

**Tabish Khair, *The Thing About Thugs*. New Delhi: Fourth Estate, 2010. 244 pp. ISBN 978-81-7223-978-7.**

The seductive city of London has been fictionalised by many writers, but Tabish Khair's latest novel, *The Thing About Thugs*, stands out as something amazingly unique. Its singularity lies in the coercive yet tantalising manner in which the novel unleashes the haunting mysteries of Victorian London. Pankaj Mishra is quite right in his assessment of the novel on the front cover of *The Things About Thugs* where he calls the novel a "formally and intellectually intrepid, and emotionally resonant" work.

The novel unfolds an assortment of characters and their touching stories, spanning over two places – Phansa in India and London in the UK. Khair's narrative takes its origin in the eclectic borrowings from Captain William T. Meadows' *Notes On a Thug: Character and Circumstances*, a bunch of letters written in Farsi by Amir Ali addressed to his "Jaanam," and a London newspaper clipping which he comes across in the old library of his grandfather.

Amir Ali, the protagonist of the novel, is taken to the UK by Captain Meadows around 1839, since Amir promises to tell him his true tales of Oriental thuggee. It took Amir three years to narrate the story, but in the course of this story-telling, great upheavals take place in the streets of London, and interestingly the readers come to know through the love-letters of Amir addressed to his English girlfriend, Jenny (or *Jaanam*, as Amir addresses her) that he was not a real thug, but after revealing the entire story, he feels that he has almost become one. Is it then that Khair is trying to offer an alternative view as to how this cult of thuggee was supposedly institutionalised in India by the British administrators? Whether the novel is narrated through a realist lens is a debatable issue but undoubtedly, Khair provides a cogent alternative view to his readers about the cult of thuggee practised in India.

The prejudices of the Whites about the Orientals constitute one of the overtly thematic concerns of this brilliant novel. The novel also highlights the increasingly passionate inclination of the Whites towards science, which they regard as a powerful tool through which they can (de)construct religion. Readers can get pellucid repercussions of this much contested dichotomy of Science *versus* Religion theme running throughout the novel, aided and abetted by the Whites constantly questioning and ignoring the authenticity of the Orientals' (dis)beliefs in superstition, through the study of phrenology being run by two powerful characters in the novel – Lord Batterstone and Captain Meadows, who believe that it is the science and not superstition which is the ultimate truth.

This novel certainly offers one of the expedient ways to undermine the prejudices of the Whites. Crime, murder and brutality have become rampant in this mother of cities – London. Rivulets of blood run through the streets of London, concomitant to brutal beheadings by unknown murderers, and ostensibly, Daniel Oates, the journalist assumes the “London beheader” to be “a Hindu thug or a cannibal from Africa” (*The Thing About Thugs* 203). However, this superior assumption turns out to be a subterfuge when the real “beheader” is caught at the end of the novel, and he turns out to be a European.

Khair’s novel has all the ingredients of getting recognised as a masterpiece of fictional writing, and deserves to be read and acclaimed widely in the literary circles. His sweet lyrical prose makes the work all the more attractive.

**Om Prakash Dwivedi**  
**MITS University, India**