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**NARRATION OF INDIA AS A NATION: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF SELECTED  
NON-FICTIONAL WRITINGS OF TABISH KHAIR**

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**ABSTRACT**

The complex and enigmatic concept of nation has become all the more problematic in narrating pluralistic societies like India. With the credo of unity in diversity and the tenet of peaceful coexistence, Indian society provides a common place to different communities and classes to reside under one umbrella with their contradictions, paradoxes, and ironies. Its temporal and spatial spread because of the continuity of civilization in India from time immemorial, the vast geographical expanse and the presence of Indian diaspora worldwide make the narration of India very intricate. Moreover, the differences based on religion, caste, language, class and region are to be negotiated to have a complete picture of India. The present paper analytically studies selected non fictional writings of Tabish Khair, collected in the edited book, namely *Muslim Modernities: Essays on Moderation and Mayhem 2001-2007*. The paper tries to read the finer nuances of the sensibility of an Indian who belongs to a minority community and is presently working in diasporic setting. It brings forth various issues related to the narration of India as a nation.

**Keywords:** Nation, India, Tabish Khair, Non Fictional Writings

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The process of defining human experiences as a part of collective consciousness has always been very elusive because of its abstractness and the involvement of infinite number of constituent factors. The constant process of negotiating with the continuously changing realities creates more complications in having a clear and well drawn picture of such consciousness. The concept of nation is one such manifestation of the collectivity of human beings. It involves the connectedness with a geographical space, either tangible or mythical and the awareness among its constituents about being a separate cultural entity from other such groupings. Individuals try to associate themselves with the collectivity of nation at different levels. The presence of multi-layered pluralistic societies of the

'third world countries' further complicates the analysis of the concept of nation which at one time was considered as a 'unity' achieved through 'uniformity'. Homi Bhabha brings forth the difficulty in narrating a nation, "there is a tendency to read the Nation rather restrictively" but there are "recesses of the national culture from which alternative constituencies of peoples and oppositional analytic capacities may emerge – youth, the everyday, nostalgia, new 'ethnicities', new social movements, 'the politics of difference'(3). No doubt, there are power conflicts for being a part of a nation among the persons who are in the 'centre' and the persons are who on the 'margins'. Moreover, the trend of globalisation, the ease in connectivity through internet and social

media, the frequent movement outside the nation space and the increasing diasporic existence create conditions for more ambiguity in defining a nation. There is a paradoxical human situation where one finds oneself as a part of global humanity and simultaneously strongly yearns for one's own exclusive –'my' space in the form of association with a nation. Even within the nation space, there are many constituents who feel alienated from its essentialist working and they want to register their difference from the core value of a nation. They would like themselves to be heard in the cacophony of the reverberation of a nation.

In the light of the abstraction and ambiguity of nationhood, the present paper is trying to analytically study selected non-fictional writings of Tabish Khair to narrate the uniqueness of pluralistic society of India as a nation and the torturous process of the persons on the 'periphery' to connect with it as its constituents. The complexity of India emerges because of its rich and complex history, its vast geographical expanse, its multicultural, multilingual and multi-religious present, its inalienable social reality of caste and the wide migration of its people in different parts of the world. No doubt, it is difficult to subsume this complexity in the short space of the present paper but a point has been made out about its nationhood and the efforts of some voices to be heard along with its meta-narrative. Tabish Khair is a very versatile and prolific author writing in different genres including, poetry, fiction, travelogues, critical writings and non-fiction. Khair was born in a Muslim family of Bihar and later on went abroad for his academic and career pursuits. He is presently working in the University of Aarhus, Denmark. Despite working in a diasporic setting, he is still holding Indian passport and is committed about his connectedness with India. His non-fictional writings are a comment upon the link of persons like him with Indian roots and overall Indian situation vis-a-vis world at large. His non-fictional writings are compiled in the edited book *Muslim Modernities: Tabish Khair's Essays on Moderation and Mayhem 2001-2007*. by Renu Kaul Verma. The present paper analyses his selected non-fictional writings from this book, namely, "A Blessing for My Children", "9/11:

Conscience and Coffee", "The Colour of Passports", "The Death of Rumi", "Murder of Divine" and "These are no Revolutionaries".

Khair upholds Indian uniqueness by emphasizing the pluralistic nature of its society. He finds India as a nation, quite different from the west, and brings forth the acceptance of alternative rationalities. He highlights Indian credo of 'unity in diversity' and points out its fundamental difference from the western worldview. In his essay, "A Blessing for My Children", he writes, "I was brought up on a concept of civilization and modernity that was not spelled E-U-R-O-P-E or W-E-S-T, for while my family members spoke English, they also spoke other languages; while they had imbibed Western education, they often also had a sense of other sources of rational thinking and possible modernities" (Verma 3). The western essentialism is not accepted in the Indian concept of nationhood which is based on the acceptance of the infinite shades of human behaviour. Khair highlights the secular credentials of India in the essay "Murder of the Divine", where he refers to Varanasi, a renowned cultural city of India, as:

Varanasi is imbued with sacredness in a deeper sense: the sense of human possibilities and limitations, of human hopes and aspirations, of human continuity and connections, the majestic flow of Ganga that, in spite of the clogging and pollution, still communicates a sense of all that exceeds the limits of humanity and that all that makes us human. (Verma 33)

Khair indicates that the sacredness of Indian people is beyond "ritualized holiness" (Verma 33) and clarifies that, "In our humanity, we are both much less than God and slightly more than mere animals. The realization is essential to a true sense of the sacred" (Verma 34). Khair, thus, equates the plurality and uniqueness of India with basic human possibilities and humanistic considerations.

Khair elaborates further the difference of Indian sensibility from the west by finding a common thread among similarly situated collectivities of the 'deprived' people of different parts of the world. He finds that India is more akin to the 'third world countries' in finer cultural aspects,

worldviews and life patterns. Even for the westerns, the people from these countries are the part of a single conglomeration without any significant identity of their own. These people get the similar treatment irrespective of their different citizenship. He points out:

And strangely, every time I travel with my Indian passport, I am reminded of what I share with people traveling on Nepali, Algerian, Nigerian, yes, even Pakistani passports. Out in the world, the colour of all passports is the same. Our difference is the same. (Verma 26)

He categorically affirms, "My passport reminds me how marginal I am in the global heart of whiteness, how childish and superfluous are squabbles of our (third World) governments" (Verma 27). Khair finds that the people of the 'third world' countries are more religious and less "divisive" and rationalizes that "insular conversation" is more because of the western learning based on "self centeredness" (Verma 30-31). He analyses the reality of Muslim intellectuals inclined towards the west to be in line with 'modern' trend

The 'Muslim' world – and actually all of the 'East' – is in a rush to catch up with the 'West'. And the 'West' has long told us that our cultures and literatures are worthless ... But once such modern professionals move to the 'West', they are confronted with a great impoverishment. To their professional training is added the self-centeredness of the 'West', the fact that 'non-western' cultural heritages are even less visible here (especially in public discourse and basic education) than in their home spaces. (Verma 31)

Khair finds Indian nationhood as a part of a broader world reality which presents an alternative to the western discourse and worldview. Through his essays, he creates an image of India which shows the march of humanity through the zigzag path created by socio-political ideology, economic hardships, forces of capitalism and dangers of fundamentalism. Despite many irritants, India as a nation is more inclusive and is negotiating the

existence of human differences to maintain its secular and sacred identity.

The narration of India as a nation is incomplete without the voice of 'difference' – the voice different from that of the majority discourse. Khair is aware of his Muslim background and is not reticent in narrating its effect on his identity and other daily concerns. He points out that the duplicity prevalent in the name of religion works as an irritant in the process of nationhood. He feels associated with India but this connectedness is with a consciousness about his difference from its meta-narrative. He shows his inclination to get an acceptance within the boundaries of India as a nation. He is not ready to shun his Indian links and celebrates his possession of Indian passport. However, he raises his voice to be heard by the persons who are in the 'centre'. His deep anguish and consequent ambivalent relationship with India is clear in his essay "The Colour of Passports":

There is much I am proud of in India, and there is much I am ashamed of. So, I am not a nationalist in the sense in which parties . . . define the nation. Being born a Muslim, I have grown up on the margins of that nation; I have grown up having my identity, my past, my language questioned and subtly discredited in such "nationalist" circles. (Verma 25-26)

He is adamant to keep his connection intact with India and tries to find space in the narration of India by upholding his difference. He indicates the vast ocean of India in which many streams of different sub-cultures combine to form a complex entity. He is in love for his memories about India:

If I hang on to my Indian passport, I hang on to my memories. But these memories are not of the sort that one hears canted in popular *ghazals* about paper ships and the shade of tress in the ancestral village. My memories are of difference, of alternatives. Not necessarily their celebration, but their existence. (Verma 26)

Khair emphasizes the existence of alternative viewpoints within the Indian discourse of nationhood. Though they are less in number and are not vocal enough to compete with the reverberation

of 'centrized' stance, they are still the part of India as a nation.

Khair is very categorical about his belongingness to a minority group and feels that being a minority, his negotiating situations and strategies are different from the majority. He finds it both as blessing as it provides a vantage point to question the established practices and a liability as it compels him to justify his difference again and again as a part of broad process of nationhood. He brings forth the fact in the essay "A Blessing for My Children"

To be born into a minority is a blessing and a curse. I was born into a Muslim family in Bihar. But within the community of Indian Muslims, my family again belonged to a large minority – that of the middle class professional Muslims. . . . I was, after all, again part of a minority –the minority of coloured people in Denmark, the minority of immigrants, the minority of Indians, of Muslims. (Verma 3- 4)

Khair, by generalizing the fact about his identity as a minority tries to understand its repercussions for a person for being on the periphery of a society. He highlights that the contextual factors are different for persons like him and so is their difference in perceiving reality on his part. He clarifies' "When you are born in a minority, that too a minority within a minority, you learn to belong in different ways. I grew up as Indian and as Muslim" (Verma 3). Khair feels attached to India but again in its unique way. He tells about his anguish:

. . . the India I had grown up in was a fragile entity—it was increasingly threatened by various kinds of fundamentalisms (Muslim, Hindu and 'Western'). ... There are constant attempts to bracket our identity. Are you Muslims or Indian, we are asked—as if one could be only the one or the other. So, when the time came, it was not too hard for me to leave the geographical space of India, for the India that mattered to me was there in my mind and memories. (Verma 3-4)

However, it is another matter that Khair is not able to get rid of his minority status even in the foreign

land. He is happy with having multiple and varied experiences because of his minority status. He enjoys his position in an unusual way, "the blessing is that one belongs in different ways, one learns to see different perspectives, one speaks many languages, one is aware of many histories, one is both this and that" (Verma 4). Khair finds that belonging to a minority group is an enriching experience for him. He obliquely indicates the possibilities of subsistence of different viewpoints within the multicultural society of India. He refers to the diffuseness and malleability of Indian society and culture by comparing Muslims in India from the Muslims professionals in the West, "...among the Muslims I knew in India, conversation could veer into religion on such collective occasions, but it was more likely to encompass local politics, social gossip and banter, fashion, film (Bollywood), TV programmes, cricket, even literature at times" (Verma 30). This shows that in societies like India, religion is just one of the diversified interests of its people.

Khair in his essays raises some fundamental concerns to highlight that some latent forces are inimical to the concept of nationhood of such tolerance prone multicultural societies. In the garb of religion and other such rabble rouser issues, these forces perpetrate violence to help capitalism on its onward march of aggrandizement. By monopolizing societal resources and without caring for the life of the poor, these forces work for their vested interests of keeping their powers and privileges intact. Khair finds that the fundamentalist forces do not have any religion and they are alike in their working against humanity. In the essay, "9/11: Conscience and Coffee", Khair conveys his sorrow over the loss of human lives in American World Trade Centre tragedy, "such human loss escapes the limits of language and representation" (Verma 7). He tries to see the reality in the context of overall picture of different parts of the world. He is unable to understand the difference between "the terrorists who struck back at a group of politicians by targeting tens of thousands of innocent people" and "those voices that seems to be using the cruel act of a handful of Islamic terrorists to tarnish and blame entire populations of Muslims and Arabs"

(Verma 8). Khair finds violence is quite harmful for the emergence and the subsistence of collective consciousness. He also points out that the apparent violence is the cause of deeper human maladies and the real reasons have to be addressed for the peaceful human existence and the continuity of the civilized concept of nationhood. The dangers to the nationhood are more pertinent for multicultural societies like India.

Khair indicates that the wide spread discrimination in the use of societal resources, the denial of the bare minimum rights to a large section of society and the conditions of deprivation and penury are the root causes of violence. He writes in his essay "9/11: Conscience and Coffee", It(violence) has never been a free choice. It is predicated upon some individuals by circumstances. . . .behind it lies the rubble of shattered hopes, of real and imagined injustices, of human desperation and, consequently, inhuman hatred" (Verma 10). He assertively states, "we have to take a stand against all kinds of violence, the violence of terrorists as well as the violence of state agencies, physical violence that leads to the death of innocent bystanders as well as economic violence that leads to the starvation of millions in a world that has enough to go around" (Verma 11). He highlights the maladies which are widely prevalent in different societies and they may lead these societies towards disintegration, "It can be a world in which all the mistakes of the post-global inequality, socio-economic exploitation, lack of international democracy, lack of national democracy and literacy in some nations, prejudices and hatred—are consolidated into a system of greater violence and suffering"(Verma 13). He suggests, "The only shield that can be effective is that of a more equal and just world" (Verma 11). Khair addresses the universal concerns which are detrimental to the smooth sailing of the process of nationhood.

Khair refers to the Indian concept of non-violence as preached by Gandhiji. He finds it an effective anti-dote to the malady of violence and feels that it has always been helpful in checking the spread of violence in India. Khair bring forth the reality:

. . . violence spreads through violence. To react to violence with violence is to spread violence. Violence is not a wound; it is more like a virus. Gandhiji was one man in the 20<sup>th</sup> century who saw this with absolute clarity. Violence came to him again and again. And every time he stopped it by refusing to succumb to it. By refusing to catch the virus of violence, he managed to prevent it from spreading. (Verma 34-35)

Khair relates violence with the forces of fundamentalism and brings forth the fact that it is their weapon to extract obedience to their way of thinking. These forces of pseudo 'nationalism' do not accept the presence of doubts and are very insistent about their own way of perceiving the world. He indicates that these elements are fascist in their working and harmful for the plurality of a nation. He further links fundamentalism with capitalism and their combined working is more to uphold some vested interests which work against the benefits of the commoners. He is critical of all such fundamentalist views and clearly comments upon their working, "The aim of Islamic fundamentalists is not the exegesis of Islam. . . . They want a social, political and economic order in which they can feel safe --- and empowered" (Verma 45). He puts all such forces in the same line and finds that they are not progressing with the change of time:

It *appears* that fundamentalists have chosen to freeze their Islam in time. In this too they resemble neo-fascists in countries like Denmark and France, and for that matter many Hindu nationalists in India. These nationalists have also chosen to seem to freeze their National identity in time. (Verma 45)

He also points out the working of these forces towards getting a single obedience to their viewpoint:

Doubts about belief, doubts about the sacred and the profane, doubts about identities and doubts about the world we live in and might live in. Being unwilling to allow space for doubt, all these doubts have to be repressed into a unitarian belief,

whether one calls it fundamentalism or nationalism or 'Nationalsocialism'. All pluralities have to be singularized—by force, if necessary. (Verma 45-46)

Khair brings forth the ignorance of these elements and indicates that they are not able to understand that the real force of capitalism is behind all this, "One exclaims 'it's like a snake!' another exclaims 'It's like a pillar', but both fail to see the Elephant of capitalism that they blindly groping at" (Verma 46). Khair tries to understand the reality through the confusion of 'Islamic fundamentalism' which finds the evolution of Christianity (largely Protestant) and capitalism as overlapping. However, the inimical response towards these two concepts is not uniform as the capitalism is beneficial to the fundamentalists. He analyses the stark fact of the present socio-political reality having a strong base in economic factors:

Islamic fundamentalists are seeking hegemony over people who call themselves Muslim. By definition, their 'fundamentalism' is a modern and literate element --- it is imbricated in capitalism, just as the middle and upper class leaders of Islamic fundamentalism are themselves beneficiary of a global capitalism that, in general, keeps most Muslims (and Christians, Hindus, etc., in the third world) in various degrees of powerlessness and impoverishment. (Verma 46)

Khair, thus, presents a very broad picture of the working of forces which may be detrimental to the growth of pluralistic multicultural societies. He tries to put forward the subtle intricacies of the actual working of different elements in such societies, so that latent and unnoticed factors come to the fore for better understanding on the part of the constituent citizens.

The narration of India as a nation, no doubt, involves many voices, varied viewpoints and different mini narratives. It is quite fruitful to hear the voice of a scholar who is a minority being a Muslim and who is very vocal in his views on varied constituent elements of nation and on his 'questioned' identity. Not only this, he is a liberal and non-aligned face who equally comments upon

all diverse forces which are seen in opposition to one another in the public discourse. Moreover, his analysis is not only limited to India, rather he relates Indian situation with the broader working of analogous conditions elsewhere in the world. Khair's connectedness with India is unquestionable as he is still holding Indian passport despite facing inconvenience in his daily life in the west. Khair, while seeking answers to the paradoxes involved in the working of nationhood, tries to traverse different fields from his personal situation to the generalized world situation, from the matter of religion to the economic aspect of capitalism, and from a commoner viewpoint to the scholarly angle of post-colonialism. Even a small unnoticed incident is enough to begin his analytical and curious mental churning over wider social issues. His critical stance over different issues tries to establish that the 'centrized' western worldview is not the absolute truth and there are many other strands of truth which are to be noticed and be brought to the fore as an alternative to the supposedly accepted realities. His writings broadly define India as a pluralistic socio-cultural grouping different from the western moorings of unity through uniformity. He tries to analyse Indian nationhood in the overall world perspective. His way of understanding reality as different from the western worldview is emphasised by many other scholars like Frantz Fanon:

But if we want humanity to advance a step farther, if we want to bring it up to a different level than that which Europe has shown it, then we must invent and we must make discoveries.

If we wish to live up to our peoples' expectations, we must seek the response elsewhere than in Europe. (254)

Khair's purposeful stance of finding realities different from the western way of thinking is necessary to comprehend the effect of the prolonged sway of colonial ideology. He tries to see other alternatives different from its hegemonic influence to acknowledge the power of knowledge of the post-colonial societies like India. He is not sheepish in conceding the overpowering colonial discourse in the matters of religion and identity and



he indicates that real factors should be exposed to reach to the truth of situations of the third world countries.

Khair is very vocal about his connectedness with India and asserts his difference by showing how his identity has been questioned in India. He is not ready to leave his links with India and rather brings forth a narrative which is different from the accepted meta-narrative of India. He upholds the plurality of the multicultural society of India and appreciates the existence of different worldviews here. He finds it different from the western way of viewing situations as it does not insist upon accepting the essentialist viewpoint. His way of defining India is innovative as he affirms India as sacred not in religious sense but as a receptacle of infinite human possibilities. After analysing Khair's non-fictional writings, it is quite clear that though his concern is India but he tries to understand its situation beyond its boundaries. He finds its situation more in consonance of the position of other third world countries and no doubt simultaneously at variance from the western situations. On one hand, Khair highlights the writings (Vali Mohammed Vali) in which plurality of India is celebrated:

Numberless creeds and countless are the  
faiths

Of its inhabitants: Adam's mistake

Has bred so many colours of skin here

Beauty pervades its people like a lake.

On the other hand, Khair's essays caution against the forces of fundamentalism and capitalism which perpetrates violence to serve their own interests. He brings out the march of these forces as detrimental to the process of nationhood. Other scholars also find such division in Indian society based on the exclusion of some groups of the society as roadblock in its onward journey as a nation:

The fact that this is nothing but a whirlpool leading to an early demise of the nation-state itself is indicated in the contradictory nature of its ideology. It is communal nationalism in a double sense; it is communal not only *vis-à-vis* other religious communities but equally so *vis-à-vis* the large mass of lower castes within the Hindu

fold. It is therefore more appropriately termed upper caste Brahminic nationalism. (Aloysius 2)

Khair is equally critical of all types of hypocrisies and pretensions whether it is of the Islamic fundamentalist, the Hindu nationalist or the Christian dominated west. He supports alternative worldviews upholding broader humanity instead of a single repressive and authoritative social position. Khair is not critical only for the sake of being critical; rather he drops clues which might be helpful in finding out the positive forces necessary for the inclusive growth of nationhood. Though his writings are not all inclusive of diverse elements of Indian society, they are certainly an indicator that to narrate India as a nation, one has to be aware of its different and unnoticed mini-narratives with the simultaneous knowledge of latent irritants of nationhood.

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