Unveiling the Enigma of Reality: Investigating Muslim Identity, Culture, and Violence in Tabish Khair's *Night of Happiness*

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Abstract:
This article examines Tabish Khair's novel Night of Happiness *(2018) through the lens of postcolonial and psychoanalytic theories, focusing on the portrayal of Muslim identity in postcolonial India. It analyses the major characters, particularly Mehrotra and Ahmed, and explores the dynamics of their relationship to reveal the harrowing ramifications of communal violence and the fragility of inter-community relationships. The research delves into how Khair's narrative encapsulates the complexities of identity, belonging, and the lived experiences of the Muslim community amidst social and political upheavals. Set against the*

backdrop of significant historical events, including the Gujarat riots of 2002, the novel underlines the multifaceted struggles faced by Muslims in contemporary India. This study contributes to the broader discourse on postcolonial literature by highlighting the nuances of communal conflicts and their profound impact on individuals and society. By doing so, it underscores the novel's relevance to contemporary issues and its significant contribution to existing scholarship on Muslim identity, culture, and violence in postcolonial contexts. This article thus aims to deepen the understanding of the complex realities underpinning Muslim identity and inter-religious dynamics in modern Indian society.

Introduction

Muslim identity is a complex and multifaceted concept, encompassing various dimensions such as caste, class, religious beliefs, cultural practices, and personal experiences. It is not an "exclusive and monolithic" (Puri, 2007, p. 56) identity but one shaped by several factors, including geography, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and life events. Identity is a dynamic process that evolves "in response to socio-linguistic, physical, and political conditions" (Hussain and Mishra, 2022, p. 525). It is a continuous process of articulation and negotiation, where individuals navigate their social realities, histories, and aspirations. This fluid nature means that identity cannot be reduced to a "fixed element" (Karmakar 2019), as it constantly adapts to changing contexts. Similarly, Stuart Hall (1996/2003, p. 234) defines "identity as a 'production' which is never complete, always in process," asserting that it is an ongoing act of creation shaped by both internal and external influences.

India is known for its religious and cultural diversity, and Muslims form the largest minority in the country, constituting around 14% of India's total population (Kabir, 2020, p. 395). Despite being an integral part of India's social fabric, Indian Muslims still face several challenges and grapple with issues related to identity and representation. One of the primary issues the Muslim community continues to face in India is religious discrimination and communal violence, which are exacerbated in contemporary times by political polarization, media biases, and socio-economic disparities. These challenges hinder not only social harmony but also perpetuate a sense of alienation and marginalization among the community. Incidents of communal tension, hate crimes, mob lynching, and discrimination have, at times, strained the relationship between different religious communities. For instance, the demolition of the historic Babri Masjid in 1992 and the Gujarat riots[1] of 2002, which erupted following the Godhra tragedy, are significant events in Indian history that have profoundly impacted Muslim identity (Kausar 2006). These events have left indelible marks on the "collective memory" of the Muslim community, shaping their sense of security, belonging, and cultural identity, which have kept them "in a marginalised position and as the 'cultural Other'" (Kabir, 2020, p. 407).

Moreover, the current political situation in India and the emergence of Hindu nationalists have played a significant role in shaping Muslim identity, resulting in "increased incidents of religious intolerance and violence" (Ali, 2022, p. 519). These Hindu nationalists categorize Muslims as "outsiders" and "foreigners" (Patil, 2017, p. 28), perpetuating divisive narratives. They assert that "Muslims have a separatist identity and live in imagined communities" (Kabir, 2020, p. 404), further alienating the community and reinforcing stereotypes that deepen societal divides. However, it is important to note that, culturally, Indian Muslims have a rich and diverse heritage that has contributed significantly to the country's cultural diversity. From art, architecture, and music to literature and cuisine, the Muslim community has significantly shaped India's identity over centuries, helping to foster its pluralism and adding to its global recognition as a multicultural nation. While there have been efforts to address the challenges faced by the Muslim community, the issue remains a significant aspect of India's social and political landscape, requiring continued attention and constructive efforts towards inclusivity and social harmony. The novel under scrutiny serves as a poignant lens through which these multifaceted issues are brought to the forefront. It explores their impact on individuals and families, addressing themes of communalism, religious extremism, the breakdown of India's social fabric, and the complexities surrounding Muslim identity.

The author and his writings

Tabish Khair is an acclaimed Indian novelist and academic who has made substantial contributions to the literary landscape of both India and the global arena. Khair was born in 1966 and educated mainly in Gaya, a small but historically significant town in Bihar, India. He is currently an associate professor of English at Aarhus University, Denmark. Khair's literary oeuvre spans both fiction and non-fiction – reflecting his deep engagement with contemporary issues. Khair's novels, including *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position* (2012), *Jihadi Jane* (2016), and *Night of Happiness* (2018), show his commitment to exploring the lived experiences of Muslims in India and the diaspora. His latest novel *The Body by the Shore* (2022) is a sci-fi thriller that explores a post-pandemic (COVID-19) world. Khair's works tackle pressing issues such as religious fundamentalism, (immigrant) identity, terrorism, belonging, and the impact of global capitalism. His writings challenge stereotypes, bridge cultural gaps and provide insightful reflections on the complexities and challenges his characters face in contemporary multicultural societies.

This article examines Khair's novel *Night of Happiness* and elucidates the complex relationship between Anil Mehrotra, an upper-class Hindu businessman, and his Muslim employee, Ahmed. It underscores the nature of their association, challenging preconceived notions and emphasizing that superficial perceptions may diverge significantly from the underlying reality. The article further explores Khair's incorporation of historical events, including the Gujarat riots of 2002, and how the socio-political backdrop shapes the characters' lives. This study undertakes an analysis of *Night of Happiness* by drawing insights from postcolonial and psychoanalytic theories and examines the complexities of Muslim identity in contemporary India, underlining the fragile inter-community relationships and the harrowing effects of communal violence.

The invisible *halwa*: Challenging perceptions of identity and reality

Night of Happiness is a compelling exploration of Hindu privilege and Muslim identity in postcolonial India. Avantika Mehta (2018) describes it as a "literary thriller with a gripping and well-constructed plot," while Mandira Nayar (2018) characterizes it as "part fable, part thriller and part philosophical." The narrative revolves around the relationship between Anil Mehrotra, a pragmatic entrepreneur, and his Muslim employee, Ahmed, an older man who is different in more ways than one. Mehrotra, the narrator and protagonist, acknowledges Ahmed's enthusiasm and values but remains indifferent to his employee's personal life. As an insider to the story, Mehrotra describes Ahmed as quiet, undemanding, and someone who often talks in aphorisms. Ahmed bothers no one, performs his duties, and maintains a low profile. The plot turns unexpectedly when, during a stormy evening, Mehrotra decides to drop Ahmed home on *Shab-e-baraat*,[2] a significant festival for Muslims. Ahmed's anticipation of tasting a special *halwa*, prepared exclusively for the occasion by his wife, sets the stage for an intriguing development.

Elisabetta Marino (2019) argues that Khair's novel delves into the human reluctance to accept the complexities of reality, which are often distorted through misconceptions. It is illustrated in a scene where Mehrotra sits on a sofa in Ahmed's "strangely bare sitting-cum-dining room" (Khair, 2018, p. 26) and is served a plate with no *halwa* on it. All Mehrotra can see is "a pile of nimkis and a small spoon on the plate, but no halwa" (Khair, 2018, p. 32). He is bewildered and breaks out in a cold sweat when he notices Ahmed being totally engrossed in eating the *halwa*, which does not exist on his plate either. Mehrotra is "filled with a sense of horror, horror of the sort [he] had never experienced or imagined" (Khair, 2018, p. 34). This incident marks a significant shift in the narrative and raises questions about Ahmed's true

character, his wife's absence, and whether his eccentricity hides a deeper, more unsettling persona.

Mehrotra initially assumes that Ahmed is playing a prank on him, which seems reasonable, as pretending to eat the invisible *halwa* from an empty plate is absurd. This response reflects our tendency to rely on preconceived notions of reality; in everyday life, we depend on our senses to validate our perceptions. When confronted with something that contradicts our senses, we often dismiss it as jest or trickery. The fact that Ahmed is eating from the empty plate disrupts Mehrotra's "sense of reality" and shocks him. It is important to note that this is not merely a play on perception; it is a commentary on the fragility of our understanding of reality and how easily it can be challenged. Ahmed's behaviour serves as a metaphor for how people sometimes engage with intangible or imaginary constructs, potentially as a coping mechanism for something lost. It serves as a reminder that there is often more to people's experiences than meets the eye and encourages us to approach others with empathy and an open mind, even when faced with the unexpected and inexplicable.

The invisible *halwa* emerges as a recurring element in the novel. It holds religious significance in Muslim communities. Muslims in India and the subcontinent prepare a variety of *halwa* dishes on *Shab-e-baraat*. In this context, the *halwa* symbolizes Ahmed's connection to his faith and his desire to maintain religious traditions even in a secular and often Islamophobic society. Mehrotra is shocked and mentally disturbed, leaving him uncertain and questioning if Ahmed is indeed the person he has known and considered his "right-hand man" for years.

> Until then he had been the most reliable, reasonable, trustworthy and easy person I had ever known. Now suddenly, he was – what was he – demented, superstitious, crafty, crazy, a fool? In any case, he was not the person I had known. By not being what I thought he was, he had thrown my world out of gear. (Khair, 2018, pp. 35-36)

As Marino (2019, p. 64) suggests, "the texture of reality is always more complex than one's perception of it." Mehrotra finds it difficult to reconcile his perception of Ahmed with the identity he embodies. This incident prompts Mehrotra to investigate Ahmed's life. He reflects, "No, I could not just fire him; I had to know more" (Khair, 2018, p. 44). He hires a private detective, Devi Prasad, to find out more about Ahmed's life. Through this investigation, Mehrotra uncovers Ahmed's journey of navigating his identity and faith amidst communal tensions and societal expectations. Ahmed's journey intertwines with other characters,

including his wife, Roshni. This in-depth investigation of Ahmed's life serves as a lens for a broader understanding of the experiences of Muslims in India. It underscores how the novel portrays the Muslim community as perpetual outsiders, associating them with unease and violence, as Farddina Hussain (2022) points out. It further scrutinizes "the recent history of India in its broad context, with the conflicting dynamics of local communities, cultures and individuals" (Adami, 2019, p. 324).

Representing the self and the other

The novel revolves around the interplay between what is perceived as real and what is a constructed narrative. It sheds light on the complexities of "representation" in postcolonial discourse and examines how Khair manipulates the perception of truth, blurring the lines between "objective reality" and "imaginative constructs". It underscores how our views can be shaped by the biases that come from our limited understanding of ourselves and others. This fundamental gap between "what we know" and "what the reality is" constitutes the key point of discussion within the context of postcolonial identity.

Furthermore, as Farddina Hussain (2022, p. 23) argues, while *Night of Happiness* seems to focus on the "self-other" relationship between Mehrotra and Ahmed, it delves deeper into "a complex understanding of the self that constitutes the other within" and shows that Mehrotra's self is "dependent on the other [Ahmed] as a not-me part of [the] self." As such, Mehrotra "occupies a privileged position in constructing a discourse of another person, as "not-me" through suggestive metaphors, body language and tone."

Moreover, Edward Said's concept of the "other" posits that the other is not merely an external figure but plays a crucial role in the construction of the self. In this sense, Mehrotra's perception of Ahmed reflects his own insecurities and biases. According to Said (1978), the representation of the other is often filtered through a lens of power relations, where the self seeks to define itself against an external contrast. Thus, Mehrotra's interactions with Ahmed reveal how the act of perceiving the other simultaneously shapes one's understanding of the self.

Mehrotra's character vividly reflects the complexities of postcolonial identity. He describes himself as "a man of action," (Khair, 2018, p. 42) who thinks logically. After completing his MBA at an IIT, he taught at the same institution for some time before doing a PhD in Business Communication at Columbia University. Although Mehrotra is an upper-class Hindu, he is unaware of his own religion, let alone other religions and Indian cultures. His profound lack of knowledge manifests recurrently within the narrative, portraying him as a

disoriented individual. Having studied abroad, he aligns himself more with Western cultures and lifestyles and remains ignorant of the socio-political conditions of his own country. He lives a "sensible life" (Khair, p. 139) and calls golf a "sensible game" (Khair, 2018, p. 64), and he has the best of marriages "a sensible one" (Khair, 2018, p. 75). Consequently, he presents a very nuanced picture of a postcolonial mindset, asserting that "post-colonial societies are still subject in one way or another to overt or subtle forms of neo-colonial domination, and independence has not solved this problem" (Ashcroft & et al., 1995, p. 2). Mehrotra's embrace of Western cultures is not merely a personal choice but can be interpreted as a result of the ongoing neo-colonial dynamics that shape the cultural and intellectual landscapes of postcolonial societies.

Furthermore, "a sense of disorientation" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 1) is seen in Mehrotra's personality. Despite his Indian heritage, he strives to identify himself more as a well-educated, upper-class Western individual. Homi K. Bhabha (1994, p. 86) conceptualizes this phenomenon as a postcolonial dislocation of identity, encapsulated by the notion of "mimicry". It suggests a process in which individuals from colonized cultures imitate or emulate the values, behaviours, and norms of the colonizers as a means of assimilation or survival. Mehrotra's inclination to adopt aspects of a Western identity despite his Indian heritage perfectly aligns with this idea of mimicry. The novel highlights colonial legacies by portraying Mehrotra's internalized prejudices at the very beginning of the novel. Mehrotra calls Ahmed, the only Muslim applicant, for an interview, just to ensure impartiality in the recruitment process and yet holds reservations due to preconceived notions associated with Ahmed's Muslim name. His lack of prior collaboration with individuals of the Muslim faith is evident when he says, "First rule in business, first rule in life: work with known factors" (Khair, 2018, p. 8). Mehrotra is sceptical and all prepared to reject him. However, upon reviewing Ahmed's resume and discovering his proficiency in multiple languages, including "Arabic, French, German, Thai, Tibetan, Japanese, and a smattering of Chinese" (Khair, 2018, p. 9), he is ultimately offered the position, and he soon becomes Mehrotra's "right-hand man" (Khair, 2018, p. 13).

However, after the incident at Ahmed's residence on the *Shab-e-baraat* night, Mehrotra finds himself grappling with self-doubt, questioning his own sanity and feeling unsettled by Ahmed's actions. Mehrotra is deeply disturbed because he is faced with an incongruity between "what he sees" (an empty plate) and "what he knows" (that Ahmed is eating). Thus, Ahmed shatters Mehrotra's "postcolonial illusion" by offering him the invisible *halwa*, as Mehrotra maintains his "Westernized" demeanour by being "sensible" and "reasonable" (Büyükgebiz, 2019, p. 496). This discomfort evolves into a palpable manifestation of apprehension, casting

Ahmed as the "other" (Ashcroft et al., 2002, p. 102). Mehrotra internalizes "a certain construction and understanding of difference" (Khair, 2016a, p. 21) in relation to Ahmed, perceiving him as a threat to both himself and his flourishing business.

As Martha Nussbaum (2012, p. 58) explains, "Fear is a 'dimming preoccupation': an intense focus on the self that casts others into darkness." Farddina Hussain (2022, p. 23) further argues that Mehrotra constructs a discourse where the "other" is feared and viewed through a stereotypical gaze rather than allowing Ahmed to speak for himself. This pervasive sense of fear drives Mehrotra to investigate Ahmed's past before sending him on one year's paid leave. The novel thus prompts readers to scrutinize Mehrotra's reliability as a narrator and his interpretation of Ahmed. His recurrent discourse on *Tableeghi Jamait*, Islamist atrocities, terrorist attacks, and the concept of *jihad* (Khair, 2018, pp. 71-73) underscores his deep-seated biases against the Indian Muslim community.

Khair employs a nonlinear narrative structure in *Night of Happiness*, blending past and present through flashbacks and fragmented timelines. This structure engages the reader but also introduces a sense of ambiguity, mainly through its shifting perspectives and voices. The narrative's reliance on Mehrotra's limited first-person perspective is a deliberate yet problematic choice. While this perspective creates an air of ambiguity and underscores the themes of cultural miscommunication and personal blindness, it also risks oversimplifying the complexities of Ahmed's character. Ahmed's voice, often mediated through Mehrotra's interpretations, remains curiously muted, raising questions about whether Khair sacrifices depth for narrative intrigue. While thematically consistent with the novel's exploration of misperception, this narrative choice undermines Ahmed's agency, reducing him to an object of Mehrotra's curiosity rather than a fully realized character. Furthermore, while Khair's use of symbolism – such as the recurring motif of *halwa* – adds texture to the narrative, it can feel overdetermined as if the novel leans too heavily on such devices to communicate its themes. Thus, while Khair's techniques undoubtedly enhance the novel's atmosphere and intellectual appeal, they also reveal certain limitations in their execution, leaving the reader to grapple with the tension between narrative sophistication and character depth.

Unveiling Ahmed's past: Devi Prasad's reports

Prasad delves into Ahmed's past, deep into his upbringing and experiences, to shed light on the enigmatic behaviour that has left Mehrotra puzzled. Prasad investigates Ahmed's historical background, subsequently unravelling a complex sequence of events that provide fresh insights into Ahmed's irrational and unsettling behaviour. The first report delves into the

challenges and hardships that marked Ahmed's upbringing, highlighting the significant early loss of his father, which placed him under the exclusive care of his mother. Additionally, the report sheds light on his years in his hometown (Phansa), his marriage, and his occupation as a local tourist guide in Bodh Gaya. The second report sheds light on Ahmed and his wife's years in Mumbai and Surat. The very reference to Mumbai captures Mehrotra's attention, causing a resurgence of apprehensions in his mind. As Mumbai is known for its underworld, he contemplates the possibility of Ahmed having any "terrorist links" (Khair, 2018, p. 117). Mehrotra spends sleepless nights. For him, "Ahmed's realities, it appeared, shifted with every new enquiry into it, as if he was not a solid human being but something amorphous, imaginary, ghostly" (Khair, 2018, p. 115). This whole investigation into Ahmed's past can be seen as an exploration of the power dynamics involved in knowledge production. It reflects the postcolonial concern with who has the power to define and shape narratives.

Devi Prasad's Phansa report uncovers that Ahmed's life significantly turned when he met Roshni, his future wife. Roshni's compassion and support acted as a beacon of light in Ahmed's otherwise tumultuous life. They shared a bond forged in the crucible of their shared struggles, and their love offered Ahmed solace and hope. However, their union was not without its challenges. Roshni's background remained a mystery. "She was a woman of various names. One of them was Roshni" (Khair, 2018, p. 100). Due to her unknown religious background and parentage, she was not socially accepted either as a Muslim or as a Hindu. When Ahmed proposed to her, it was also not well received by the people of his *mohalla*, except her mother.

> Ahmed and Roshni were married by a mullah in Bodh Gaya, and Ammajaan accepted it. Not everyone else did though, as I think I have told you. Some mohalla people wanted Roshni to be converted to Islam and the niqaah to be performed again. They did not believe Ahmed's claim that Roshni was a Muslim. 'She doesn't look like a Muslim,' said those who did not know anything about her. (Khair, 2018, p. 112)

However, after the wedding, Roshni starts doing *purdah* just like her mother-in-law despite Ahmed's objections. Ahmed tells Roshni, "They will never accept you no matter what you do" (Khair, 2018, p. 113). Her character reminds us how difficult it is to have social acceptance. Roshni also becomes the "other" in the novel. Neither Muslims nor Hindus accept her. She eventually meets her death, killed by Hindu fanatics during the Gujarat riots of 2002. It is only through the reports that we learn about her. Bhabha (1994, pp. 70-71) says, "Colonial discourse

produces the colonized as a social reality which is at once an 'other' and yet entirely knowable and visible." However, it is not possible to define Roshni as a "social reality" even though there is a continuous effort in the novel to do so.

Furthermore, Ahmed and Roshni's relationship underscores the tension between individual choices in matters of love and marriage and the expectations and judgments of a conservative community. It showcases the clash between traditional religious and cultural norms and the desires of individuals to forge their own paths, particularly in the context of interfaith relationships. Khair navigates the challenges Ahmed and Roshni face as they confront societal expectations, family disapproval, and the clash between religious traditions. Their relationship becomes a metaphor for the possibilities of overcoming religious divisions and forging meaningful connections based on love, understanding, and shared humanity.

The novel also sheds light on the challenges that Muslim women face within their own community. Ahmed's mother [Ammajaan] confronts refusal when trying to enter a graveyard, as the gatekeeper cites the prohibition on women, claiming their perceived emotional fragility and physical weakness as reasons; in response, Ammajaan challenges this restriction, emphasizing her long history of entering the graveyard and asserting her right to do so, stating, "I have been entering it every year for longer than you have lived on this earth!" (Khair, 2018, p. 105). However, the gatekeeper insists and argues that it is for the benefit of women because they are considered "too weak, too soft-hearted to enter graveyards. They cannot bear it. It is for their good that they are prohibited from entering" (Khair, 2018, p. 106). This incident underlines a conflict between traditional gender stereotypes and Ammajaan's determination to challenge them, illustrating the tension between cultural norms and individual agency.

Devi Prasad also discovers that Ahmed's actions are not entirely irrational. Ahmed's love for Roshni is so profound that he recreates their shared moments through his interactions with her memory. The invisible *halwa* and conversations with Roshni symbolize their life together, a testament to Ahmed's enduring love. The investigation ultimately humanizes Ahmed's behaviour, transforming it from a mere anomaly to a poignant love, loss, and coping narrative. The revelations uncovered by Devi Prasad allow Mehrotra to view Ahmed's actions through a new lens, one coloured by empathy and understanding. Ahmed's story becomes a testament to the resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity and tragedy.

Thus, Devi Prasad's investigative reports unearth the layers of Ahmed's past and reveal the experiences and emotions that underpin his seemingly inexplicable behaviour. Ahmed's upbringing, his relationship with Roshni, and the trauma of the Gujarat riots collectively contribute to his actions. The investigation serves as a reminder that behaviour which appears

irrational on the surface often carries deep-seated emotional significance, and understanding the full context is essential to grasping the true motivations behind it. We learn that "appearances may be deceptive, perceptions (even self-perceptions) might prove inaccurate, and simplifications inevitably lead to misunderstandings and mistakes" (Marino, 2019, p. 62). Mehrotra's gradual transformation from an ignorant and prejudiced observer to a more empathetic narrator mirrors the postcolonial discourse of addressing colonial-era stereotypes and biases. His evolution reflects the need to challenge and overcome the lingering impact of colonial ideologies on contemporary society.

Communal violence: Understanding Ahmed's grief, trauma, and identity

Psychoanalytic theories, particularly those developed by Sigmund Freud and expanded by later scholars, offer valuable insights into the understanding of grief, trauma, and identity. Freud (1917/2003), in his essay "Mourning and Melancholia," argues that "mourning" and "melancholia" are different but similar responses to loss. In mourning, one's reaction is regularly to "the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on" (Freud, 1917/2003, p. 243). This process takes place in the conscious mind. However, in melancholia, one grieves over a loss one cannot fully understand or identify, and this process happens in the unconscious mind. Freud emphasizes that mourning is not pathological and does not require medical treatment. It is a gradual detachment process; one accepts the reality and moves on after a particular time. Once the work of mourning is completed, "the ego becomes free and uninhibited again" (Freud, 1917/2003, p. 245). However, melancholia is "a painful dejection," where one loses "interest in the outside world" (Freud, 1917/2003, p. 244). In this context, "the object has not perhaps actually died, but has been lost as an object of love" (Freud, 1917/2003, p. 245). It involves the inability to sever that attachment, accept the reality, and move on. It leads to self-blame, emotional paralysis, and a pathological attachment to the past. In this case, Ahmed's behaviour is melancholic. He is obsessed with the *Shab-e-barat* ritual, which shows that he still has not overcome his wife's death. Instead of processing the loss in a healthy way, he remains emotionally attached to her, which suggests that he has not fully integrated the loss into his conscious mind. Ahmed's dependence on the past prevents him from engaging with the present.

Ahmed's actions could also be interpreted as a commentary on the blurred line between "reality and delusion" during times of extreme emotional distress. His grief has led him to a state where he cannot distinguish between the living and the dead, which is a heartbreaking portrayal of the toll that violence and loss can take on a person's psyche. Mehrotra recollects,

"Violence, Ahmed had once said, is a virus; it spreads by contaminating others" (Khair, 2018, p. 125). Ahmed's actions, while seemingly irrational, shed light on the complexities of grief and the human capacity to hold onto hope, even in the face of overwhelming tragedy. Ahmed's refusal to accept his wife's death and his conversations with her serve as an act of resistance against the erasure of her memory and the collective trauma of the community. Mehrotra becomes more sympathetic once he learns everything about Ahmed and his traumatic past. He just does not know what to do.

> If, on the one hand, it left me with no choice but to face up to Ahmed's basic insanity – his traumatized refusal to accept the death of his wife – on the other hand, it added to the sympathy and affection I felt for that quiet, peaceful, almost entirely self-contained man. I could not even blame him for refusing to accept the death of a woman he had obviously adored. (Khair, 2018, p. 132)

Night of Happiness places Ahmed's traumatic experience due to the tragic death of his wife within the broader context of communal tensions and historical injustices Muslims face in India. Devi Prasad's report recounts the harrowing 2002 Gujarat riots when Roshni was alone at home while Ahmed, assured of her safety, remained unworried. His sense of security stemmed from his established presence in the community and acquaintances with many neighbours. However, "a mob came into the neighbourhood from outside, led by minor politicians of the ruling party. It had a municipal list of houses belonging to Muslims, and another list of flats rented by Muslims" (Khair, 2018, p. 128). They banged on the door and dragged Roshni out of it. A neighbour tried to save her by saying that Roshni and her husband were not bad Muslims, and "they even participated in neighbourhood pujas" (Khair, 2018, p. 128). In another attempt to save her, someone screamed that she was not Muslim. However, Roshni "did not claim she was not Muslim. She did not say anything. She neither cried nor remonstrated; she never pleaded" (Khair, 2018, p. 129). One of the leaders, never arrested, poured kerosene on her bowed head, struck a match and threw it on her (Khair, 2018, pp. 130-31).

> It was this organized mob that dragged Roshni down the stairs. They ripped the veil off her. They mocked her. 'Where is your God?' they shouted. 'Where is your bastard man?' they mocked. 'No one can save you now, you Pakistani whore!' (Khair, 2018, p. 129)

Ahmed buried his wife's "charred remains in a Muslim graveyard, three or four days later, when such things could be done" (Khair, 2018, p. 131). Roshni's death by burning symbolizes the brutal nature of communal violence. Despite her unknown parentage, the fact that she was believed to be Muslim underlines the arbitrary nature of violence during communal conflicts, emphasizing how innocent lives are often caught in the crossfire of hatred and bigotry. Zeenath Kausar (2006, p. 361) points out that "like other national and international violence and conflict, in the case of Gujarat also, women were the main victims. They were [gang-raped] in many cases before they were cut or burned to death." The novel underscores this grim reality through the death of Roshni. However, Ahmed cannot accept the grim reality that she is no more. This refusal to acknowledge her death manifests grief, shock, and denial, typical responses to traumatic loss. His actions, described as absurd, can be seen as a desperate attempt to hold onto the memory of Roshni and preserve the illusion that she is still alive. This behaviour can be viewed as a manifestation of complicated grief and dissociation, where Ahmed's mind creates an "alternate reality" to shield him from the unbearable pain of separation.

Dominick LaCapra's (2001, p. 142) concepts of "acting out" and "working through" further elucidate Ahmed's behaviour. He defines acting out as the "tendency to repeat something compulsively", where the person remains trapped in the past. Ahmed acts out by clinging to the rituals he used to perform with his wife as if the past were still alive and emotional closure is not possible. In contrast, LaCapra (2001, p. 143) sees working through "as a kind of countervailing force" that enables a person to confront trauma without being overwhelmed. Through this process, the person "tries to gain critical distance on a problem and to distinguish between [the] past, present, and future" (LaCapra, 2001, p.143). However, Ahmed fails to work through his trauma and remains stuck in his fictional world. A year later, Mehrotra finds a towel-wrapped tiffin box with *halwa* on his office table, puzzling over how it got there despite Ahmed's long absence. The flavour of the *halwa* haunts him, prompting him to visit Ahmed's neighbour, who informs him of Ahmed's death. Left with no answers, "Mehrotra's representation of the other remains mysterious and uncanny" (Hussain, 2022, p. 31).

Conclusion

In *Night of* Happiness, Khair situates the narrative within a socio-political framework, portraying the communal tensions and prejudices inherent in postcolonial Indian society. He interweaves the storyline with historical events, including the Gujarat riots of 2002, and

underscores the profound impact of these events on the lives of his Muslim characters. This exploration emphasizes their struggles for self-definition amidst social bigotry. The novel gives deep insights into the Hindu-Muslim relationship, advocating for communal harmony and inclusiveness while interrogating "the multicultural essence of the country, in particular [. . .] the opposition between Hindu and Muslim factions" (Adami, 2019, p. 324).

As the narrative unfolds, Mehrotra undergoes a transformative realization, becoming sympathetic to Ahmed and gaining an acute awareness of the harsh realities Ahmed endured. Initially an unreliable narrator, Mehrotra's biases – evident in his dismissal of the Gujarat riots and his suspicion of Ahmed's faith – mirror broader societal prejudices. His inability to withhold Ahmed's story reflects the suffocating weight of the revelations on his conscience, leading to an introspective journey that unravels both Ahmed's life and Mehrotra's own psyche. Despite his apparent detachment or even reluctance, Ahmed's story exerts a force that compels Mehrotra to recount it, even as he struggles to understand or contextualize it. This tension reflects Mehrotra's more profound unease – both with Ahmed's enigmatic life and the broader cultural and emotional complexities Ahmed represents. However, it also underlines a potential limitation in the novel's framing. If Mehrotra cannot withhold Ahmed's story, it implies that Ahmed's narrative escapes full control or mediation. Nevertheless, the text remains firmly rooted in Mehrotra's perspective, which raises questions about whether Ahmed's story is authentically conveyed or whether it remains filtered and distorted by Mehrotra's biases. In this sense, Khair uses Mehrotra's "inability" as a narrative device, positioning him as an imperfect vessel through which the reader must navigate the layers of miscommunication and cultural dissonance that define the novel.

Ahmed, in contrast, emerges as a figure of resilience and moral clarity. His refusal to allow the erasure of his wife, Roshni – a victim of the Gujarat riots – symbolizes resistance against communal violence and societal divides. By asserting that "Roshni is always with me" (Khair, 2018, p. 136), Ahmed challenges the erasure of personal and collective memory, emphasizing emotional connection over communal animosity. His trustworthiness and calm demeanour further juxtapose Mehrotra's prejudices, making him (Ahmed) the novel's moral anchor. The novel thus transcends mere storytelling, offering a profound exploration of love, death, and memory, set in a world without tolerance. It challenges our preconceived notions and encapsulates the complexities of Muslim identity, the psychological scars of communal violence, and the delicate nature of inter-community relationships in postcolonial India.

Endnotes:

[1] On 27 February 2002, a train carrying Hindu volunteers (*karsevaks*) from Ayodhya (Uttar Pradesh) was set on fire in Godhra, a small town in the Western Indian state of Gujarat. The *karsevaks* "had gone there to express their vigorous support for building a Ram temple at a legally and politically disputed site [Babri Masjid]" (Varshney, 2020). This train burning resulted in the deaths of 58 passengers, including many women and children (Varshney, 2020). The incident sparked widespread violence across Gujarat, leading to what became known as the Gujarat riots. For further information, refer to Ashutosh Varshney's article here: https://items.ssrc.org/from-our-archives/understanding-gujarat-violence/.

[2]*Shab-e-baraat* is an important Islamic observance that falls on the 15th night of the Islamic month of Sha'ban. It is a time for prayers, seeking forgiveness, and reflecting on one's actions in preparation for the upcoming month of Ramadan. Muslims prepare a variety of *halwa*, a sweet dish to celebrate this occasion.

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