




Scientific Experiment and Aesthetic Experience: A Review of Tabish Khair's *The Body by the Shore* (2022)

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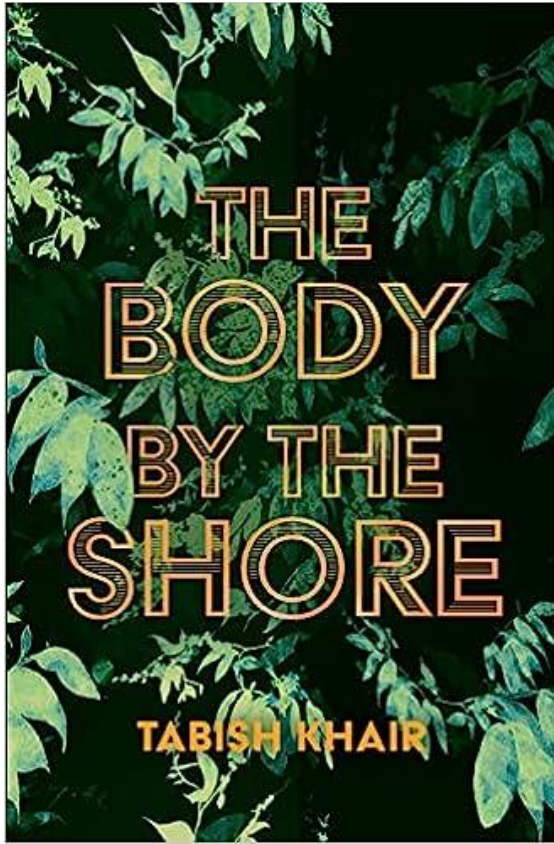
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Scientific Experiment and Aesthetic Experience: A Review of Tabish Khair's *The Body by the Shore* (2022)



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Abstract

Based on the post-pandemic scenario and set in the year 2030-31, Khair's novel *The Body by the Shore* explores human interventions in the natural dimensions of life in their ugliest forms. Featuring microbes and viruses, this book presents a scathing criticism of our society, where people's unquenchable desires for power and capital have been a big obstacle to humanity. Delving into the experiment of science and aesthetics of literature with a tinge of religion, Khair has taken an in-between space between these two without taking any side to show the ethics of the society in power. The old wound of racism has not left its mark in Denmark because the big and powerful from top positions take care of permanent economic exploitation, which Khair shows in this novel through Private and Governmental associations and their convoys like Command Alpha Mercenary Group. While making literature a thinking device, at the same

time, bringing the mixture of mystery and thriller on the oil rigs, this novel evokes a fantastic experience for readers of all age groups.

Keywords: Speculative fiction, Covid-19 post-pandemic, Human intervention with nature, Microbes and Symbiosis, Oil-rig, Tabish Khair,

Introduction

The Body by the Shore is a literature cum science fiction or speculative fiction set in Denmark that imagines a futuristic abandoned oil rig used for an organ trade business through a secret refugee route in the North Sea. Khair's novel, as a speculative fiction, is a Chimera, a fantastic idea about metabolic symbiosis that can change humanity. His concern for the environment is paramount in this novel presenting "greater worries due to sinking coastlines and islands" (*The Body by the Shore*: 2022, 63). The Covid-19 pandemic and its atrocities in the world created a sense of panic against the dangerous bacteria and all kinds of microbes, and this age became the age of bacteria. *The Body by the Shore* has centered on this tension of microbes and symbiosis.

A human being cannot directly fight bacteria; we need antibiotic-resistant bacteria that will fight from our side. So, this book explores the idea of symbiosis between good microbes and harmful microbes that human interventions have disrupted for their unquenchable greed for material wealth and power. Based on the post-pandemic Denmark and connecting other parts of the world, including oil rigs in the sea, Khair has taken this issue of human intervention with nature and how far they can go in their evil intentions forgetting their place on the earth. But even after all this social turmoil, people have not understood the impact of the anthropocentric characteristic that has endowed all the troubles of microbes. Mr. Watch (Mikhailov) says, "What a virus it was, it changed everything, and no one has noticed it" (273). Khair wants to throw light on the health crisis and gov. policies on how abnormal things are normalized in this period. People suffered more from systemic violence from the government and big corporations than viruses or microbes. In this novel, an abandoned rig has become the operation theatre of organ trade and lab for the experiment of the human body. Similarly, Khair creates Command Alpha, a mercenary group that benefits from global tragedy. Khair's intertextual understanding of scientific observations is relatively new and praiseworthy.

Human beings, or Homo Sapiens, believe themselves the perfect being in every sense and is "the only species on the earth that produces junk ... Not excrement, not waste, junk" (261). He takes it to another level by arguing,

Our planet is full of junk. ... Anti-nationals, Jews, Palestinians, Yazidis, Rohingya. This novel is a criticism of our human society by giving DNA examples by saying that 98% out of 100% of our DNAs are superfluous in terms of 'freeloaders, bums, refugees, anti-nationals, discards, rejects etc. (261).

If nothing else, the pandemic showed the precarious nature of human existence that can be unsettled with tiny microbes. If any event could teach us that we are a tiny part of the universe cosmic, this should be it.

Progress for the human species should not be in a few hands. And yet, a few powerful multi-billionaires, sitting in different corners of the world, run this material world which makes regress instead of progress for species, as Mermaid believes, "progress for our species is regress for life on earth" (262). Progress will happen, as Vijay Nair in the novel says, until or "unless every one of them has an equal share in the good" (171). Khair has shown coral concern in this novel caused by thermal power in the big oil rig business. People are running behind artificial paradise or finding happiness in elements like drugs, which has become one of the options for the post-pandemic world. Kathy, a drug addict, lives in such a world. Khair's concern for future people's peace is noteworthy; he believes that dreams have become very costly, and people cannot do what they want. They are just mere little fish in the mouth of a bigger one and can enjoy their freedom till the big fish is not closing its mouth. Microbes are an essential part of the life cycle, and Khair sees this in two aspects: one, if we destroy microbes from the earth, many infectious diseases will disappear, and second, at the same time, other lives, including humans, will disappear too. Microbes are so powerful in nature that "they do not just make us see things; they can also make us do things" (264).

Humans have always glorified the human communication system, and they are very proud of this, but to think that we humans are the only beings capable of communicating and especially communicating across species is a big mistake. The novel disagrees with this by saying that 'trees, shrubs, mushrooms, fungi, microbes are far better at communicating than we are, and that they communicate between species too' (265). We are not just part of an ecosystem. We are ourselves an ecosystem (265). We find the glorification of ancient Indian sages in terms of their perceptions and knowledge of organisms inside and outside us, what they said and figured out ages ago.

The novel's protagonist, Jens Erik, is depicted as an anti-hero because of his conservative take on outsiders. He cares more about what happens in his country than any migrant, refugee, and nigger people. It is something unexpected for a writer from postcolonial literature to present an anti-hero in his novel. After living many years in Denmark, Khair's observation sheds a clear light on Danish society. Jens Erick's character, a semi-retired police officer, gives a real sense of understanding against his racist ideas and hate against black and diaspora people in Denmark. Khair notices the changes coming from the people of a new generation. In the novel, Erik's daughter, a new generation's mind, sees her father as a racist after she sees the picture of her father involved in police brutality. Coming from this younger generation, she does not accept the racist ideology that her father generalizes for outsiders. Mr Erik's justification, as a police officer, for his violent action against migrant people (black) is that he became fearful because of the mob and hit them, which is what xenophobia means. Xenophobia is more about power than fear (*The New Xenophobia*, 2016), it starts apparently from the fear of other people that changes into hatred for them, leading to violence. The perpetrator never says he has committed any wrong.

The idea of fear is interior, whether it is islamophobia, xenophobia, or homophobia. The older generation is affected by their tradition; sometimes, this fear comes from traditional beliefs and thinking that is not one day or sudden emotion. It can be ancient traditions that, in the case of Jens Erik, work as a protective cloth from his childhood, it makes a root inside him, and it is not easy to throw very quickly as the newer generation as his daughter does. The reason for hatred and prejudice against others can be so many things, and it is complex to understand them. This can help to understand how the idea of nation and nationality are always divisible in nature and

hence protected by a national border. But it is never meant to see migrants and migration as other and hostile. It is only when the feeling of hyper or radical dominates people in terms of hyper-masculine, hyper-protective, hyper-reactive etc., nationality loses its integrity.

Khair's early novel, *How to Fight Islamist Terror from Missionary Position*, raises this question of migration and Danish people's attitude to migration in general and Islam in particular. In the novel *The Body by the Shore*, Khair shows this tension of migration between the characters of Mr Erik and his daughter, Pernille, through their recurring arguments and fight about second-generation immigrants and first-generation immigrants. Khair tries to show how the non-Muslim world is still not empathetic towards Muslims and fails to perceive their culture and lifestyles, as the narrator says, "Muslims had been replaced by a virus as the global villain [...], though with similar effects" (37), suggests how this Western idea about Muslims is stereotyped as terrorists or global villains is nothing but the western discourse and its power of distorted cognition that people are suffering from. But Covid-19 and the viruses replaced this Muslim villain by taking their job of killing people worldwide. People forget about terrorist and their problems when news channels and media got their new topics, or we can say new discourse, to feed upon the distorted cognition of people. This racism does not come because they are a police officer or businessman but the very identity of their Muslim background. Aslan, Erik's Turkish friend, always remained the subject of suspicion because of his identity as a Muslim. Same with Hanif from Bangladesh, his representations as an agent remained suspicious because of his background as a Bangladeshi Muslim and hence others. Khair believes that understanding is more important than knowledge because a straightforward generalization of knowledge lacks many kinds of understanding. Michelle, the most suppressed character, could save her life because of the quest of Jens Erik and Aslan Barzani for an unknown black body that washed up years ago. Aslan understands and ignores Jens Erik's xenophobic ramblings because, on the one hand, if Erik hates immigration, on the other hand, he has sympathy for outsiders and saves Michelle, a Caribbean woman, from dying, which the daughter of Erik could not understand. According to Khair, this understanding is not simple, "Not all is direct. Not all visible, not all verbal" (266). Pernille hates her father because she sees him as a racist who hates foreigners and blacks. But later, she realizes she is partly wrong because her father saves Michelle.

Set in the frame of a campus novel, it deals with post-pandemic life in 2032 based on one past symposium organized in 2012 at Aarhus University. Khair makes this symposium a mystery as most of the scholars who had attended that symposium died in mysterious ways. The science experiment with the human body to make it extraordinary so that even after death, it can be used as a killing machine for various purpose shows how science always pushes the boundary of limitations and go beyond nature. The international organ trade racket hidden behind the curtain of a tourist agency that facilitates this business without much trouble is one of the sharpest attacks by Khair on Western ideology when he shows how the West is using young 'bodies' with good organs as resources for their upliftment. Khair's attention on the unprecedented numbers of refugees moving from one country to another, their forced migration inside and outside the country caused by the post-pandemic world due to Covid-19 presents a phenomenon that has completely shaken humanity from the very core leading human exploitation. Human trafficking for the healthy organ trade is something Khair wants to show can be humanity's biggest challenge, as the ivory trade has changed into the organ trade, which has surplus value in the international market.

The novel's most important location is an oil rig in the North Sea, where Kurt, the agent, who deals with the business of organ trade and human trafficking, makes this novel a petrofiction. The oil industry and organ trade are the kind of business with another dark face of the black market. Such business can be handled only by powerful people who involve big corporations, including the government, who can take care of law and order very easily. This thing is apparent in the novel that all the official records are erased by government officials in confidential ways so that none can trace the death of most of the scholars and professors who had attended the Aarhus University symposium and were in tune with the knowledge of such gory business where money overflow.

Khair, being an avid reader of Ghosh's works, has done a thorough reading of counter-science as Ghosh has done in his work, *Calcutta Chromosome* (1996) and has been able to bring out the spark of discussions in secret occults and the existence of souls even after death by depicting the long flowery gown lady who floats in the air nearby the oil rig after her death. The impact of climate change is one of the most critical issues presented in this novel. Khair has tried to warn this society of the sudden and unexpected water level in the tsunami shown in the novel in the North Sea. Conrad's novel, *Heart of Darkness*, greatly influences Khair's writings. The comparison between Khair's character, 'Kurt' can quickly be made with Conrad's character 'Kurtz. Kurt is doing his evil and dark business of organ trade and lab experiments with human beings on an oil rig in the North Sea, whereas Conrad's Kurtz does his cruel business of ivory in the heart of Africa, down the Congo River. The eponymous character Michelle is Khair's Marlow, whom half remembers the line from Conrad's novel, "he is very little more than a voice" (181). This novel can be read as the present-day colonialism and vast wealth inequality in trade business between the global North and the global South. Through Michelle's narrative strand, Khair has also created a claustrophobic atmosphere in the oil rig.

In the futuristic setting of the 2030-2032 post-pandemic world, Khair presents an apocalyptic vision of the world where the retirement of people from work is like big death and the addiction to dangerous drugs like 'crobe' has changed the face of humanity. Even a fitness addict like Kathy can change into a drug addict, who is not a typical female but a former clandestine Command Alpha mercenary group member. Khair presents a sight of the future where the oil rig is still a problem, showing his understanding of our human society, which will never do anything without benefit. Khair's portrayal of a mysterious woman in a long flowery dress who disappears and reappears anywhere at any moment remains a mystery at the novel's end. The oil rig where the business of organs trade and all the experiments with human genes were happening became a haunted rig for other people, "they often claimed that the water around the rig smelled of violets, not seaweed or oil" (267).

The anti-hero, Jens Erik's understanding of migrants and refugees, is very critical; he supports the idea of staying rooted in one place. But his devotion or faith in his locality and country is adamant and unabashed, which makes his character endearing to readers. This relating and, at the same time, combative nature of roots and routes presented by Khair is intensive and creates the dialogue Rushdie presents in his novel *Shame*. The dialogue between father and daughter creates tension of national importance when Jens Erik believes that one should not leave the familiarity of the place where one grows up and is suspicious and xenophobic of migrants for having left their homes. But his daughter Pernille sees this differently. She believes in routes out for refugees and migrants whose homes have become unlivable because of Western intervention. Pernille

attacks him by giving reference to Rushdie's lines, "he writes in one of his books that trees have roots, human beings have legs. [...] Trees have roots, so they stay in one place; human beings have legs to move with, walk, run, travel, emigrate" (53). But Mr Erik manages a witty reply – "human beings also have buttocks to sit on" (53). This reply declares Khair's voice that he does not want to give his final comment about what he supports for human- routes or roots. Khair, through the minor characters, like Lenin Ghosh from *Phansa*, and the rural Zimbabwean girl Maita, literalizes this notion of roots in this novel because they live where they grow up. But his taking of this very issue and presenting this problem somehow shows that he supports routes; he wants people to move as Khair's other works also deal with the issue of migration and throw light on how to fight in such conditions. So, *The Body by the Shore* harnesses the anxiety and latent insecurities that have floated in the post-pandemic world.

Declaration of Conflicts of Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest.

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