

JIHADI JANE: A TERRIFYING STORY OF TERRIBLE TIMES

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Jihadi Jane (2016) is the latest novel by Tabish Khair who has earned distinction as a poet, journalist, academician and essayist. He is widely known for his masterly handling of contemporary issues- a fact borne out by his books such as Muslim Modernities (2007). How to Fight Islamist terror from a missionary position (2012) and the New xenophobia (2015) . He argues that faith can never be a synonym for indiscriminate violence and terror. In his essay “Muslim consciousness.....” he talks about his muslim identity as given by his community and other but his principal focus is on understanding : I seek not lamentation but understanding’ (Muslim Modernities, 167). As a liberal author and thinker, Khair is opposed to extremist positions in the pursuit of faith be it christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Zionism or whatever. To his mind, understanding based on reason, logic and sympathy can help create a better world where people of all faiths may live together in harmony. He concedes the differences of opinion within a religious community but does not forget to add that differences should not be stretched too far, that is to the extent of violence, terror and destruction. Like all Literary writers, Khair acts as a historian of his troubled times and his keen literary imagination enables him to paint a vivid picture of the world around him. He creates characters of whom epitomise his thesis of understanding in terms of their sane, assimilating and balanced approach to life.

Jihadi Jane Focuses on a marginal group especially women who commit themselves to militant organisations fighting and striving for power in the middle-east and elsewhere. These women act their roles either as the wives of Jihadis or as suicide bombers. The novel carries an epigraph which is a poem by Tony Harrison and in which the poet highlights the binaries such as Communist V. Fascist, Left v. Right, Us v. Them, Hindu/Sikh, Soul/ body, heart v. mind, East/West, male/female and so on. Significantly enough, the epigraph contains the crux of Jihadi Jane which embodies several of the aforesaid contraries. It is worthwhile to add here that

the central concern of the novel is built on jihad which stands on the premise of the conflict between believers (having true faith in a narrowly rigid version of Islam) and non-believers (i.e. people practising orthodox or other forms of Islam, along with infidels including Hindus, Christians, Jews, Buddhists and others). The meteoric rise of ISIS in Syria drastically changed the equation of power in the middle-east with the western forces jumping into an open warfare with militant outfits. The battleline was clearly drawn : the erstwhile regime in Syria aided militarily and financially by the west versus the militant organisations. A reign of terror was let loose in the wake of carpet bombing by the western forced and militants intermittently losing and gaining ground here and there.

The events of Jihadi Jane are narrated by Jamilla, a young woman whose parents had migrated to England from the new created nation, Pakistan after the partition of Indian subcontinent. Khair has deliberately chosen her as the survivor of kurd offensive on Daesh (a pseudonym invented for ISIS) in Syria. Jamilla's parents lived in the suburban Yorkshire, though it is not even once mentioned in the novel. Rather, it is ingeniously suggested by the dialect to which the ingeniously suggested by the dialect to which the protagonist of the book, Ameena, resorts in moments of excitement and anger. Ameena's family has immigrated from India to England. Both these girls become fast friends a couple of years before they complete their high school. There is a sea of difference between Jmilla and Ameena in terms of their socio-economic back- grounds and personalities. Jamilla's father is a cab-driver and her mother is a housewife whose literacy is confined to her Quran. On the other hand, Ameena's father holds on executive post in a multinational corporation and her mother is a school-teacher. While Jamilla's parents are orthodox and practising muslims, Ameena's mother practises a paired down version of Islam, leading a westernized mode of life. Ammena's father is absolutely westernized as he loves new cars, dresses after the western fashion and loves western women. In fact, he is a philander and go-lucky sort of person who cares little for Islam and it's structures. Jamilla's mother is content to be unassuming and submissive, whereas Ammena's mother is a nagging personality, and hence unable either to adjust with her husband or with her daughter. The slowly and steadily rising conflict between Ammena's parents ends up in their final separation and divorce. However, Ammena's father takes care of his daughter and meets her when he can spare time. Ameena's mother has to sell her flat under financial crisis and moves in an apartment in the same building where Jamilla's family lives. Both these

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girls are poles apart in their temperament for Ameena is a free minded girl who loves western mores of life, smoking cigarette on the slide in school and wearing top and jeans. She takes boyfriends and loses her virginity at the age of fifteen. To the contrary, Jamilla practises Islam in the orthodox manner of her parents (including her brother Mohammad, whose orthodoxy borders on fanaticism) and puts on veil. The veil may be taken as a marker of cultural identity as well as on instrument to resist male gaze.

Unsurprisingly enough, the physical proximity between Jamilla and Ameena opens up an opportunity for Ameena transformation in to first on orthodox and next as a fanatic who commits her life to the cause of jihad. Soon after graduating high school, both these young women confront a crisis each in their lives. Jamilla's father succumbs to his second heart attack while Ameena has a nasty row with her mother and leaves her mother's flat to live separately in a one-bedroom flat gifted to her by her father. In the meantime, Jamilla's brother, Mohammad gets married to his friend Ali's sister, an event which comes about as an uncomfortable intrusion in Jamilla's life. She had been contemplating college education but her family insisted on her getting married as early as possible. With her dreams of higher education thwarted and the growing unease in the constricted space of one bed-room flat, Jamilla finally moves in with Ameena. It is here that the making of a Jihadi Jane takes shape. Their English education supplemented by computer Literacy draws them to internet through which they are able to gather lots of information about jihad and jihadis. Ameena comes in touch with a woman called Hejjiye who on the face of it runs an orphanage on the outskirts of some Syrian town. Hejjiye posts the news of Daesh victories and encourages young muslim women (having the knowledge of English language and computer) to marry jihadis and thus promote the cause of Islamic faith as propagated by the militant organisation. As Ameena is thoroughly influenced by Hejjiye's ideology and her programme, she makes a secret plan to be a militant life. To this may be added her resolve to marry a Syria based jihadi, Hassan who happens to be operating as a commander on the border between Syria and Iraq. Ameena has now become a radical militant and she convinces Jamilla to be her partner in this risky and bizarre venture. Following her plans made by the advice of Hejjiye, both Ameena and Jamilla fly to Turkey and from there they cross borders and move in to Syria where they undertake a long journey through arid plains and ruined towns to Hejjiye's orphanage. Having stayed for a while in the orphanage which was in fact a centre for training female suicide bombers for the purpose of

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attacking enemy positions but declared publicly as a shelter for the widows and children of the so-called martyred jihadis, Ameena was married to Hassan in the orphanage and accompanied her husband to where he was posted. Ameena stayed in touch with Jamilla on e-mail for sometime but discontinued on account of restriction on the use of electronic media.

The admission of Jamilla and Ameena into Hejjiye's world brings about a new series of experiences. Jamilla is left on her own on the orphanage and her beauty and piety advance her in Hejjiye's favour. Hejjiye's performed several roles simultaneously : a preacher, internet expert, principal, wife of the town's commander Abu Jalal and a mother. However, she dealt with an iron hand the girls who disobeyed her or tried to contradict her views. A Turkish girl, roughly about the age of Jamilla detects foul play in Hejjiye's special arrangement of special classes which were taught by herself and her chaperons. This Turkish young woman Halide discovered that Hejjiye and her chaperons held this special class to prepare suicide bombers out of those girls. Jamilla noticed that there were three kinds of women in the orphanage : young women who were to be married off to jihadis, widows of Jihadis and their children, and girls specially trained to be suicide bombers. Halide openly protested that suicide was a crime to Allah and taught girls not to lose their lives by turning into suicide bombers. When Hejjiye's discovered this transgression of her authority she punished Halide, humiliating her before the gathering of women and girls in the orphanage and finally imprisoning her into a barred cell where she was kept almost starved for several days, and given no food for two days. Hejjiye dispatched her to an unknown place by marrying her off hurriedly to a jihadi. Halide's humiliation and torture comes about as an eye-opener to Jamilla whose disillusionment is further intensified when Ameena returns broken and wounded. Hasaan had publicly lashed her with whip ten times for her minor fault of protection a yazidi boy saba whom Hassan publicly beheaded. Ameena is no less disillusioned than Jamilla about Islam, her true faith, for which she left her family and became a militant wife.

In the meantime, there is a new development in which two female members, dilnaz and sera, are captured by Daesh and they are kept in the barred cell of the orphanage with their hands chained and locked. The female inmates of the orphanage were enraged by their presence and wanted to kill them but for umm Layth, a tribal woman of about 80 years who was venerated in the region for having lost her husband and her sons to the cause of Islamic

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militancy. As the attacks by government forces intensified, Hassan was called back from his border post and given the charge of protecting the orphanage. There was another reason for his return : his ranks had depleted. So he was reduced to the status of a mere deputy commander. More- over, there was no love lost between Ameena and Hassan who seldom or almost never come to meet her. As jamilla notes, Ammena was motivated by an ideology of special version of Islam but her grandiose dreams are shattered to pieces when she discovers that Hassan's Islam delivered only inhuman cruelty, violence and death. Ever since her return to orphanage, Ameena had been contemplating revenge on Hassan for his brutal cruelty against herself and others. To achieve her objective, she behaves and acts in the most pious and reserved manner and remains most humble, docile and obedient to Hejjiye. Ultimately she is able to win the confidence of Hejjiye who trusts her most as her favourite. When the kurdist forces lay siege to the orphanage, Hassan and Hejjiye in consultation with Ameena prepare a plan for the safe passage of women and children in the orphanage in exchange of to prisoners, Dilnaz and sera. Among other things, the plan included the safe passage of inmates followed by Jamilla and Ameena escorting the prisoners to the enemy camp. Hassan agreed with Ameena's plan that both she and Jamilla would wear bomb vests and they would detonate themselves soon after they reached the enemy camp. On his part, Hassan kept the remote triggers with himself in case the two woman failed to blast the bomb vests.

Interestingly enough, Ameena's plan was almost half executed after the safe passage of women and children under the ceasefire mutually agreed upon by Daesh and shia militants. In the flurry of events, Ameena who had been given the charge of the prisoners' cell, she disclosed her plan of suicide bombing to Dilnaz and sera. Now only Hassan and his three men were Left ant it was the safest opportunity for Ameena to carry out her terrible revenge. Hassan took her aside in a room to put the bomb vest on and to instruct her how to blast it. Unsurprisingly, she succeeds in hoodwinking Hassan on the pretext of Islam that no stranger can either see the face or touch the body of a muslim woman, and a pious woman like Jamilla for that matter. So Hassan agrees to her Logic that Once having learnt the trick of putting the bomb vest, she would put it on Jamilla and train her about its use. As Jamilla reports she visualized, saw and learnt these facts only after Ameena really acted as a suicide bomber, blowing herself, Hassan and his three men to smithereens. Dilnaz and sera kept their word in safely escorting Jamilla, and as Jamila recalls Diznaz who was a very high-ranking officer in

shia militra loved her and wanted to keep her as her daughter However, she respected Jamilla's will and freedom and finally arranged all the essentials including fake identity, fake passport and money for further expenses. In fact, Dilnaz was so impulsive that she personally wished to see her off on her flight at Ataturk Airport Turkey but her companions advised her against such a risk and finally she desisted.

No doubt, Ameena's martyrdom was remarkable in so far as she acted on the principal of one versus three. To save three lives – namely of his friend Jamilla, and of two Kurdish women, Dilnza and sera- she offers the sacrifice of her own life. Jamilla comes to a beautiful small country, Bali where she wished to lead a life of anonymity, she brushes aside the idea of returning to England, to her family because she would be causing them only pain, humiliation and suffering. So she decides to stay furthest away from everything which constituted her past. As she puts it towards the end of the novel. “ I wanted a place where I had no history, and where I could be with my beliefs without people who proscribed or prescribed”.(Jihadi jane, p. 237)

On the structural ground, Jihadi Jane is a virtual achievement. It begins in a 'looking back' manner and runs through ten chapters, each supplementing and augmenting the power of this masterful narrative. The novel Depicts the reality of our times in its terrifying dimensions it brings home the lesson that terror, violence and death can never be the real substitute of true faith. The nightmarish vision of life spread throughout the book acts as an eye-opener. Khair has powerfully exposed the religious hypocrisy and bloodlust of one of this era's most magnetic and ruthless movements. This world of terror and death has one positive aspect : after the tragedy comes the understanding this is nowhere more conspicuous than in the case of Jamilla who through her episodic narration of human tragedy emerges as a sadder and wiser woman of this world.

Works Cited:

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