

Memory, Trauma and the Elusive Self in Tabish Khair's Fiction

TAMANNA KHATOON

UDAY SHANKAR OJHA

Abstract. This paper examines the interwoven themes of memory, trauma, and identity in the novels of Tabish Khair, an acclaimed voice in contemporary postcolonial and diasporic literature. Khair's characters, often displaced across geographies and cultures, grapple with the burden of collective memory, the scars of trauma, and the complexities of hybrid identity. Through an analysis of works such as *The Thing About Thugs* (2010), *Night of Happiness* (2018), *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position* (2012), and *Jihadi Jane* (2016), this paper explores how Khair articulates the unresolved tension between memory and forgetting, personal agency and imposed identity, and the struggle to belong in an increasingly globalized and fractured world. The analysis foregrounds Khair's narrative techniques that challenge simplistic binaries and resist reductive stereotypes, offering nuanced reflections on marginality, alienation, and the search for selfhood.

Keywords : Collective memory; scars of trauma; hybrid identity; simplistic binaries; marginality; alienation.

In modern English literature, the global upheavals of migration, cultural hybridity, and the digital revolution have foregrounded the themes of identity, trauma, and memory. No culture today remains untouched by the forces of global communication, technological advancement, and transnational exchange. Tabish Khair's oeuvre powerfully engages with these issues, presenting diasporic characters caught in the cross-currents of personal memory, collective trauma, and the quest for self-definition. His protagonists, often marginal figures—immigrants, exiles, and minorities—inhabit the liminal spaces between cultures, languages, and histories. Their struggles reflect the fractured realities of postcolonial existence where identity is not stable but constantly negotiated, contested, and shaped by the lingering impact of trauma and memory.

Memory as Resistance and Erasure

Memory in Khair's works becomes a battleground where personal truth contends with colonial or hegemonic narratives. In *The Thing About Thugs*, Khair interrogates how colonial power distorts memory and imposes reductive labels upon the colonized. The protagonist Amir Ali, shaped by colonial narratives, reflects, "The English version of my story has no place for my memories" (39). Khair masterfully interweaves personal and collective memories, exploring how history is remembered, written, and manipulated by power structures. Amir Ali resists the colonial gaze, asserting his own agency, "Am I the villain in their stories or the hero in mine?" (47). This resistance to the erasure of memory is central to Khair's postcolonial vision, where recovering and asserting one's narrative becomes an act of survival.

Trauma and the Lingering Wounds of History

Khair's characters are often haunted by the scars of historical and communal trauma. In *Night of Happiness*, Ahmed, a Muslim migrant in Denmark, carries the agonizing memory of the 2002 Gujarat riots. The trauma is both a refuge and a source of unrelenting pain, "Some memories, I thought, are like rust—silent but slowly corroding the soul" (35). Ahmed's unspoken trauma permeates his interpersonal relationships, as seen in the subtle observation by his employer, "There was something in Ahmed's eyes that spoke of storm it weathered but never spoken" (71).

The theme of unspoken and unassimilated trauma recurs across Khair's novels, creating what can be termed a spectral presence—where the repressed past perpetually intrudes upon the present. In *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position*, set in post-9/11 Europe, Khair explores the trauma of misrecognition and Islamophobia. His characters, marked by suspicion and alienation, embody the precariousness of diasporic existence, "It was not what we were that mattered, but what we appeared to be" (31).

The Quest for Identity: Fracture, Hybridity, and Dislocation

Khair's characters often inhabit a state of in-betweenness—belonging neither fully to their homelands nor to their adopted countries. The search for identity, therefore, becomes a central concern in his narratives. In *Jihadi Jane*, Khair critiques the processes of radicalization and the

vulnerability of diasporic youth through the stories of Ameena and Jamilla, two British Muslim women drawn to extremism in Syria. Jamilla's reflection captures the essence of diasporic dislocation, "To be lost between countries is to belong nowhere, to be spoken for by everyone but to speak for no one" (56).

This sense of alienation is not limited to individual experience but resonates as a collective trauma of diasporic identities, perpetually oscillating between inclusion and exclusion. Emma Dawson Varughese underscores this complexity in her study of Khair's works, "Problematizes the notion of identity as stable or monolithic, suggesting that identity is instead a series of performances shaped by external gaze and internal struggle" (Varughese, 76).

Indeed, Khair's narratives often depict identity as fluid, fragmented, and hybrid—marked by the tension between cultural memory, personal agency, and the external gaze.

Conclusion

Tabish Khair's literary contributions offer a nuanced exploration of the intersections between memory, trauma, and the quest for identity in the context of postcolonial and diasporic experience. His characters, caught in the entanglements of history and modernity, colonial legacies and global displacements, articulate the fractured selfhood of those living in the margins. Through his layered narratives, Khair resists the reduction of characters into stereotypes, instead foregrounding the psychological vulnerabilities and complexities of individuals negotiating multiple worlds. As Khair himself states, "My writing is an attempt to understand the margins—the places and people often overlooked or misrepresented" (Internet).

Ultimately, Khair's works serve as powerful interventions in postcolonial discourse, offering a literary space where the burdens of memory and trauma, and the urgent quest for identity, are intricately interwoven, never fully resolved, but deeply felt.

Tamanna Khatoon

Research Scholar

Dept. of English, J. P. University, Chapra, Bihar

Uday Shankar Ojha

Professor and Head, Department of English

J.P.University, Chapra

Works Cited

- Khair, Tabish. *The Thing About Thugs*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010.
- _____. *Night of Happiness*. Picador, 2018.
- _____. *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position*. Corsair, 2014.
- _____. *Jihadi Jane*. Harper Collins, 2016.
- _____. "Writing from the Margins". Interview by Ravi Shankar. *The Caravan*, 2018.
- Sahoo, Somia. Review of *Night of Happiness*, by Tabish Khair. *The Hindu*, 24.08.2018, [<https://www.telegraphindia.com/culture/the-strangeness-of-the-familiar/cid/1531803>].
- Varughese, Emma Dawson. *Beyond the Postcolonial: World English Literature*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.