

**A Tale in Travel Writing: Tabish Khair's *The Bus Stopped*****Prof Sucheta Pathania****Dean Faculty of Arts, University of Jammu****Dr. Rakesh Kumar****Associate Professor, Department of English****University of Jammu**

The travel writing has always been popular for sharing the experiences of fun, pleasure and memories of a writer visiting a particular region, route, place or even a culture. The recent human history marks a number of migrations from third World countries to the first world. Approximately two hundred and eighty million people live in countries other than the countries of their birth. Their frequent visits to their native countries or the other places of the world produce a great volume of literature in the travel writing apart from other travel writers. Tabish Khair is one of the established diaspora writers of Indian origin, presently living in Denmark, and has made significant contributions in the travel literature. His novel *The Bus Stopped*, offers various features of the travel writing in special regard to his nostalgia for Bihar, India. The novel offers interesting narratives about a bus journey from Gaya to Phansa of his native land Bihar in which a number of stories imbed and create this master piece.

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Travel writing, as a literary genre, occupies a unique space between observation and introspection, fact and imagination, movement and memory. At its core, travel writing involves the documentation of journeys, not merely in terms of physical relocations but also as transformations of the selves. From the ancient chronicles of explorers and pilgrims to recent and contemporary narratives shaped by globalisation, the genre has evolved significantly over the time. For Indian diasporic writers, travel writing has been an especially potent platform, enabling them to negotiate, contemplate and comprehend their hybrid identities, reflect on displacement and explore the complexities of cultural belonging. The traces of travel writing dates back to antiquity as per available data. Classical travel accounts, such as those by Pausanias and Herodotus in ancient Greece or Faxian and Xuanzang from ancient China primarily focused on describing lands, customs, and peoples and their transformative effects on the travel writers. These early travelogues often combined empirical observation with myth, storytelling, and philosophical reflection, thereby highlighting the encounter between different cultures. In the medieval period, travel writing was the result of the religious pilgrimage and trade. Muslim travellers like Ibn Battuta and Christian pilgrims to the Holy Land penned rich accounts that mixed the sacred with the worldly. In India, early

travel narratives often took the form of *tirtha-yatras*, describing faith, spiritual journeys of the body and soul, highlighting the holy landscapes.

European imperialism in the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries further fuelled the travel writing which subsequently got entangled with the colonial discourse. European explorers, missionaries, and even administrators wrote extensively about the "unknown" East, including India, often portraying it through the orientalist viewpoint. Writers like Marco Polo and later colonial figures such as William Dalrymple, Freya Stark, Patrick Leigh Fermor, Tim Mackintosh-Smith, Wilfred Thesiger etc. contributed to the vast body of travel writing that constructed and codified foreign territories as spaces of adventure, danger, and cultural otherness. The colonial era in particular witnessed travel writing functioning not only as a narrative form but also as a tool of empire, contributing to cartographic knowledge, imperial ambitions, and ethnographic curiosity. In contrast, native accounts of travel, especially by Indians, were relatively rare or gagged in the colonial archive, although figures like Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, and later Jawaharlal Nehru wrote compelling travel-based reflections that subtly challenged the colonial narratives.

The twentieth century marked a significant turn in the genre, with modernist and postcolonial shifts encouraging writers to move beyond descriptive realism towards more introspective, fragmented, and critical modes of travel writing. No longer merely about the outer journey or destination, the genre increasingly engaged with the themes of exile, dislocation, memory, and identity. This evolution opened up space for the marginalised voices from formerly colonised nations, including India. For diasporic writers in particular, the act of travel was no longer a one-way exploration of the "other" but often a return, a re-visiting, or a re-imagining of both homeland and the hostland.

Indian diasporic travel writing is marked by a rich variety, history and hybridity. These writers often overlap multiple identities, geographies, cultures and histories. Their travel narratives are deeply personal and politically resonant and complex, shaped by experiences of migration, exile, hybridity and global mobility. One of the pioneering Indian figures in this genre is Salman Rushdie, whose works such as *Imaginary Homelands* (1991) offer a compelling blend of essay, memoir, and travelogue. Rushdie's reflections on India, Pakistan, and the broader South Asian diaspora demonstrate how physical journeys can mirror psychic ones, with memory, nostalgia and imagination playing central roles in reconstructing place and identity. Just like Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh also establishes himself as a diasporic travel writer who traverses continents and histories. In his *In an Antique Land* (1992), Ghosh merges ethnography, historical reconstruction, and travel narrative to explore the interconnected worlds of medieval Egypt and India. His writing challenges the Western notions of linear progress and reclaims historical agency for subaltern voices. V. S. Naipaul, of Indian descent and Trinidadian origin, provides another complex composition. His travel writings—such as *India: A Million Mutinies Now*, reflect both an insider and outsider perspective. While Naipaul's works have been critiqued for their often debatable stance toward postcolonial India, they reveal the psychological tensions of diasporic identity and the fraught dynamics of return. Jhumpa Lahiri, known for her fiction, has also ventured into reflective travel writing, particularly through her essays and memoir *In Other Words* (2016),

in which she documents her linguistic journey from English to Italian. Though not conventional travel writing, her work explores themes of migration, language, and cultural translation, all central to the diasporic condition. Indian diasporic travel writing offers a bucket full of complex themes such as displacement and belonging, memory and history, hybridity and identity, critique of globalisation and neo-colonialism, and rewriting the exotic.

Alasdair Pettinger defines travel writing as “any account of a journey or description of a place that is based on firsthand experience.” He notes that this genre includes a wide range of texts, encompassing diaries, letters, postcards, newspaper, magazine articles, blogs, essays, official reports, promotional brochures, and even ethnographies. Travel writing is often distinguished from guidebooks and imaginative fiction, though these distinctions were less pronounced in earlier periods. The genre has gained increased scholarly attention since the ninety eighties, coinciding with a surge in popularity of literary travel writing and the establishment of travel-writing studies as an academic discipline. Carl Thompson describes travel writing as a genre that “encompasses a bewildering diversity of forms, modes and itineraries.” He emphasises that travel writing is inherently interdisciplinary and transcultural, blending elements from various genres such as memoir, journalism, letters, guidebooks, confessional narrative, and fiction. This genre is characterised by its focus on the encounter between self and other, highlighting the negotiation of identity and difference through movement. According to Maria Louders Lopez, “Once vehicles for cultural prejudice serving official purposes, contemporary travel accounts have become powerful instruments of cultural critique, displaying a greater subject-orientation” (June 2003, 51).

In the ever-evolving domain of postcolonial and diasporic literature, Tabish Khair has emerged as a significant voice whose narratives intersect geographies, cultures, and identities. Born in 1966, in Bihar, India, and later relocating to Denmark, Khair embodies the sensibilities of a diasporic intellectual whose literary corpus engages with questions of displacement, belonging, cultural memory and identity. His position as both an insider and outsider, rooted in Indian traditions yet intellectually and physically distanced from them, renders his writing a fertile ground for the exploration of diasporic consciousness and transnational travel. Among his diverse works, *The Bus Stopped* (2004) stands out as a nuanced narrative that merges the conventions of travel writing with the socio-political anxieties of postcolonial India. Framed within the context of a single inter-city bus journey, the novel becomes a microcosmic exploration of Indian society, filtered through the lens of a diasporic imagination. Tabish Khair’s *The Bus Stopped* contributes meaningfully to this reconfiguration of travel writing. His treatment of travel is not one of exotic spectacle but of internal and external navigation, of physical distances as well as psychic terrains. For Khair, travel becomes a metaphor for transition, liminality, and the fluidity of identities, especially in the postcolonial and post-globalised contexts.

The relevance of *The Bus Stopped* lies in its deceptive simplicity. Set on a bus journey from Gaya to Phansa, the novel follows a diverse ensemble of passengers, each carrying their histories, prejudices, aspirations, subjectivities and secrets. Through their interactions and introspections, Khair presents a cross-sectional view of contemporary India, marked by caste hierarchies, gender dynamics, religious tensions, and class divides. However, what elevates the narrative beyond a mere sociological catalogue is the author’s ability to infuse it with the sensibilities of someone who is both part of the culture and detached from it. Khair’s



diasporic position allows him to observe the intricacies of Indian society with a clarity that is both empathetic and critically distanced. The theoretical underpinnings of this research paper rest upon the intersection of diaspora theory, postcolonial travel writing, and mobility studies. Scholars such as James Clifford, Homi Bhabha, and Paul Gilroy have emphasised the complexities of diasporic identities—not as fixed or nostalgically bound to a singular homeland, but as mobile, hybrid, and constantly negotiated. Khair's writing resonates with such conceptual frameworks, particularly in his resistance to monolithic narratives of home or cultural authenticity. In *The Bus Stopped*, travel serves not as a quest for origin but as an inquiry into the present, messy, plural, and yet fragmented. The road, as depicted in the novel, is not merely a means to an end but a space of encounter, disruption, and sometimes, violence. The novel, therefore, aligns with contemporary scholarly approaches that see mobility not only as freedom or escape but also as fraught with power imbalances and exclusions. Khair's diasporic lens also manifests in his narrative techniques. His prose is devoid of romantic nostalgia, yet it exudes a quiet empathy for his characters. The third-person omniscient narrator, while moving fluidly among characters, often maintains a subtle ironic distance, suggestive of the author's own position between belonging and estrangement. Furthermore, Khair's stylistic choices reflect his diasporic consciousness: the interweaving of standard English with Indian idioms and cultural references, the juxtaposition of myth and modernity, and the use of flashbacks to convey historical and personal trauma. These techniques disrupt linear storytelling, mirroring the disjunctive experience of the diasporic subject. Sharply, *The Bus Stopped* resists the teleology of Western travelogues that move from ignorance to knowledge, or from periphery to center. Instead, it foregrounds the uncertainties of travel, the impermanence of identity, and the incompleteness of human understanding. Characters board the bus with expectations and illusions, but the journey complicates their self-perceptions. For instance, the retired Judge, the *hijra* (transgender person), the young girl forced into marriage, and the American tourist each represent different facets of social identity, all of which are put into question as the bus moves through rural and urban landscapes. In presenting these intersecting trajectories, Khair emphasises the multiplicity of Indian experiences, while critiquing the essentialisms often associated with both Western and nationalist discourses. Furthermore, Khair's work must also be situated within the broader tradition of South Asian English literature, where travel, both literal and metaphorical, has long served as a narrative device to explore the postcolonial condition. Writers such as Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, and Anita Desai have used journeys to interrogate identity, history, and cultural hybridity. However, Khair's contribution is distinct in its minimalism and realism. Unlike the magical realism of Rushdie or the historiographic metafiction of Ghosh, Khair adopts a sparse, almost cinematic realism that draws attention to the immediacy of lived experiences. This aesthetic choice reinforces the socio-political urgency of his narrative, aligning it more closely with the material realities of everyday travel in India, overcrowded buses, dusty roads, and unpredictable detours.

As the title suggests the novel deals with the writer's journey on a route from Gaya to Phansa. In which the bus stopped many times which provides a platform to delineate writer's experiences during the journey. Khair has also given a subtle description of the bus such as the colour, a rusted mudguard, tyres, and a cracked windscreen etc., Mangal Singh, driver of the bus came and started the bus; "Just before he turns the ignition key, again and again coaxing the old engine to start, he puts the whistle to his mouth and gives a short sharp blow on it. A sound that cuts across the dawn, the field and the houses like a bird in flight". The



bus reaches its destination towards the end of the novel and it finally stops. Throughout the journey from Gaya to Phansa, the bus is stopped multiple times. And with the each stoppage of the bus there comes something new in terms of characters, situations, and the events. The most remarkable event of the bus remains quite dramatic denouement, for all the passengers, that there is portrayal of a tribal woman travelling in the bus carrying a dead child. When the co-passengers come to know the fact, the bus stops and the child is buried before the bus again moves. Khair describes the scene as:

More voices pitched in, expressing surprise, indignation, shock, scepticism, anger, plain curiosity. The bus started slowing down. I jumped out from the rear exit and ran to the front. A crowd had already spilled out, while a bigger crowd was hanging around the front exist and peering from the windows on our side. On the bottom step of the door sat the tribal women. She was clutching the bundled-up child to her bosom the child is dead. She is carrying a dead, cried the dominant male voice. (157)

The first part of the novel is titled as 'Homes'. Khair expresses that the servants know better about houses than sahabs, bibis and babus (3). In this section of the novel he talks about the Ammi's house which was built by her husband. The Ammi's house was built during the Second World War when the cement was available in limit as it was strictly rationed and Ammi's house was not built with cement but with a compound of lime and earth. Khair has given a wide description of Ammi's house in the following words:

Ammi's house, the white one, was built by my grandfather-doctor, educationist and amateur archaeologist with some minor finds to his name. It was built during the Second World War, when cement was strictly rationed. As such, it was built not with cement but with a compound of lime, and earth that, claimed my grandfather and the ancient master mason who supervised the construction, was the mix favoured by the Mughals for centuries before the hard certainties of cement and concrete. (5)

The author highlights that this house has a special relationship with servants as there is a separate room for them constructed around a large courtyard attached to the store room and the kitchen. The guests are invited and many visitors and passing relatives often come in the house. The meals are cooked and served to all of these servants, visitors and guests. He further elaborates that his father's house, *ghar* to him, was a massive structure. It was constructed to face the earthquakes which stroke the region every fifty years. There is a large dining table where a dozen people can eat together. The servants have no separate houses owned, but, there is a reserved room kept for servants in the house.

The second part of the novel, titled 'Journeys' meticulously deals with an expressive and reminiscent depiction of the rural and rustic town of India through the bus that proceeds from Gaya to Phansa. The various characters on the way provide a brief look of several aspects of modern India. The pivotal voice in the novel is that of Mangal Singh, driver of the bus. He stays with us throughout the novel. Mangal Singh is an rough man, forsaken by his wife but an attentive man who observes life in small images. These small images which are brought together in a series allow us to construct up a scene of the events taking place in that dramatic





journey. Another first person narrator is a eunuch or a *hijra*. When she boards the bus she converts her identity from a Muslim name Farhana to the Hindu Parvati. She left the town where she was born and ran away in order to escape from the increasing tensions of new religio-political parties. Her narrative is sophisticated and rather regrettably nostalgic with a happy ending. The next narrator is another first person voice, a person nostalgic about the attractiveness of a servant called Zeenat. He had tried to persuade her in his teen age years. This man namely Irfan had met her on the stairs many a times. He had no idea what would happen if he met her again. He expressed his emotions and sentiments in many statements which reflect that he was greatly attracted by Zeenat. The following lines clearly illustrate it:

When I put my arms around her and kissed her clumsily, she did not object. Her smell entered that deep part of my soul from which nothing can ever be erased. It would be there for as long as lived and, at that moment, I did not care what they said about her. Wanton? Whore? To have her touch me, to feel her firm warmth, I would stand up against all those tongues. (109)

The other important person in the bus is a Danish businessman Rasmus. The businessman was travelling from Gaya to Phansa in his car with his driver Hari, but his car breaks down. And Rasmus has to catch the bus. There were a few cars passing on the way but he did not hope that they would give him a lift. He was carrying a lot of money in the attaché case. He thought to travel in such area, in possession of money he needed safety. This is the most hilarious situation of the novel with humiliation of Rasmus who is going to Phansa to bribe an official. The bus conductor, Shanker gives another viewpoint on Mangal Singh, the bus driver. He regards Mangal Singh as ferocious, seducer and a drunkard. “But this Driver Mangal Singh, he is different. Rapacious, a womanizer, a drunkard. He has a poster of an actress hanging behind his driver’s seat; not a poster of Madhubala or Nargis or Hema Malini or even Rekha but of some half-naked two-chit starlet of today” (+149).

At the end of the novel the reader experiences the whole narrative woven in relation to the bus and its journey on a particular route. The bus becomes a metaphoric symbol in terms of the need of journey. Narrating this bus journey of his native land Khair gets an opportunity to deconstruct the cultural boundaries of his adopted nation, i.e. Holland. During this bus journey his memories and experiences fill his heart with the flavours and nostalgia of his native region. Khair finds relief while portraying his experience of the journey of his homeland. In “Border crossing in The African Travel Narratives of Ibn Batuta, Richard Burton and Paul Theroux”, Fiona Moola comments upon the different conceptions of travelling, “The border is seen as a liminal zone which paradoxically separates and joins spaces. Accounts of border crossings in travel writing from different periods suggest the historicity and cultural specificity of conceptions of geographical borders, and the way they index the “boundaries” of the subjects who cross them” (1).

The novel emphatically raises the notion of home, as it opens with the ‘home’ and after completing the journey ‘homes again’. The whole narrative is structured on the basis of the division into three sections; the main part is titled as ‘Journeys’ and remaining two parts, opens with the title ‘Homes’ and ends with the title ‘Homes again’. It opens with the writer’s emphasis upon the word home. To quote: “Home. A word that, in English or Danish, is spoken with a final clamping down of the lips, like windows shutting, as if what was



contained was nothing but space; there is a movement like that of a possessive child gathering his toys in his arms: home; and that, in Hindi or Urdu, is spoken with a soft expulsion of breath, the lips opening like doors, a moving out from the rasp that catches in the throat to the final roll of the tongue: ghar. Ghar is also house" (195).

Highlighting the regional spirit of any place is a very unique hallmark of the travel writing. Khair through this novel amazingly highlights the regional spirit of Bihar, his homeland in an interesting way. He writes, "A pond or a trough from which the monsoon water would not evaporate most years. On its banks, three ragged banana bushes and behind them a number of hunched huts made of bricks and mud, the walls facing the road unplastered but chalked white. Beyond it all biggest, tallest Sita Ashok tree he has ever seen. He notices this tree on every trip. It is said that if you drank the water in which its delicate, perfumed flowers had been washed, you would be cured of grief (66). The novelist not only describes the regional beauty and spirit of Bihar but along with that he also highlights the beauty and spirit of the regional language as he has used the typical desi words of Hindi and Urdu languages really spoken in Bihar, India. Even he has used the long sentences, realistically filled with the essence of his native land such as; "yahan sudh desi ghee ki mithaiyan milti hain", "sab bhagwan ki leela hai" and "ye koi Firangistan thode hi hai" etc.

Tabish Khair becomes able to deconstruct the cultural boundaries of his adopted nation with the help of explanation of the journey of his native land. In *Remembrance of Homes Past: The narration of memory in Baumgartner's Bombay, The Bus Stopped* and *The God of Small Things*, Kristin Nord Hicks writes about the narrative structure of the novel. He argues: They are all on a journey that eventually leads home, either physically or spiritually. The lives the passengers, viewed in the specific moment of transition they share during the bus ride-are told through other specific moments of their lives. The memories evoked show us stories of lives being lived. Each life is represented through seemingly coincidental images or memories, somehow connected to the journey of the bus. The stories thus also allegorize how the present is only a preliminary stop on the continuous travel of our life, from the past through the fleeting present, into future. (Hicks 19)

Usually, travel writing has been involved in cultural and socio-political discourses whereas in the recent times significant contributions have come from the diaspora. There are numerous migrants who recorded their experiences and expressed their sensibilities related to life in the foreign lands. There are many scholars and writers in diaspora who have visited their native lands and homes of their ancestors to find out how much of their values and morals that they have are actually obtained in inheritance. Hence, in the contemporary times diaspora has added a lot in travel writing. Their migration to the foreign lands and their frequent visits to the native lands create a great volume of literature in travel writing. As a matter of practice, a travelogue reflects a journey which initiates from a particular place and ends with some specific destination. The reader comes in contact with a large number of emotional, social, moral, political and cultural changes. In this novel different characters portray different social groups and social status. They reflect the different situations and features of the society. The reader feels himself very close and familiar to a variety of cultures. There is a great difference between Indian cultures and foreign ones and these differences are clearly brought out by the author in this novel. Khair as a novelist successfully describes variation of culture, of the travellers in the bus in these words:



The only person in the bus who makes Mangal Singh's restless eyes pause is sitting in one of the front rows. He is dressed in torn but clean clothes, shirt and cotton trousers. He wears thin, black rimmed glasses. He is obese in a watery sort of way going bold from both sides of the temple, face swollen in an unhealthy manner. Even from this distance, Mongal Singh can see the dandruff that is spread like powder on the dark cloth covering his shoulders. He seems to be in his own world and it is easy to see that the man is not well. Not well at all. (Khair 105)

The narrative reveals the journey as a psychological interaction of the characters, for instance, Mangal Singh shows some polite traits while travelling. The falls and rise of eunuch has been realistically narrated. There are several ideas of varied cultures and socio-political changes of the native land of the author. He describes two different religions and cultures prevailing in the Indian society. For instance:

By the way she haggled; one would have thought she was poor. But her language and her clothes did not indicate any poverty. She was wearing a white sari which obviously meant that she was a widow. However, it was not a plain cotton sari. It was of some richer material, with off-white embroidery around the borders and it looked new. (68)

In the mind of diaspora 'Home' remains as a sign of identity for ever. The novel, *The Bus Stopped* offers a detailed account of the vitality of 'Home' and it also differentiates between House and Home. As shared earlier the whole narrative is bifurcated into these sections on the basis of the structure. The middle and main part is titled as 'Journeys', the other two sections begins with the title 'Homes' and ends with 'Home again'. The novel gives a drastic idea of diaspora dynamics and also highlights the feelings for the notion of home. The notion of home is primarily concerned with memory and identity. The emigrant tribes who have parted from their homes, their native regions, they miss their mother land. This reflects that how the love and affection of native land has been deeply rooted in the heart of alienated diaspora. Khair is living in Denmark but through this travel writing he reveals his nostalgia for his native land uniquely and reminds his experiences and remembrances of his lovely past days spent in his native region. Fundamentally, the novel contributes the course and phenomenon of memories of his spent days in native country.

The novel brings out the significance of home and the inclination of returning to their homes through various characters. The journey initiated from home and on completion of journey they reach their destinations. On the basis of diaspora influence Khair defines the denotation and importance of homeland. The novel is an amazing picture of the notion of home. The home is not only a place giving temporary shelter from bad weather or danger but it is also offers the warmth in which the ideas, dreams, beliefs and relations are conveyed, nurtured and become larger. The book tables two different categories of ideas; one is the idea of belongingness and the other is the thought of alienation. The author is living far away from his homeland and writing consciously about his land of origin. It reflects the feeling of





belongingness. No doubt he explains very little in a simple language but his description is full of deep and strong emotions. That is why the novel is very easy to penetrate and present an idea which is closer to common Indian ethos. On the other hand, feeling of alienation also reflects that the author is alienated from his own land of origin. He considers himself in an unfriendly atmosphere. The ideas of separation and withdrawal from the native land strengthen the feelings of alienation.

In examining *The Bus Stopped* through the lens of diasporic travel writing, it becomes evident that Tabish Khair occupies a unique position within contemporary postcolonial literature. His diasporic identity does not merely inform the themes of his writing but fundamentally shapes his narrative approach, bridging the local with the global, the familiar with the alienated, and the rooted with the mobile. As a writer who lives outside India yet remains deeply connected to its cultural, linguistic, and social complexities, Khair offers a perspective that is both intimate and critically distanced. This duality allows him to portray the socio-political landscape of India with clarity, nuance, and a sense of moral urgency. In this novel, Khair reimagines the travel narrative not as a linear journey toward enlightenment but as a chaotic, layered experience that mirrors the fragmented realities of postcolonial and post-globalised India. The novel challenges traditional Western paradigms of travel writing by focusing on the quotidian and the marginal rather than the exotic or the monumental. In doing so, Khair underscores the power of the seemingly mundane to reveal deep social tensions and human vulnerabilities. Moreover, Khair's work expands the contours of diasporic literature by resisting nostalgic idealisations of the homeland. Instead, his narrative compels readers to confront the contradictions, injustices, and complexities of contemporary Indian life. Through a deceptively simple bus journey, *The Bus Stopped* becomes a vehicle for exploring broader questions of identity, power, and belonging in a world increasingly defined by movement and displacement. Thus, Tabish Khair not only redefines travel writing from a postcolonial perspective but also affirms the diasporic writer's critical role in mediating between cultures, geographies, and histories with intellectual rigor and narrative grace.

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