



Regional Representation of Bihar in Tabish Khair's *The Bus Stopped*

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ABSTRACT: The paper attempts to explore the regional representation and the problematic of regionality in Tabish Khair's *The Bus Stopped*. Khair portrays Phansa, a fictional place in Bihar in such way that unveils the cultural, socio-economic background and religious views. The novelist presents a real and detailed account of Bihar contemporary society through various characters, events and representational devices which form the narrative of the novel. The paper tries to determine how varied people of the society are accommodated in the same bus and set off their journey for Phansa and during traveling how passengers tackle the unexpected problems and learn to survive and adjust. The paper further focuses on the lives of middle class families of Bihar from a perspective that displays the realistic and psychological states of mind.

KEYWORDS: Bihar, contemporary society, cultural, regional representation.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Regional novel is the artefact of social happenings that emphasises on particular features of characters, cultures, customs, history and topography. Literally, the term 'region' means 'a fairly large area of a country, usually without exact limit, a part of a country that is away from the capital city', and regional refers to that which is connected to a particular region' (OED 1281). As J.A Cuddon in Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory states "A regional writer is one who concentrates much attention on a particular area and uses it and the people who inhabit it as the basis for his or her stories. Such as locale is likely to be rural and/ or provincial" (DLT< 737). And M. H Abrams further defines: "The regional novel emphasises the setting, speech, and social structure and customs of a particular locality, not merely as local colour, but as important conditions affecting the temperament of the characters and their ways of thinking, feeling, and interacting" (Abrams 200). Raja Rao in the introduction to *Kanthapura* posits:

"There is no village in India, however mean, that has not a rich sthala-purana, or legendary history, of its own. Some god or godlike hero has passed by the village – Rama might have rested under this pipal- tree, Sita might have dried her clothes, after her bath, on this yellow-stone, or the Mahatma himself, on one of his many pilgrimages through the country, might have slept in this hut, the low one, by the village gate" (Introduction, *Kanthapura*).

Therefore, regional novel portrays the life of common people in a particular place delineating how ambiances influence its inhabitants and it "involves an especial focus of attention on to the life of a particular, well-defined geographical region" (Hawthorn 16). Maria Edgeworth (1767-1849), an Anglo- Irish woman is perhaps one of the first writers to perceive the possibilities of relating characters to a particular atmosphere and location. Her *Castle Rackrent* (1800) is considered to be the first of this kind novel. Sir Walter Scott's 'Weaverley' novels, Thomas Hardy's 'Wessex' novels, William Faulkner's 'Yoknapatawpha country' and Margaret Lawrence's 'Manawaka' have depicted strikingly and extensively regional landscapes and common people's sensibilities. Regional novelists such as Thomas Hardy (England), William Faulkner (South America), Gabriel Garcia Marquez (Colombia), Margaret Lawrence (Canada), and R. K Narayan (India) portray an ideal representation of region spirit and essence in their works. They focus on the issues like native, cultural identity of the people, dialects/languages and how common people strive and struggle to survive in the world of competition. As "Narayan's little dramas of middle class life are enacted in Malgudi, an imaginary small town in South India which comes to be felt as a living ambience in his fiction" (Naik 168).

II. THE MAIN CORPUS OF PAPER

The depiction of regional prospects of India reminds what Mahatma Gandhi stressed on "True India lies in its seven lakh villages. Do you know that big cities like London have exploited India and the big cities of India in turn have exploited its villages? That how palatial mansions have come up in big cities and villages have become impoverished. I want to infuse life in to these villages" (Joshi 13). The triumvirate of Indian Literature in English R. K Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao have brilliantly depicted the regional sensibilities of ordinary people in their novels. People influenced by their Socio-cultural, political and religious aspects of Indigenouslyness. The regional representation is embedded in the works of Indian that shows deep indigenous sensibility of writers. R. K Narayan through his fictional town Malgudi has generated original sensibility of common people and highlights their clandestine human conduct and relationship with others. Writers like Arundhati Roy depicts the buoyant regional sites of Ayemenem, Kerala in her Booker prize winning fiction *The God of Small Things* (1997), Vijay Nambisan portrays the regional spirit of a village named M ____, located beside Ganga river, Patna, Bihar in his non-fiction *Bihar is in the Eye of the Beholder* (2000) and this book is solely dedicated to the 'people of M____' He further specifies that "a small town on the Ganga's bank some 100 km east of Patna. I will not distinguish the town beyond calling it M____ (Author's Note). In *The White Tiger* (2008), Aravind Adiga delineates the village of Laxmangarh, in the district of Gaya, Bihar. He segregates India on two basic grounds: one is an 'India of Light', and another 'India of Darkness'. Adiga, through the mouth of Balram Halwai speaks out: "Laxmangarh is your typical Indian village paradise, adequately supplied with electricity, running water, and working telephones; and that the children of my village, raised on a nutritious diet of meat, eggs, vegetables, and lentils, will be found..." (Adiga 19). Along with renowned Hindi regional novelist Phanishwar Nath Renu created Maryganj, Purnia, Bihar as setting and background of his regional fiction *Maila Aanchal* (1954). *Maila Aanchal* is possibly considered as the first regional novel in Hindi literature.

Tabish Khair and Amitava Kumar were born and brought up in Bihar, and now they have settled down in Denmark and America respectively. Both of them depict the wretched and downtrodden condition of the poor as well as different strata of societal people especially of Bihar to draw the attention of the Government for progress and development. Besides both of them, Siddarth Chowdhury, Manna Bahadur, Raj Kamal Jha, Nikita Singh contribute to the corpus of English literature and have marked their presence on the realm of world literature. Khair was born in Gaya, Bihar, India and belongs to a conservative Muslim family but later he migrated to Denmark in search of better standard of life and livelihood. Khair presently resides in Denmark but he returns to India occasionally. He especially goes back to his home town Gaya, Bihar through his fictitious setting in Phansa of his fictions. He depicts Phansa, a fictional place near Gaya but does not exist on the map of India rather a place of mental creation/ imaginary landscape. Phansa is not more distinct from Thomas Hardy's Wessex, William Faulkner's Yoknapatwapha, Margaret Lawrence's Manawaka and R. K Narayan's Malgudi.

India is the land of varied and diversified cultures, costumes, and languages, and so is Bihar, one of its states. The majority of people of this country reside in the remote villages. Indian villages are not modernised but the abundance and bounty of natural things flourishing and being preserved in. As the novelist Khair constructs in this fiction, "Phansa is a small town and being a prosperous business there does not imply being a millionaire. But it implies an easy life and sort of respect that even the marginality rich can inspire in a provincial town" (126). Regional purviews of Bihar are depicted through the journey by bus which runs from Gaya to Phansa in Bihar. As the bus journey advances, the more views automatically fall down on the floor of passengers' eyes. The passengers experience new-fangled and fresh feeling by looking at the things all around. They also traumatised by the death of a tribal woman's child. The Private bus express- "Gaya, Chaakand- Bela-Makhdumpur- Telta- Dhoda- Akbarabad- Janbagh- Sherpur- Vilaspur- Phansa . . . Gaya- Phansapayn-tees rupya, payn-tees rupyaaa!" (120) and Mangal Singh, the driver says that "I do all the sixty- nine meel to Phansa and all the sixty-nine meel back" (121). He covers the distance between Gaya to Phansa twice in a day.

The journey of oneself proceeds from Gaya and terminates at Phansa, the destination of bus as well as the destinies of all passengers who obtain unique experiences. Khair's *The Bus Stopped* emphatically focuses on three distinct parts of the novel. The first 'Home', the second 'Journeys' which happens on the way of the running bus from Gaya to Phansa, and the third and the last 'Homes Again'. Home is such a sacred and pious place where one can feel secure and protected. To emphasize the word Home, the novelist states:

"Home. A word that, in English of 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).

Home doesn't mean only shelter but it connects/ brings one's childhood memory. One's childhood memories are connected with birth place/home. No one can forget it easily. The "feeling of belongings" and the

“feeling of alienation” always echoes strongly. Home is represented as the identity of the person and it assists the person to construct the valuable position in society. As the protagonist asserts in the inception of the novel,

“This is the house of my parents. This is simply house. Home. Ghar. There are times when I feel that this is the only home I have ever known, will ever know. No matter where I go, no matter how many years I stay away, this will be home” (4).

A tribal woman carries her child in her arms to go to Phansa and she because of crowd “on the bottom step of the door sat the tribal woman. She was clutching the bundled-up child to her bosom” (158). She has apostulated that her husband has gone to Phansa and has never returned and that’s why she sets off her questing journey along with her baby but after sometime in the bus, another passenger points out that “The child is dead. I am telling you, the child is dead! Touch his arms, they are cold, thanda (cold) like ice” (157). The Beryl creamed townsman told the woman:

“Your child is dead in a measured matter-of-fact tone. Why are carrying a corpse into the bus? The woman, emotionless and unmoving said, “Not dead. It has been dead for hours, insisted he. It is ice cold. He is only ill, replied the woman. I am taking him to his father in Phansa. There are doctors in Phansa. Where does your husband live? In Phansa. Where is Phansa? I do not know. He went away five months ago. He went to Phansa” (158). He says that “these rural women are so obstinate in their ignorance” and that’s why when he married he looked for a girl who had been born and brought up in Phansa – not in a huge debauched city like Kalkutta or Dilli” (159).

At last the Tribal woman accepts it as her adding misfortune. The bus stopped at next stoppage and all passengers including bus driver and conductor escort the woman and partake in the final funeral ceremony of the child. Passengers are ungrudgingly helpful and assist her dead child to be buried. The Tribal woman lost her child and simultaneously the way of her destination. She is being asked to go back home and she did but nobody knows where she went and she either alive or dead. The very word in ‘tribal woman’ emphasises the regional and the locality of her culture and custom. Tribal people are considered as the bottom of social strata in all aspects. They do not have basic rights and privileges or they have been treated as worse than animal. In this novel, the Tribal woman has been given freedom to travel on this private bus because she pays for it. The bus incorporates all strands of societal people and displays the interspersing and socializing of distinct cultures.

The bus can be called one of the samples of cosmopolitan city of India in which ‘middle class’ struggles and strives to survive against all odds of existential problems and glitches. Mangal Singh is an angry bus driver and at the same time very compassionate for his beloved. He is a close observer of things around. As the writer says: “He is a man who notices such things; he is a man who only notices such things” (12). The writer further brilliantly describes his character and nature in the following words:

“Some people collect stamps or bottles or coins; he collects images. Some people collect stamps or bottles or coins; he collects images, you have to collect something as worthless as images, don’t you, no market value to them, and he has to collect them, nothing but them, images!, one from each trip of his life, thousands of them now, all meticulously remembered, just those single images, a colour, a scene, a face, an act italicised on the pages of memory. Not that he chooses the images consciously; that is simply the way his mind orders the seamless and yet unravelling days of his life” (12).

He is rather “large, flaccid, with folds of flesh around his neck. He wears tiny silver earrings, chews paan all the time, usually has stubble and always has a temper...he wears only a lungi and a white banyan when he is driving” (140). Mangal Singh says Rameshwar, a bus cleaner “Take this cleaner, a new boy whose name I have not bothered to remember; when I need him I simply shout ‘re’ or ‘abbe’ (138). And sometimes he actually says “Wake up, son of a donkey, and wipe the mother-fucking bus clean with your arse” (20). As bus conductor Shankar observes him “he jokes with cleaning boy: he always has a friendly, unprofessional relationship with these boys, which makes them lazy, and cheeky with me” (156). He reads novels of Premchand, Renu, Amritlal Nagar and Nirmal Verma like many shoe makers, rickshaw-pullers who cultivate interest in reading and find solace in it.

Cultures, customs, food, garments and regional languages of the local landscape are idiosyncratic features of a particular place. As the writer draws attention of readers by saying, “Makhana is the popcorn of Bihar, he thinks. Except that it is tastier and crisper. They say it is only grown in the Darbhanga, Purnia, Saharsa and Madhubani districts of North Bihar” (55). Above mentioned districts are main part of Mithilanchal/ Mithila region and they speak Maithili as their mother-tongues and then Bhojpuri, Angika, Hindi, Urdu and English. “Tilkut was the mithai (sweet) that Gaya had contributed to the multiple cuisines of North Indian sweets” (58). “Khir Mohan in Dhoda, khaja in Silao, tilkut in Gaya” (58). As “Jalebis are not just ‘sweetmeats’ and rotis and parathas are never just ‘unleavened bread’, an aura cannot be just a demon” (5). Language/ dialect is one of the unique factors that brings the regional issues closer than anything else. As the novelist further argues: “It is a space of many shades of skin, many dialects and languages spoken by the servants and the other family members; a space of people, memories and practices that see no need to be called by another name” (5). Phalguni River Bridge is situated between Gaya and Phansa and traffic is always a massive issue on it and “The

Phalgu had been a bubbly flowing river, going la-la-la on its own way like a virgin traipsing along the valleys , unaware of wolves and rapists” (24-25).

Farhana is not sure where she will stay in Phansa. Her tabla master use to tell her “sometimes things do take a turn” (198). She sits in the bus beside the old woman who is like ‘a raucous mynah, alert and sharp’ and she bargained for tea to a ‘tea boy’ to provide her tea for fifty paisa instead of a rupee. She advised Farhana “you should never let these chokkaras take advantage of you. They are pickpockets, all of them!”(68). She belongs to a prosperous family that reflects in her language and dressing sense. She wears a “white sari- which obviously meant that she was a widow”(68). Trains and buses are irregular and sometimes, even don’t run properly because of it local people stuck. “The trains on this route do not have a first- class compartment and the buses are even more democratic; you have to travel like the masses, and that soils your clothes” (68-69). As Amitava Kumar writes in his *A Matter of Rats: A Short Biography of Patna*: “The resources of transportation are scarce all over India; there is a continual press and scramble for tickets and seats wherever you go. But young Biharis travel on the roofs of trains even when the compartments below are empty and rush listing ferries like a piratical horde”(Kumar 62).

Farhana, after getting married to Vijay Mirchandani says about rise and fall of time in her life: “And that is what I am now. There was a time when I could have been the keeper of the harem keys, a guard of the holiest of holy shrines in the Middle East, a dancer, a soldier, a spy, a scholar, and a general in Delhi. I am not any of these today. But then I am something that is even harder to achieve for so many. I am the perfect wife. I am not Farhana Begum or Parvati any more. I am Mrs Mirchandani. I will not be buried by strangers at a roadside. My fate will not be another story no, not that one” (191). She found a “home too; she has found respectable home, the house of the Mirchandanis”(196). She received everything what a woman desires to have in life.

Patna, the busiest city of Bihar and “It is still the quite shabbiest capital we have, but spare a thought for the depths it is having to claw its way up from” (Kumar 76). You can imagine the conundrum of the city when night approaches and “city is falling silent, from here through the Gol Ghar and Boring Canal Road to perhaps Gandhi Maidan, so crowded in the daytime and now ‘a place of emptiness and lethargy’”(93). The graceful description of night as it deepens and you lie down in your bed. The usual sounds emanate through open window and the small holes/ ventilators of rooms. As the novelist states:

“Dogs bark in the competition from neighbourhood to neighbourhood, the occasional truck rumbles by, someone sings from the embrace of the night - a drunkard or a labour returning late – doors open and close here and there in the building , the tap in the Sharma’s kitchen drips relentlessly” (92).

When power cut falls in the night, Dr Rai’s wife ordered one of her two servants to start generator because Dr Rai ‘never returns before midnight’. Mrs Sharma and Mrs Prasad use kerosene lanterns in the power absence for different reasons. When Mrs Sharma asks her eldest daughter to “light the lantern, she is thinking of the money saved; if she could afford a generator, she would polish it three times a day”(93). Mrs. Prasad asked Chottu to burn the lamp, although one of her children has provided Toshiba Generator but she refused to use it. Patna, a small smart city reflects the congested lifestyle of urban people through the portrayal of Mr. Sharma and Mrs. Prasad’s apartments. Mrs Prasad throws light on the ‘Character and the background’. Her children have understood and imbibed her discourses on ‘Character and Background’ and have quite successful in their career and life. She tries to develop same thing in Chottu, her servant but he defies and denies her unending lectures. He is a man of money-minded and invests all his money in gambling with local lads. Mrs Prasad speaks about “Character, something that she and her husband have obviously passed on as a legacy to their own children. Chottu hears about character, something that his parents and their people seem to have been singularly devoid of. Mrs Prasad speaks possibilities; Chottu hears limitations” (90). Mrs Prasad with Dr. Rai’s wife discussed about ‘Character and the Background’. Background means educational background. Dr. Rai’s wife is an opinion that Chottu is ‘an intelligent young boy’ (90). His focus of attention is not on education but something else. She further mentions that “he can remember a thousand and one film songs but cannot learn a single poem correctly. Mrs Prasad can only attribute it to “lack of ‘background’” and “background is something that you only get from your family” (91). The best instances of the ‘lack of background’ can be traced in Mr. Sharma’s family.

Mrs Prasad attributes “the failure of the Sharma daughters to gatecrash into the heavenly realm of the civil service to their ‘lack of background’” (91). Mr. Sharma himself belongs to a middle class family and is ‘a junior- level officer in some government office in town’ (31) whose first name don’t know anyone in the building. He has three daughters and always seriously concerned about their marriage prospects. Mr Sharma studied in “a village and a college in Jehanabad and moved to Patna only when he was posted here” (91). And Mrs Sharma is “mousey-looking and illiterate, living in constant dread of the outside world and a particularly malevolent divine providence” (91). These families reside in three different apartments in the same building and the only blocking is bricks walls. As the writer expresses: “The walls are still thin. They stretch like the membranes of your ear, fragile and more felt than seen. Here the walls are membranes though whose tight secrecy permeates much that may only be heard, not see” (30).

III. CONCLUSION

Therefore, Khair's *The Bus Stopped* is a semi- autobiography novel in which he delineates and attempts to recollect the elements of reminiscences through his unforgettable memory to portray the region of Bihar. According to Outlook, "It is a brave writer, and one worth paying attention to, who believes that a novel can be shaped and given meaning by what has been found in the commonplace, everyday world, even when this is seemingly no more than a bus journey in a provincial area of Bihar... *The Bus Stopped* is a novel that reflects the nature and circumstances of human mobility in our modern, unforgiving world"(back side of the book's cover). Being a Diaspora writer, he attempts to throw light on the backward state of Bihar, where he was born and raised. Being a full time journalist first in India for few years and he went to Denmark to begin his new career as a professor. At the beginning of his life in Denmark was quite difficult to survive but his beloved family provided enough space to settle down comfortably. He depicts himself in one of the characters in the fictions in which he can express his personal opinion. This novel has been written in the concerns of many different perspectives of characters that belong to different strata of society. All the passengers have their own different kinds of problems and life stories. The encapsulation of dissimilar passengers on the same bus highlights the distinct pyramids of society. Khair's narrative power is impressive and striking. The flow of his writing is quite amusing and left no stone unturned too intricate the depiction of contemporary issues in his writings. His style of writing is unabridged and precise. The way he portrays characters is simply outstanding. He minutely observes the things and meticulously linked to ideas through the words. His depiction is convincing and persuasive that readers experience through visualisation and feel like that everything occurs in front of their eyes. They are witnessing the actions being played on the floor of their eyes. Language highly and hugely assists in the formation of the regional identity in India. Region specifically refers as linguistic region and associates/ connects to the distinct cultural and customs values. Language is something through which one can express one's feelings and experiences. Language also helps to locate and provide boundary to the groups/ communities.

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