

ഇശൽ
വൈകൃതം
ഐതര്യം: 42

Ishal Paithrkam

Online issue 27

print issue 42

June 2025



Mahakavi Moyinkutty Vaidyar
Mappila Kala Akademi
Department of Cultural Affairs
Government of Kerala-India
June 2025

ഇശൽ പൈത്യകം

ത്രൈമാസിക

ലക്കം: 42

2025 ജൂൺ

പകർപ്പാവകാശം: പ്രസാധകർക്ക്

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Ishal Paithrkam

ISSN: 2582-550X

Peer-Reviewed

Quarterly

Bilingual

Issue: 42

Online issue: 27

June: 2025

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Editor

Dr. Shamshad hussain. KT

Publisher

Mahakavi Moyinkutty

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പ്രസാധകർ

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Exploration of Trauma and Identity in Tabish Khair's Select Protagonists

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Tabish Khair's works, *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position* (2012) and *Night of Happiness* (2018), explore the complexities of trauma, identity crises, and cultural dislocation. Through the detailed experiences of characters like Karim and Ahmed, Khair emphasizes the extensive effects of both personal and collective traumata on the identities of immigrants. Karim's experiences of Islamophobia within a Western context, alongside Ahmed's grief resulting from the tragic death of his wife amid the Riots, exemplify the ways in which trauma can fracture an individual's identity and lead to significant feelings of isolation. These narratives highlight the characters' struggles for belonging amidst the overlapping challenges of religious, cultural, and racial divides. Utilizing trauma theory, this analysis examines how Khair articulates the broader immigrant experience, revealing the significant psychological impact of societal rejection. By integrating historical and contemporary elements into his narratives, Khair provides a perspective that amplifies the immigrant's fight for self-identity and acknowledgment. Ultimately, his works convey the persistent resilience of individuals confronting dislocation and prejudice, framing trauma as both a personal struggle and a shared reality. This examination positions Khair's narratives within the wider conversation on trauma and identity in postcolonial literature.

Keywords: Trauma, Tabish Khair, Islamophobia, immigrant experience, cultural alienation

Introduction

Trauma, identity, and cultural dislocation serve as pivotal themes in Tabish Khair's novels *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position* and *Night of Happiness*. Through the narratives of characters like Karim and Ahmed, Khair delves into the profound emotional scars inflicted by personal loss, societal prejudices, and the internal struggles associated with fragmented identities. Set against a backdrop characterized by cultural, religious, and racial divisions, these individuals endure significant psychological injuries as they strive to align their personal convictions with the societal rejection they encounter. Trauma emerges as a crucial element in their existence, leading to feelings of alienation, fear, and disillusionment. Khair's narrative technique illuminates how trauma, often inherited and sustained by systemic marginalization, influences their self-perception and worldview. His work underscores the enduring impact of trauma within postcolonial and immigrant contexts, providing a sensitive exploration of the quest for belonging and self-identity in a society that often marginalizes those who do not conform to established norms. Through these characters, Khair illustrates trauma as not merely an individual affliction but as a shared experience that impacts entire communities grappling with the intricacies of identity, belonging, and survival.

Cultural Distrust and Islamophobia: Karim's Reliance on Spiritual Belief

In *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position* Tabish Khair examines the complex interplay of identity, faith, Islamophobia, and trauma as experienced by immigrants. The narrative intricately portrays the lives of the protagonist, the Muslim landlord Karim, the unnamed narrator and his roommate Ravi, highlighting the diverse dimensions of immigrant identity in Denmark, where xenophobia and prejudice remain pervasive. The characters' journeys toward belonging are set against a backdrop of subtle yet

impactful traumas, underscoring how both individual and societal obstacles affect and distort their self-image.

Cathy Caruth's insights on trauma resonate deeply with Khair's investigation of these themes. Caruth posits that trauma is "not, like the wound of the body, a simple healable event, but rather an event...not locatable to the original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way that it was precisely not known in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on" (Caruth 1995). This haunting aspect of trauma is vividly illustrated in Karim's encounters with Islamophobia and social exclusion, as well as in the protagonist's contemplations on cultural dislocation. Through their interconnected stories, Khair elucidates how trauma influences immigrant identities and complicates their pursuit of acceptance and stability in a fractured society.

The unnamed narrator of the novel, an English professor at a university, hails from a Pakistani Muslim background and experiences a profound conflict regarding his Muslim identity. He oscillates between a rejection of liberal ideals and a certain leniency towards Islamic values. This internal conflict is vividly illustrated through his candid accounts of sexual encounters during his Master of Fine Arts studies, indicating a significant departure from conventional Islamic norms. Ravi, a Brahmin from India with ambitions of becoming a writer, offers a distinctive viewpoint on Islam that encourages readers to reevaluate their perceptions of the faith. Upon beginning to follow Karim Bhai, he remarked, "The nammaz is the gym of Islam; that's why it is so despised in the West." (Khair,2014 p.12). Despite his Hindu heritage, Ravi demonstrates a keen interest in learning about Islamic prayers from Karim Bhai, who consents to instruct him. Karim, a committed Muslim, feels a sense of duty to assist Ravi, as this is regarded as a means for non-Muslims to gain access to paradise. "To convert a non-Muslim into Islam is to be shown the secret side-door to paradise." (Khair,2014 p.11). His unwavering commitment to his faith sharply contrasts with the narrator's ambivalence, presenting a redefined notion of fundamentalism that encompasses selfless sacrifice, deep devotion, and a genuine respect for others. The narrative delves into Karim

Bhai's dedication to his faith, highlighted by his organization of Quranic study groups and his unwavering adherence to Islamic tenets, thereby challenging prevailing stereotypes and providing a more intricate portrayal of devout Muslim characters in modern literature.

The representation of Muslims in media has profoundly shaped public perceptions, reinforcing stereotypes that contribute to the rise of Islamophobia. Following the events of September 11, this bias became more pronounced on a global scale, with media frequently portraying Muslim communities through simplistic and reductive frameworks. A prevalent stereotype is that of the radical Muslim militant, characterized as inherently violent and obsessed with jihad against Western societies, thereby linking violence with Muslim identity. Such portrayals not only instill fear but also marginalize individuals, depriving them of their complex identities and complicating their experiences within Western environments.

In Tabish Khair's *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position*, the character of Karim serves as a poignant representation of the psychological scars inflicted by Islamophobic prejudice and its significant repercussions on devout Muslim immigrants. As a deeply religious yet reserved landlord, Karim finds himself subjected to societal mistrust primarily due to his religious observances and participation in a Quran study group. This skepticism, exacerbated by the portrayal in Danish media, illustrates a widespread societal inclination to equate religious devotion with radicalism. The narrator, reflecting on this dynamic, begins to scrutinize Karim's intentions, pondering, "I wondered whether it was because he did not trust any of us. Was he more unguarded with his Quranic discussion group when we were not around? Or was it because he did not really care, having given up on Denmark as the land of infidels?" (Khair, 2014: 48).

Karim's emotional detachment serves as a coping mechanism in a world that relentlessly marginalizes him, while his reliance on faith becomes both a refuge and a source of conflict. In a society rife with Islamophobia, he finds himself ensnared in a reductive stereotype that fails to capture the complexity of his identity. The narrator's

observation that Karim is perceived as “a narrow, religious man, intolerant of so many aspects of modernity” (Khair, 2014: 135) highlights the pervasive nature of these misconceptions. This characterization not only simplifies Karim’s multifaceted personality but also reflects a broader societal tendency to conflate individual beliefs with extremist ideologies, thereby perpetuating harmful stereotypes.

This viewpoint is emblematic of a historical continuum, where colonial-era prejudices have morphed into contemporary Islamophobic sentiments. Choudhury’s assertion that these biases are “born of these colonial epistemological misadventures, now revived in service of a new imperial project: that of prosecuting and managing the War on Terror” (Choudhury, 2015: 49) underscores the insidious nature of such stereotypes. They are not merely relics of the past but are actively employed to justify modern-day discrimination and surveillance, particularly against Muslim communities. This transformation of prejudice illustrates how historical narratives can be weaponized to serve current political agendas, further entrenching societal divisions.

The theme of enduring trauma resulting from unjust categorization resonates deeply throughout the novel. Karim’s wrongful detention, spurred by unfounded suspicions regarding his alleged involvement in the ‘Islamist Axe Plot,’ serves as a stark reminder of the consequences of such biases. The media frenzy that ensues not only amplifies the stigma surrounding him but also highlights the role of sensationalism in shaping public perception. Even after his exoneration, the lingering suspicion that follows him is a testament to the lasting impact of societal bias. His identity becomes irrevocably tainted, illustrating how the scars of injustice can persist long after the initial trauma has subsided.

Through Karim’s experiences, Khair poignantly critiques the dehumanizing effects of Islamophobia. It strips individuals of their humanity, reducing them to mere symbols of fear and suspicion. This reductionist view thrusts them into crises of identity, forcing them to navigate a world that often refuses to see them as whole individuals. The cycles of trauma and social exclusion that Karim endures reflect

a broader societal failure to recognize and embrace diversity, ultimately perpetuating a narrative that marginalizes rather than uplifts.

The doubts surrounding Karim ultimately turn out to be baseless; his seemingly enigmatic conduct does not indicate extremism but instead reveals his profound concern for his ex-wife, who suffers from Alzheimer's disease. As Khair explains, "He was secretly helping his ex-wife... She had Alzheimer's, and no one knew. Not even his tenants" (Khair, 2014: 136). This revelation serves to portray Karim in a more sympathetic light, demonstrating that his actions, often misinterpreted due to prejudice, are fundamentally driven by compassion and a sense of responsibility.

Moreover, Karim's experience illustrates the concept of acculturation, which is described as "the process of cultural and psychological change that follows intercultural contact" (Berry, 2006: 305). On an individual level, this process involves psychological adjustments, or "behavioral shifts," in which "existing identities and attitudes change and new ones develop: personal identity and ethnic identity often shift away from those held prior to contact" (Berry, 1994: 238).

Khair's examination of trauma, prejudice, and cultural conflict among Muslim immigrants is deeply nuanced. Through the experiences of Karim, he uncovers the emotional weight Muslims bear in a society that frequently misinterprets their identities. He highlights the strength of faith in the face of uncertainty and the psychological ramifications of Islamophobia, demonstrating how immigrant communities navigate both external adversities and internalized biases. By illuminating their narratives, Khair encourages readers to reevaluate their views on faith, culture, and the immigrant experience, promoting a more compassionate understanding of marginalized groups.

Ahmed's World: The Interplay of Trauma, Identity, and Alienation

In *Night of Happiness*, Tabish Khair intricately examines the themes of trauma, identity, and alienation, revealing how these elements influence the lives of individuals in postcolonial India. Central to this narrative is Ahmed, a Muslim man working for Anil Mehrotra,

a businessman who becomes enmeshed in Ahmed's tumultuous and trauma-laden existence. The plot unfolds as Mehrotra uncovers a manuscript that details Ahmed's complex journey, characterized by significant psychological turmoil, a fragmented identity, and a deep sense of social exclusion. The novel serves as a lens through which the psychological and emotional ramifications of navigating a life marked by personal loss and societal challenges are explored.

The title *Night of Happiness* references Shab-e-Baraat, a significant night in Islam associated with salvation, mercy, and the absolution of sins. Yet, for Ahmed, this night represents the disintegration of his life. Each year, he requests leave for this occasion, and although Mehrotra accommodates this request, he does so without grasping its profound importance to Ahmed. In a crucial scene during a specific Shab-e-Baraat, Mehrotra compels Ahmed to remain at work late, an intrusion that disrupts Ahmed's sacred rituals and intensifies the emotional burden of the evening. A severe rainstorm further hinders Ahmed's return home, and in a seemingly innocuous act, Mehrotra offers him a ride, inadvertently breaching a personal boundary and entering a hidden aspect of Ahmed's life.

Upon arriving at Ahmed's residence, Mehrotra finds himself in an increasingly disconcerting predicament. He notes the absence of Ahmed's wife, Roshni, attributing it to her shyness. However, the discomfort escalates when Ahmed presents Mehrotra with a plate of halva—remarkably devoid of any food. As Khair observes, “the plate Ahmed was holding. There was no halva on it either... Ahmed was totally engrossed in ‘eating’ the halwa” (Khair, 2018, p. 33). Despite the lack of actual sustenance, Ahmed engages in the peculiar act of pretending to eat, a behavior that is both strange and profoundly unsettling. This seemingly innocuous gesture serves as a gateway to the unresolved trauma that pervades Ahmed's life. The empty plate and Ahmed's mimicry of consumption emerge as potent symbols of the emotional and psychological void that characterizes his existence.

This conduct resonates with Judith Herman's assertion that “More commonly, traumatized people find themselves reenacting some aspect of the trauma scene in disguised form, without realizing what

they are doing” (Herman, 1992: 47). Ahmed’s ritualistic behavior with the empty plate can be viewed as a nuanced form of reenactment—an unconscious endeavor to relive or externalize the trauma that continues to afflict him. The act of feigning consumption from an empty plate signifies a profound emotional deprivation, a void within himself that physical nourishment cannot remedy. It underscores the enduring nature of his trauma, which remains unaddressed and unrecognized, yet manifests in ways that elude logical comprehension.

This significant moment in *Night of Happiness* compels the reader to contemplate the intricate nature of trauma and its influence on personal identity. It illustrates that trauma manifests not merely as an external injury but as an internal fracture that can fundamentally alter an individual’s self-perception and modify their interactions with others. Khair skillfully delves into the ways in which trauma, especially when unacknowledged, becomes interwoven with one’s identity, often revealed through actions that may appear trivial yet carry substantial emotional significance. Ahmed’s conduct serves as a reflection of his internal struggles, offering a compelling perspective through which the narrative scrutinizes the enduring repercussions of trauma on the human mind. This nuanced and profoundly impactful examination of trauma enriches the novel’s overarching inquiry into the intersections of personal anguish with broader themes of alienation, identity, and the quest for meaning in a disjointed reality.

In the novel, trauma transcends individual experience, emerging as a pervasive influence that profoundly impacts the lives of the characters, especially Ahmed. The narrator highlights the complex identities imposed upon Roshni, noting, “She was given a name, a Hindu one. But another man corrected the first one and gave another name, a Christian one this time. A third man offered a third name. She was a woman of various names. One of them was Roshni” (Khair, 2018: 100). This continual renaming of Roshni illustrates the fragmentation of her identity, as she is compelled to navigate a societal landscape that enforces rigid and often conflicting categories. Her struggle to conform to these societal expectations reflects her profound alienation, as she is perpetually denied the opportunity to develop a

cohesive sense of self. Roshni's plight resonates with Ahmed's own fractured identity, which is similarly shaped by the trauma of cultural dislocation and the painful realization that he, too, cannot meet societal norms. The trauma experienced by Ahmed is exacerbated by his recognition of the entrenched prejudice that impacts both Roshni and himself. His remark, "They will never accept you no matter what you do" (Khair, 2018: 113), signifies a painful realization that Roshni's attempts to integrate into the larger societal framework are ultimately in vain. This understanding reflects Ahmed's own feelings of isolation. His trauma is psychological, stemming from the awareness that regardless of their efforts to belong, they will perpetually face marginalization. The deep-rooted biases within their society serve as a constant source of oppression, undermining their self-esteem and sense of belonging.

The tragic circumstances surrounding Roshni's death during the Gujarat Riots further amplify the theme of alienation. Despite her attempts to integrate, she is brutally killed by a mob that reduces her to a mere representation of the "Other," derogatorily labeling her a "Pakistani whore." Her silence in those final moments conveys a deep sense of resignation regarding the futility of seeking acceptance from a biased society: "She did not even react... She neither cried nor remonstrated; she never pleaded" (Khair, 2018: 129). This act of violence not only results in her physical destruction but also symbolizes the obliteration of her identity, as she is relegated to a mere stereotype. Her silence becomes a poignant expression of surrender, acknowledging that in a world characterized by rigid cultural and religious divisions, her attempts to belong are ultimately in vain. Roshni's murder serves as a traumatic event not only for Ahmed but also for the wider context of immigrant communities whose efforts at assimilation are consistently undermined by deep-seated communal and colonial biases.

Ahmed's trauma deepens in the wake of Roshni's violent murder. The act of retrieving her charred remains becomes a profoundly distressing experience that reflects his emotional turmoil and signifies a critical juncture in his personal disintegration. As the

narrator observes, “Ahmed claimed and buried her charred remains in a Muslim graveyard, three or four days later, when such things could be done” (Khair, 2018: 131). This delay in burial emphasizes the significant psychological effects of trauma. The postponement of such an essential ritual reveals the emotional paralysis that frequently accompanies traumatic experiences, as Ahmed struggles to process or respond in the immediate aftermath of Roshni’s death. His emotional numbness serves as a prominent indication of the intense shock and disbelief he endures, unable to reconcile the horrific loss with his reality.

Cathy Caruth (1996) articulates that the recurrence of traumatic experiences, exemplified by flashbacks, can intensify trauma. She observes that “the repetition of the traumatic experience in the flashback can itself be retraumatizing; if not life-threatening, it is at least threatening to the chemical structure of the brain and can ultimately lead to deterioration” (Caruth, 1996: 63). Ahmed’s trauma manifests through his persistent inability to release Roshni from his life. His behavior—conducting himself as if she remains present—reflects his deep-seated desire to maintain her memory, despite the harsh truth of her passing. As Khair notes, “Ahmed continued to live a life as if he is still together with Roshni” (Khair, 2018: 131). This retreat into a fabricated reality serves as a protective mechanism, shielding him from the profound sorrow and helplessness that accompany such a significant loss. His unwillingness to let go of Roshni, even in death, underscores the depth of his trauma and his difficulty in facing the irrevocability of their separation.

Ahmed’s emotional detachment and his struggle to process Roshni’s death are intricately linked to his trauma. His tendency to avoid confronting reality serves as a defense mechanism against the painful truth he cannot bear. This behavior not only illustrates his difficulty in forming connections with others but also impedes his healing process, as his psychological numbness inhibits him from seeking comfort or addressing the emotional turmoil within. Such avoidance emphasizes how trauma can obstruct emotional bonds and recovery, as Ahmed’s self-imposed barriers isolate him from both others and his own feelings. This internal disintegration reflects his external

estrangement, leaving him ensnared between a past marked by the loss of his wife and a future that appears intolerable.

Furthermore, Ahmed's trauma underscores the intricate interplay of identity, loss, and dislocation within the postcolonial context. He finds himself torn between his cultural roots and personal aspirations, leading to an internal struggle that distances him from both his traditional Muslim community and the secular society. This dual alienation places him in a transitional state, where he cannot fully accept or reconcile his fragmented identity. He exists neither entirely within the traditional realm he once inhabited nor capable of assimilating into the wider secular environment surrounding him. This ongoing tension fosters a persistent sense of displacement, a psychological limbo that exacerbates his trauma.

Khair does not explore Ahmed's internal emotional landscape in depth; however, the narrative implies a significant emotional disconnection. His hesitance to confront Roshni's death and his evasion of the grieving process further highlight the crippling effects of his trauma. The failure to mourn adequately, along with his retreat into a fantasy where Roshni remains alive, exemplifies the oppressive nature of grief and the emotional desensitization resulting from trauma. This avoidance indicates that Ahmed may be unwilling or perhaps incapable of confronting the harsh reality of his loss. Consequently, Ahmed emerges as a tragic figure, marginalized not only by the external environment but also by his own mind. This internal marginalization reflects the disintegration of his self-identity, as he finds himself caught between conflicting elements of his persona—his identity as a Muslim man, the husband of a murdered spouse, and a survivor in a harsh world that has turned its back on him.

The trauma experienced by Ahmed transcends a mere personal crisis, serving as a reflection of broader socio-political challenges, particularly the cultural and communal conflicts that afflict his environment. His ordeal exemplifies the psychological burden of existing within a society characterized by violence, discrimination, and systemic marginalization. The social estrangement he endures parallels the psychological trauma he confronts as he attempts to reconcile his

profound loss with the stark realities of his identity as a Muslim in post-9/11 India. As articulated by Cathy Caruth (1995), trauma is not merely a singular occurrence but a continuous disruption that influences both identity and narrative coherence. Ahmed's struggle to integrate the trauma of Roshni's death with his fragmented identity encapsulates the lasting effects of trauma on both individual and collective scales. Baelo-Allué (2012) further differentiates between psychic and cultural trauma, emphasizing how Roshni's identity crisis and Ahmed's grief highlight the personal, psychological dimensions of trauma, while societal prejudices and exclusions illuminate the cultural aspects of their suffering.

Khair's depiction of Ahmed's trauma underscores the significant psychological and emotional impact of existing in an environment influenced by communal violence, cultural dislocation, and personal bereavement. By situating Ahmed's personal anguish within wider historical and social frameworks, Khair offers a critique of the systemic forces that sustain cycles of violence, alienation, and fragmentation of identity. Consequently, Ahmed's trauma is not merely an individual occurrence; rather, it reflects the shared trauma experienced by marginalized communities ensnared in the complexities of societal exclusion and historical injustices.

Conclusion

In both *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position* and *Night of Happiness*, Tabish Khair illustrates characters ensnared in cycles of trauma, where their identities are fragmented due to personal loss, cultural dislocation, and societal rejection. For Ahmed and Karim, trauma emerges as a pivotal element of their lives, shaping their self-identity and influencing how others perceive them. The emotional repercussions of their experiences lead to a significant disconnection from their authentic selves, as they endeavor to reconcile their cultural and religious beliefs with the conflicting demands of an alien society. This internal conflict is exacerbated by the persistent external marginalization they endure. As Dhilip Mohamad notes, "Trauma is the result of experiencing stressful events that make one feel insecure" (Mohamad, 2019). Both Ahmed and Karim confront

profound insecurity as they attempt to articulate the deep trauma they endure. This insecurity arises not only from personal losses but also from the systemic violence and prejudice ingrained in the societies they navigate. Khair's examination of their internal battles encourages readers to contemplate the intricacies of identity, faith, and belonging, highlighting trauma as a universal human experience that transcends cultural and religious divides.

Khair's characters illuminate the emotional and psychological challenges faced by individuals who endure the profound loss of loved ones or experience ongoing marginalization as Muslims in Western societies. Their narratives confront oversimplified portrayals of victimhood and heroism, prompting readers to reflect on the complex dimensions of trauma and its enduring impact on both individuals and communities. Through these portrayals, Khair offers a compelling critique of the societal dynamics that sustain cycles of trauma and exclusion, ultimately calling for a reassessment of the ways in which identity and belonging are navigated in a world marked by division.

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<https://thinkindiaquarterly.org/index.php/think-india/article/view/15805>

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