lover, he would clarify; you bastard, are still stuck knee-deep in modernity." (pg: 20-21)

-Tabish Khair

*How To Fight Islamist Terror From The Missionary Position*

An India Today article entitled *Dark Princes of Denmark* gave a new and multidimensional title to Tabish Khair as a kind of 'literary Swiss Army knife.' Tabish has variously been an award-winning poet, journalist, critic, educator and novelist. His works include *Where Parallel Lines Meet*, *Babu Fictions: Alienation in Indian English Novels*, *The Bus Stopped*, *Filming: A Love Story*, *The Glum Peacock*, *Man of Glass*, *The Thing About Thugs* and *The Gothic, Postcolonialism and Otherness*. He has co-edited *Other Routes: 1500 Years of African and Asian Travel Writing*.

Khair's most recent books include *How To Fight Islamist Terror From The Missionary Position* (Novel, Harper Collins, India), *The Thing About Thugs* (Novel, Houghton Mifflin, USA) and the co-authored *Reading Literature Today* (Sage). His work has been translated into nearly a dozen languages.

Winner of the All India Poetry Prize, Khair's novels have been shortlisted for the Encore Award (UK), Crossword Vodafone Fiction Prize and Hindu Literature Prize (India), Man Asian Literature Prize (Hong Kong) and for major translation prizes in Denmark and France. He has also been awarded fellowships and academic scholarships by the Baptist University of Hong Kong, Danish Research Agency, Cambridge University and Carlsberg Foundation, Delhi University, Jamia Millia Islamia, Jawaharlal Nehru University and the University Grants Commission of India.

Tabish Khair's novel, *The Thing About Thugs*, is a sensational crime story about a series of beheadings that terrify the public in 1830s London. As a Victorian genre novel it delivers an intricate plot, a large cast of entertaining characters, masked villains and admirable stylistic flair. And as an attempt to transcend the genre, Khair employs some metafiction and uses multiple perspectives to offer a broad social critique of the era's class and race divisions.

Khair eases slowly into this ambitious, dual agenda by establishing his authorial presence early on rather than jumping right into the story. He starts out by sharing childhood memories of his grandfather's house in Phansa, a small village in India, where he came to love authors like Dickens, Austen, Conrad and Collins. "It was there that I first read rumours of the story that I will tell you in these pages, while a gecko clicked on the wall, a moth butted its head against the false sky of the windowpane, and the antique ceiling fan chattered and sighed in turns."

This tactic leads to a high expectation: that Khair as author (or an "I" speaking as the author) will serve both as a guiding voice and true character in the story and his autobiography will help propel an otherwise standard genre novel to a higher level. It is, however, not a subtle method to draw readers' attention to possible parallels between an author and a novel. And Khair's writing style in the first section presents a mix of awkwardness and eloquence. The odd first line reads, "Ghosts are often said to be white," but a few pages later Khair delivers a slightly more graceful, expansive sentiment about the characters we'll soon meet: "(I) write from between texts and spaces, even though I am located in the space of their narration and they in mine."

Having set the tone, the tragic epic tale of a young Indian man named Amir Ali then unfolds. Readers learn that he has left India posing as a member of the murderous Thugee cult, whose infamy has spread throughout the empire. He's actually a peaceful man, grieving for a terrible loss, and has faked this identity to help escape India, courtesy of a British officer named Captain William Meadows, who has his own agenda for Amir once they arrive in England.

As this plotline advances, Amir's backstory is slowly and gradually revealed, allowing for great moments of parallel action, with his past seeming to dictate his fate in London - which is soon rather dire. Amir has agreed to serve as Meadows' showpiece for a phrenology society, where its members harrumph and argue about whether the "brain is the means by which we may recognize the shadowy workings of our eternal soul," a fact pronounced by the book's villain, Lord Batterstone. Amir has also agreed to serve as a primary source for Meadows' book-in-progress about the Thugee cult. He's hoping to capitalise on the thug's tale, and help prove that the racist agenda of phrenology is true - that only white men possess good souls and good, round skulls to prove it.

In somewhat pat fashion, Amir is soon dating a cleaning woman named Jenny, whose aunt runs an opium den, which later becomes the scene of a grisly murder by three white Englishmen who - and this gives nothing away - later begin harvesting the bumpiest heads they can find to help fill the secret skull-museum of Lord Batterstone, whose identity is unknown only to the three capable, if dim, murderers-for-hire. The readers know all this because Khair narrates from all these characters' perspectives, except Jenny's.

The short chapters help set a quick pace, but also keep the perspective off-balance. Amir's state of mind is shown via letters he writes to Jenny, and we get his backstory from Meadows' first-

person record of the false history Amir has dictated to him. Occasionally, the first-person narration leaps into the mind of a minor character and later in the book it's narrated by a character who has almost no stake in the central action.

Then of course, there is Khair, or his cipher, as author, who more than once clambers directly into the narrative, as in this exact quote: "Jenny bends down and ... I cannot see what she does. From my grandfather's library in Phansa, in the ghostly white pages of the books here and elsewhere, there is much that I can see and much that I cannot."

Why not? And does this matter? Khair wants it to matter. And in the end it does only because these confessed limitations, true or false, are unwise to include. They amount to discursive hand-wringing about the work of writing a novel and need more care and attention if they are to fit into an otherwise gripping, inventive book.

It's a baffling device to use because Khair has designed Amir's story well, an epic journey propelled by a mysterious past as Amir faces life as an outsider among many people prejudiced against him. Khair presents phrenology as many of the aristocrats' beloved science, to help strengthen England's global dominance and colonial zeal. Readers get scenes of Lord Batterstone bellowing eloquent bigotry: "(Our) science of phrenology argues against the assumption that the Chinaman or the Negro is almost a Caucasian, failing only in degree. There is a difference in the size of the brain and the organic quality of the body, with which the brain must inevitably correspond." The language races along, in various well-tuned dialects of the large cast of characters from the London underworld, who live "in those crooks and crannies of London in which you may find asleep, a dozen to the floor, lascars and ex-slaves, ayahs and prostitutes of the poorest sort, gypsies and stowaways, urchins and pickpockets".

Amir is of course accused of the murders and he takes refuge among his fellow "untouchables," including a fun trip through Mole People territory, who live in sewer tunnels. Khair does build some suspense about what might happen to Amir, but the storytelling engine becomes clogged as the readers are constantly told exactly what characters feel, often when this is implied based on their role in the drama. For instance, after a scene inside the mind of Major Grayper, the chief investigator of the crimes, we're told: "But Major Grayper was a pillar of society. He might sympathize with the feelings of the vigilante, but he would uphold law and order."

This amounts to a flat character sketch, not character development. And halfway through the novel, readers realize that Khair has written no full scene of dialogue between Amir, the hero, and Jenny, his love. By using an epistolary technique of showing us Amir's letters to Jenny, Khair had silenced them both, rather than giving them a voice and showing their true feelings about each other and their possible life together.

Unfortunately, the prose can only hint at what emotion or feeling might connect these characters' plight to real life, and Khair does not slowly develop his chosen themes. It's disappointing that after bringing himself into the story so many times, teasing at the idea that while Amir's adventure is wild it has a basis in modern life, Khair does not give enough concrete facts and details about himself to form the real connection he tells us he feels he has with his characters, Amir most of all.

Khair is a poet, novelist, professor and literary critic, and he writes in *Thugs* very directly at times about race and class, hinting at the scope of Amir's pain and creating many chances to weave in his own experiences of racism and class division. But we're not given the insight to care about Amir's suffering or its source in Khair's reality. When Amir laments: "This is India as you people imagine it. You have made it come alive here in the streets of London," readers get a sense of what Amir has endured, but only briefly. It becomes another thread Khair abandons to follow small scenes about his minor characters. Thus, the refusal to write neither a full-fledged genre novel nor a book with true, personal connection, as promised; make this a book of halfway things.

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