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RESEARCH ARTICLES

Challenging Assumptions in Tabish Khair's *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position*

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Abstract: This paper sets out to explore the way Tabish Khair (an Indian scholar and writer based in Denmark) succeeded in undermining stereotypical conceptions, while challenging assumptions, in his 2012 novel entitled *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position.* This controversial novel, revolving around three main characters, prompts readers to think anew, thus abandoning their own biases.

Keywords and phrases: Tabish Khair, How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position, Stereotypes, Fundamentalism, Irony.

Brought up in a Muslim family, in the ancient town of Gaya (a vibrant crossroads of cultures and religions), Tabish Khair grew up "as a cosmopolitan person" and, in his own words, since childhood, "[he] was attracted to the world and [he] was interested in difference" (Dharker 33). Based in Denmark, where he works as an associate professor in the Department of English of the University of Aarhus, he is not just a highly-reputed scholar, but also an award-winning poet, a much-praised playwright, and a prolific novelist. Om Dwivedi and Cristina Gàmez-Fernàndez have recently described him as "a Humanist," "a socially responsible writer who writes not to entertain but to provoke thought and thus augment moral and ethical values in society" (xv). Besides, the two critics have emphasized his resistance to "theoretical straitjacketing" (Roy 141), his staunch refusal to be categorized as a diasporic/ postcolonial/ postmodern/ transnational writer: in his view, every literary label imposes unavoidable restrictions, the choice of customary lenses and privileged perspectives that fail to capture the complexity of a multi-faceted work of art, mirroring a dynamic, ever-changing reality. Conversely, as Khair wrote in his 2010 article entitled "Non-Fiction," valuable books are those "that make you think *anew*," that escape deeply-ingrained, often biased perceptions, that undermine traditional sets of beliefs. In his *Reading Literature Today* (a seminal volume he wrote with his friend and colleague Sébastien Doubinsky, published in 2011), he expanded on this concept by stating that

> literature is not a sedative or a balm, it is not a God or a moral code; it is not even a refuge, an oasis of sense. But literature […] is where we are confronted with the possibilities, problems and limits of language, which are finally also the problems of reality (and representation). […] Literature *qua* literature is that which always presses against the limits of language: in that sense, to read literature is to read also the gaps, the silences, obstacles, and noise in its language. (10-11)

Accordingly, the reader envisioned by the author is not a passive consumer of linear and highly legible texts, often based on dichotomies and fixed categorizations; quite the opposite, he/she is "an active thinker and interpreter" (15) who, reminiscent of Seamus Heaney's famous poem, is engaged in a process of *digging*, of uncovering hidden – albeit worthy of observation – possibilities.

Given what has been argued so far, by focusing on his 2012 novel entitled *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position*, this paper sets out to explore the multi-stranded strategy devised by Tabish Khair to challenge assumptions, and to expose the limits of misconceptions and stereotypes fatally leading to mistrust and conflict. Even though the reference to Islamist terror suggests a plot centred on the current political scenario (indeed, the 2005 Muhammad cartoon controversy, the 2011 Norway attacks as well as the Arab Spring are hinted at in the volume), the novel actually subverts the readers' expectations by surprisingly unravelling a story of "friendship and love, misunderstanding, betrayal and pain" (1), in the words of Gillian Dooley. Nonetheless, like all Khair's volumes, *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position* is undeniably a political narrative in the broader sense of the word since, as the writer elucidated in a 2012 interview with Sebastién Doubinsky, "to be political […] is to be aware of how human beings respond to each other and socio-political organisms, like states or established religion, in their daily lives."

Set in modern-day Aarhus, the plot features three main characters: the unnamed narrator (a university English teacher, born into a Pakistani Muslim family), Ravi (a flamboyant Indian Brahmin and a promising writer, who is struggling with his PhD in History), and Karim, a fervently religious Muslim taxi-driver from India in his mid-forties, a good decade older than the other two immigrants. Ravi and the unnamed narrator, who has just faced a divorce, end up renting two rooms from Karim, who hosts a Koranic study session every Friday, frequently receives odd phone calls that prompt him to vanish for a few days, and seems to be doing his utmost (including sub-letting his flat and working double shifts and overtime) to earn an increasing amount of money. As the story proceeds and the two younger characters become romantically involved with two Danish women, the narrator grows suspicious that Karim

may belong to a terrorist cell. Hence, when one of the participants in his Koranic study sessions turns out to be the infamous protagonist of the so-called "Islamist Axe Plot" against Herr Hansen (a retired cartoonists responsible for the caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad published in *Jyllands-Posten*, a conservative newspaper), the narrator decides to report him to the police. Needless to say, Karim is innocent: the mysteries of his life (even his sudden disappearances and weird phone calls) revolve around his twenty-three year older Danish ex-wife. Some years before, she had decided to file for divorce not to burden him with her ailment (Alzheimer's disease), and with her different needs and expectations connected with elderly age; nevertheless, out of sheer and unconditional love, Karim had continued to care for her.

Tabish Khair's controversial title for his novel has received much critical attention. According to Esterino Adami, it aims at intertwining "a range of sensitive topics […] because it provokingly alludes to religion, terrorism, sex" (4). Samhita Arni regards the title as a pun, anticipating one of the many challenging topics dealt with by the novel: in her opinion, the "Islamist terror" is not just a reference to terrorism but also to "the terror the assimilated immigrant feels about the unassimilated;" furthermore, she maintains that the "missionary position" alludes to both Karim's religious zeal and to "the attitudes inculcated in the missionary-run schools" attended in youth by both Ravi and the narrator. Conversely, Jane Housham credits Khair's publisher with suggesting a catchy title, capable of "inject[ing] a frisson of riskiness into a rather quiet, oblique book." What has been generally overlooked, however, is the irony embedded in the beginning of the title: "how to," typical of instruction manuals and of the self-help genre. By pretending to provide a simplified set of indications (to be followed slavishly) on *how to* cope with pivotal issues, Tabish Khair confronts his readership with a world of uncertainties, of multiple possibilities, of individual and collective fabrications, which unsettle any form stability, even the dull fixity of stereotypes. Khair's *active* reader is, therefore, compelled to "think *anew*," to *dig* for concealed meanings.

Humor (which, as the author remarked in a 2014 interview with Smita Sahay, "enables us to survive") is a powerful instrument employed by Khair to destabilize derogatory categorizations imposed from the outside, as well as to reverse their undermining potential. On one occasion, the clichéd portrayal of the Asian extended family (both excessively solicitous and annoyingly intrusive) is fruitfully exploited by Ravi and the narrator to rid themselves of their disappointing Danish dates. Pretending to go to the toilet, the narrator calls Ravi on his mobile phone, from the other side of the bar, mumbling "a 1960s Bombay film song into the receiver" (Khair *How to Fight*, 14). In turn, Ravi replies "gobbledygook in Hindi, with a few suitably intonated English words – especially 'hospital?', 'hospital!' 'hospital' – thrown in" (14). By

profiting from the conventional disparaging depiction of immigrant families, "all of them cramped into little Denmark" (15), Ravi makes up the compelling account of a terrible accident occurred to one of his countless cousins who, as the two sympathetic Danish girls perfectly understand, requires his (and the narrator's) immediate assistance: "'Families,' said Ravi, the dramatist, unable to resist the temptation to improvise, 'that's what happens when you have large, extended families'" (15). It should not pass unnoticed that, throughout the plot, Ravi (identified by the writer as "the dramatist") *creates* narratives that, while feeding the Dane's biased imagination, are ironically crafted to his and his friends' advantage; thus refusing to perform the part traditionally assigned to the immigrant (that of the outsider, of the disquieting *Other*), Ravi cleverly pieces together successful stories, drawing from the very assumptions and preconceptions that, supposedly, are aimed at stigmatizing visibly different foreigners. Like Hamlet giving advice to the actors in the rotten state of Denmark, therefore, Ravi urges the narrator to re-invent his past, in order to match the expectations of the "damsel[s] in distrust" (73) (not in *distress*) he wishes to seduce:

> Look at yourself, you sad unpackaged commodity! You talk about your schooling which is like their schooling; you talk about your parents who are like their parents; you talk about your life which is like their life. They look at you and expect something else. You look like you are something else. And then you go ahead and disappoint them. And you, a fucking scholar of literature who should know better. Shame on you! (73)

Humorously enough, the narrator's love story with Ms Marx begins, without him knowing it, thanks to one of those longed-for, intriguing Oriental tales narrated by Ravi, that thoroughly captivates the woman:

> veiled mother, bearded father, married at the age of fifteen, son divided between his halaal mentality and the desire to make it in the pork-eating West, unwilling to acknowledge his religious background in public and unable to relinquish it in private, etcetera, etcetera. […] You were so bloody intent on committing sexual hara-kiri by making your parents sound like her parents; I had to administer narrative antidotes. (89-90)

Tabish Khair also challenges assumptions and stereotypes by revealing the intimate connection between reality and fiction, to such an extent that, as he highlighted in a 2012 interview with Sravasti Datta, "each defines the other, each exists with the other. All our realities are partly fictional and even our wildest fiction is partly real." In *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position*, the author forcefully demonstrates that even identities can be mutable, fluid, porous, even constructed: any attempt to "bracket" them (borrowing the term from one of Khair's essays included in *Muslim Modernities*) proves to be vain. Consequently, Ravi (a Brahmin) enthusiastically explores

other possibilities by joining (and really appreciating) the Koranic study sessions held by Karim; he even grows a beard on his "Middle-Eastern type face" (Khair *How to Fight*, 55) to ascertain whether it impedes progress through Customs in European airports (which, unfortunately, it actually does). Every character of the novel (not just the three immigrants) fashions his/her own life by combining the truth with *fictional* elements he/she is relatively aware of. Great Claus (who lives in the flat above Karim's) apparently leads a methodical and quiet existence with his wife, in their immaculate apartment, full of costly art objects and modern furniture. In the second half of the novel, however, he decides to come out of the closet, by revealing his homosexuality and blissfully moving into his partner's untidy house in the countryside; as the narrator prophetically observes when Great Claus's secret is far from being disclosed, "I wonde[r] at the difference between what we seem to be and what we are to ourselves" (79). Likewise, Lena, Ravi's Danish girlfriend, the seeming epitome of flawless perfection, poise and grace, is trapped into her expected niceness, into her "doll's smile […] stapled to her face" (138): "she is a prisoner of herself" (160), as the narrator underlines, she is "on stage all the time" (83) as a skilled performer, even though twice in the story "her mask of confident poise slip[s]" (99). Tabish Khair also shows his readership that nothing is fixed and permanent, that every person or situation may be perceived in contrasting ways if only the point of view is altered. At the beginning of the narrative, while gazing at Ravi and Lena, the narrator is impressed by their similarities: "the broader beauty of Ravi's Bollywood looks somehow match[ed] the narrow perfection of Lena's Nordic features; his jet-black hair set off by her cascading dark golden locks; his light brown eyes complementing her surprisingly green ones" (70); a further observation, however, leads to the unexpected consideration that they are noticeably dissimilar: as the narrator states, "when I had seen them together the first time, I had been struck by how similar they were despite their difference. This time, I was struck by how different they were despite their similarities" (83). The very architecture of the novel contemplates multiple perspectives: the narrative is interlaced with dreams (which help cast light on the plot) and with Ravi's short story entitled "A State of Niceness" which, as readers are informed, is also the exact title of another story "by an Indian writer – a chap called Khair – who lived in Denmark some years ago" (140). The narrator regrets not being able to locate a copy of the text, actually published in a 2012 collection entitled *Alien Shores: Tales of Refugees and Asylum Seekers from Australia and the Indian Subcontinent* (edited by Sharon Rundle and Meenakshi Bharat). Needless to say, the two stories with the same title are different; they explore two distant facets of the same, prismatic reality: while Ravi's narrative delves into the clash between the orderly yet plain and artificial world of Denmark and the image of vibrant yet

disorderly and ambiguous India (experienced by the protagonist with the same feeling of alienation), the anthologized story, as Punyashree Panda has pointed out, "is about an Indian citizen's reconfiguration of his own self as he settles down in a West European country and his growing affinity towards his adopted geographical space."

By voicing the narrator's doubts, suspicions, and biases towards Karim (the alleged fundamentalist), *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position* exposes readers to the risk of contracting a widespread social disease: "selective blindness" (161) in Chun Fu's definition, i.e. the inability to embrace difference since stereotypes are the only set of lenses through which the *Other* is scrutinized and his/her actions interpreted. Trusting the obscure words of an unreliable narrator (who even refrains from revealing his own name), some readers may end up believing the taxi-driver is actually a terrorist, even though the recurring references to the effective narratological strategies suggested to the narrator by his ex-girlfriend (who holds a Master in Fine Arts) bear clear witness to the fact that his story, like every story, is actually *filtered, constructed, re-created* by the person who relates it. Conversely, the attentive, actively engaged, and sympathetic reader fostered by Tabish Khair will not fail to notice the numerous details that concur to shape a rather different image of Karim. He is described as tidy (Khair, *How to Fight*, 130), "calm, determined and precise" (11), as well as "very conscientious" (18). He "blush[es] behind his beard" (24) when Ravi and the narrator freely discuss sex-related topics; while his younger flat-mates express words of harsh criticism towards Denmark, "he never sa[ys] anything critical himself" (53). Moreover, he carefully avoids "anything that resemble[s] gossip" (64). More than likely, he has decided to hide his long-lasting relationship with his former, but still beloved spouse only to protect her dignity, not to expose her painful illness to those outside her close family circle. Karim's unfaltering faithfulness to her makes him a fundamentalist, but in a new acceptation of the word, implying generous sacrifice, unselfish devotion, and profound respect for the other (who becomes an extension of oneself), all qualities that Tabish Khair "the Humanist" firmly believes are needed in a world increasingly dominated by distrust, misconceptions, and fear.

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