

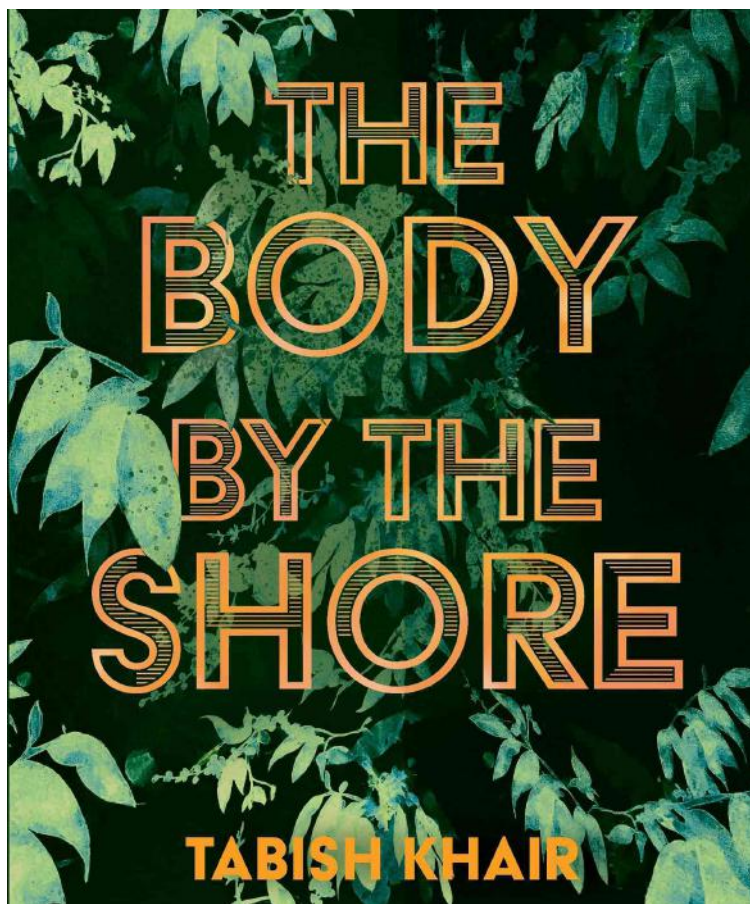
Review: *The Body by the Shore* by Tabish Khair

SONALI MUJUMDAR

"The Body by the Shore" by Tabish Khair is a complex sci-fi thriller with elements of Scandinavian noir that explores themes of climate change, racism, abuse of power and science. Set in a quasi-dystopian future, the narrative follows three seemingly unconnected plot lines that converge to examine humankind's place in the cosmos and its ability to wreak systemic havoc on the world and on fellow beings.

Eclectic in thematic scope and narrative style, and with elements of Scandinavian noir, *The Body by the Shore* is a complex sci-fi thriller. The author Tabish Khair, who is also a poet and academic, is a critical voice in contemporary Indian English writing whose works have been lauded for straddling genres. In his latest work, he explores the darker vagaries of human behaviour

"Whatever is eaten and served has to be done according to tradition"



The sort of place that Michelle finds herself in. An oil rig in the North Sea.

at a macro level, through the prism of science. The scene is set in the quasi-dystopia that prevails in the aftermath of a pandemic, a few years from now: "By 2031, memories of the dread that the virus had evoked in many circles had faded... Many people were simply not interested in these dated ten-year-

old stories of suffering. Neither were they interested in connecting pandemics to climate change or human lifestyle." Power terrifyingly rests in the hands of a few: "the accelerating roller-coaster ride of economies, turning entire nations into kingdoms run by oligarchs and corporate robber barons, under the

thin veneer of elected parliaments and free media". Radicalised violence and upheavals persist on the geopolitical front, and greed dominates with the rise of giant corporations. In this milieu, three seemingly unconnected plot lines emerge. Michelle, a beautiful young Caribbean woman finds herself on

an old oil rig in the North Sea. Initially disconcerted by the strangeness of her environs and the suave man she has chosen to follow to a place that gets ever more sinister, her first-person ruminations lend the required impetus to the narrative.

In a parallel story, Jens Erik, a retired police officer in Aarhus, Denmark, living a solitary life spent gazing at birds and amidst plants, grapples with the contentious relationship he shares with his adult daughter. He yearns to be rid of the xenophobic tag she has given him. While Jens Erik works with people of varied ethnicities, he struggles to understand why they can't live where they were born: "he felt that there was something to be said about staying in a place

TODAY, CONSERVATIVE ESTIMATES PLACE MUMBAI'S JEWISH POPULATION AT AROUND 4000. THE NUMBERS ARE DWINDLING, BUT THE COMMUNITY HOLDS ON TO THEIR RELIGIOUS AND KOSHER TRADITIONS.

where you knew which berries to eat and which to avoid, where you could identify a bird hidden in a bush by its trill. It had nothing to do with hating immigrants. Though he did not understand immigrants. Refugees he understood, but he could not understand why anyone would move by choice."

What's Inside?

The Partition Trilogy

With the trilogy, I was trying something very ambitious, which is putting political leaders and the aam aadmi and aurat on the same stage. I want to show how decisions taken in Delhi affect common people. So, in Lahore, in Hyderabad, in Kashmir, and in Delhi, I have Jawaharlal Nehru, Vallabhbhai Patel and Lord Mountbatten as my protagonists. I'm writing from inside their heads – it's Jawahar speaking, Vallabh speaking, and it is Dickie speaking.

Review: The Song of the Cell by Siddhartha

Siddhartha Mukherjee rejects this atomistic view of the human body and proposes an alternative conception in his latest book, *The Song of the Cell*. He argues that we need to look at the interconnectedness between the trillions of cells in the body as well as between cells and the environment. In these connections could lie answers to medical mysteries. He arrives at his conclusions through an examination of the cell — the simplest unit of life.

A grand mela of dance, music & culture

The MSLF, which hosted a mela of dance, music, food, literature, crafts, films and theatre from February 3-7 opened my eyes to all the fine riches of the capital of Uttar Pradesh. Most of the events were held at the historically significant Safed Baradari and Salempur House, which are part of the Qaiserbagh palace complex built by Wajid Ali Shah, the last nawab of Awadh, whose flamboyance and pathos was brilliantly captured by Satyajit Ray in *Shatranj Ke Khilari*.

Continuous tradition of resistance to british rule

There was a continuous tradition of popular resistance to British rule throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, culminating in the great anti-colonial upsurge of 1857. In the countryside, this resistance often took the shape of resistance to oppression by dominant landed groups who usually had the support of the colonial state. The large-scale dislocation of itinerant communities and tribal societies resulted in violent confrontations between these people and the repressive machinery of the government.

Review: *The Blue Women*

by Anukruti Upadhyay

SONALI MUJUMDAR

The reader gets a glimpse of the form at its best in Anukruti Upadhyay's debut collection of short stories — *The Blue Women* — which delves into the familiar space of real women and their complicated relationships with the world and more importantly, themselves. In 12 stories, Upadhyay creates 12 different worlds of wonder, each not so different from the other, and yet each independent in its own being. In imagining real women charged with realistic issues, she weaves in hints of believable magic realism. The stories intelligently address a

myriad of social issues like violence against women, everyday sexism, and mental health. It is all done in very delicate yet complex narratives. The men in the book are described exactly as how most men are. They want to be better but often end up not being so. Their empathy, their concern is limited and burdened with conditions. They have their best interests in mind, but for some reason, it all falls short. Upadhyay's stories are terrifyingly beautiful with a precise clarity amid the chaos that makes each one extraordinary. With great story telling and every ingredient that a reader looks for in literary fiction, this anthology is a clear winner.



Talking Life; Javed Akhtar In conversation with Nasreen Munni

In this conversational biography, poet, lyricist, and screenplay writer Javed Akhtar looks back at his struggles, mistakes, and penchant for swimming against the tide

LAMAT R HASAN

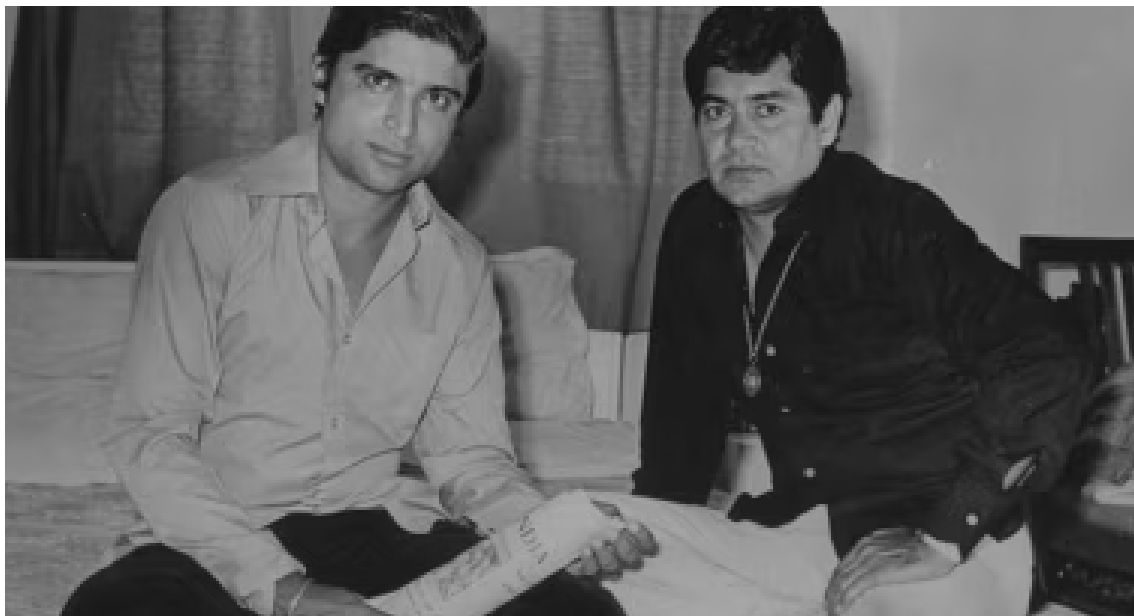
When poet, lyricist, and screenplay writer Javed Akhtar was born, his father, a diehard Communist, read out the Communist Manifesto to him, instead of reciting the azaan, the Islamic call to prayer, in his ears, as is the tradition. The seeds were sown for an extraordinary journey. Named Jaadu by his professor-writer parents Safia and Jan Nisar Akhtar (later changed to Javed when he was enrolled at school), life was magical till the day after his eighth birthday, when his mother died, an event that changed the trajectory of his life. In this conversational biography with documentary filmmaker and writer on films Nasreen Munni Kabir, Akhtar looks back with fondness and emotion at his life – his struggles, his mistakes, and his penchant for swimming against the tide. “(In my family) I had politics on one side and poetry and literature on the other. It was natural that I’d be influenced by both,” he tells Kabir in Talking Life, the final part in the trilogy that includes Talking Films and Talking Songs. Following his mother’s death, Akhtar shuffled between Lucknow, Aligarh and Bhopal – largely ignored by his father (who now lived in Bombay), and at the mercy of friends and extended family. There were times when his younger brother Salman

and he had to go hungry for days, and sleep on school benches full of bugs. He revisits these dark chapters of his life in a very matter-of-fact way. There is not a grain of anger

always broke, so sometimes he took me to the temple and would apply a teeka to my forehead. I’d ring the temple bell, and then he would pick up a few coins lying in front of

to the growing resentment and anger I felt towards him, and our relationship became increasingly negative and strained. His mother’s death saddens him to this day.

curiosity” and once wrote to her husband: “What is plastic? I keep hearing this word. What is it used for? Can you send some?” When Akhtar arrived in Bombay in 1964, he was 19. He landed at the doorstep of his father, who had remarried, and had another set of children by then. Akhtar’s stepmother made it clear that he wasn’t welcome. The two years of intense struggle that followed in Bombay – starving and without a roof over his head – is the stuff of Bollywood stories. His first job was as an apprentice at Kamal Amrohi’s company, Mahal Pictures. His salary was ₹50. “At the entrance of studio floor number one there were some long planks and two wooden crates. They became my property. I took the two wooden crates, put a plank across them, and slept on it at night. I did not have a dhurrie, sheet or pillow. When he was asked by filmmaker Yash Chopra to write songs for Silsila, he initially resisted the idea but then started enjoying that phase of his life. You cannot remain parochial, communal, narrow-minded in art, I positioned this plank-bed in such a way that the light coming from floor one fell on me so I could read at night.” Kabir presents a hitherto unknown side of Akhtar in this freewheeling candid interview. As for Akhtar, as always, he wins hearts with his honesty.



or shame, or an attempt to gain the reader’s sympathy. He narrates these episodes with his biggest weapon – humour. He recalls his teenage years in his inimitable style: “The pujari (in Bhopal) knew we students were

the idol and give them to me.” The only time one senses a tinge of bitterness is when he refers to his father. “I wrote to my father, asking him what he was doing. I never got a reply. All these incidents added

He remembers every single detail about her. And what he doesn’t, was described by her in beautifully crafted letters to her husband which were published posthumously. His mother had “a great sense of

Review: Legend of the Snow Queen by Manjiri Prabhu

The latest Re Parkar destination thriller reconciles the conflict between surprise and suspense



ASHWIN SANGHI

Manjiri Prabhu’s latest outing, Legend of the Snow Queen, is a destination thriller that deftly weaves three distinct threads into one seamless adventure. These three threads are: the destination (in this case the Lake Starnberg region of the Bavarian Alps), the history (in this instance the German-Austrian narrative) and finally, the mystery.

All three aspects are integral to the story and are judiciously used to create a multidimensional mystery novel. Prabhu’s writing style is immersive, allowing the reader to fully appreciate all three strands — destination, history and mystery. Tension and suspense is built steadily throughout the book. Her characters are well-developed and the writing style is engaging and descriptive, making

it easy to visualize each scene and become fully invested in the story. The dialogues are authentic and home-grown to the extent that nowhere does one feel that they are written by an outsider. An important aspect of this sub-genre of destination thrillers must necessarily be the historical references on which the novel is based. It is evident that the author has done significant research in crafting the Legend of the Snow Queen and her study shines through. Her attention to detail in the fictional crime investigation is also to be appreciated which ensures that the book’s realism quotient remains high.

The story is set around a key event: a five-nation peace treaty being signed to commemorate the 182nd birth anniversary of the Empress Elisabeth of Austria.

The five national representatives are complex characters with traits that force the reader to suspect almost everyone. The author still manages to reconcile the conflict between surprise and suspense and provide a resolution that is unpredictable yet satisfying. I have always believed that storytelling is distinct and separate from writing.

A good writer must agonize over her choice of words and expression; a good storyteller should sweat over getting the reader to turn the page. Prabhu uses several clever techniques to achieve this objective including plot twists, red herrings, character flaws, and timing. It is evident that she has honed her skills as a mystery writer over the years. Each chapter reveals new clues and leads one deeper into the mystery. This onion-peel effect ensures that a reader remains invested.



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