

Tabish Khair *Night of Happiness*

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Superficially, the storyline of the new short novel (or even novella) of Tabish Khair depicts the uneventful relation between a Hindu businessman Anil Mehrotra and his Muslim employee Ahmed. The former, who is the narrator of the story, appreciates the zeal and value of the latter, but apart from this he does not care much about his lieutenant nor does he know much about his personal sphere. During a stormy evening, Anil drives Ahmed home since the latter wants to celebrate Shab-e-baraat, the Muslim holiday when the fortunes for men are decided and God may forgive sinners, and he is promised to taste a special *halva* that Ahmed's wife prepares only on this occasion. However, when "in that strangely bare sitting-cum-dining room" (26) Anil is given an empty plate, namely an invisible and immaterial dessert, the narrative in a slow but gradual way starts developing uncanny echoes and frequent ambiguities. Is the absence of Ahmed's wife due to the segregation of women in a traditionally strict society in which gendered spaces are regulated by specific habits? Why does Ahmed insist on praising on imaginary pudding? And, above all, is he really the quiet and decent Muslim worker that people seem to know, or rather a bizarre and mad character? To answer these and other questions, Anil contacts a private detective with the purpose of piecing together the various parts and phases of the life of Ahmed. In a parallel manner, the investigation becomes an excuse for the narrator to go beyond his own bourgeois world, certainties and successes.



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Given the growing atmosphere of suspense that Khair skilfully constructs bits by bits, it is not possible to provide too many details of the story, but suffice to mention that, as the past of Ahmed unfolds, we learn about his propensity of mastering languages, not only Arabic, Urdu and English but local Indian and other languages too, his capacity to work as a guide for tourists, and his family dimension too, including a strong bond with his mother and his decision to marry a woman from the Gaya district in Bihar. Unearthing the many layers of the man's life in reality means scrutinising the recent history of India in its broad context, with the conflicting dynamics of local communities, cultures and individuals. From this angle, the sketched mention of trains is significant because on the one hand they bring to mind the never-forgotten spectres of violence that triggered the horrors of Partition and on the other, still today, they may be elements of a tragedy, for example with the case of the Godhra train, which was set on fire in 2002 causing the death of 59 Hindu pilgrims. But violence is a virus that "spreads by contaminating others" (125) and produces a kind of domino effect, such as the inter-communal riots that led to several hundreds of (mainly Muslim) victims and devastated Gujarat for three days in 2002. Thus, it is inevitable that ferocity and destruction dramatically affect and overturn the lives of men, irrespective of their ethnic and religious background, hence the subtle cues and traces of ghosts in this powerful and dense story. The Islamic tradition does not envisage the existence of ghosts, but nonetheless the text is imbued with silent presences and voices that strive to remind society of the traumas generated by radicalism.

If Ahmed's bizarre identity is associated with a certain impression of madness, in actuality feelings and perceptions seem to dominate the entire novel, with regard to memory – most of the narration pivots around the regaining of his past against the backdrop of the history of the nation – but also in visual and even olfactory figurative terms. As he discovers the various segments of Ahmed's life, Anil synesthetically recalls his rare visits to Muslim areas in connection with the aroma of incense and kebab because these are "smells, memories that travel in the wind, as if they carry, encapsulated in themselves, the history of a people who have moved, and moved, and moved" (73). Cumulatively, desserts that cannot be seen and eaten, smells that are imperceptible and presences that are ethereal become apt metaphors for the empty spaces and fault lines that a plural, complex and changing country like India still has to consider: the sensorial traits of the story transmute the tangible experience of life into a painful, but necessary, dialogue between the self and the other.

The disturbing atrocity of the riots that appear in the interstices of the story interrogates the multicultural essence of the country, in particular in the opposition between Hindu and Muslim factions. It is a feeling that compels Anil, and implicitly the reader, to ponder the

sense of tolerance whilst Khair's rich narrative endorses the poetics of empathy: what happens to your things, your mind, and your life when everything is overwhelmed by a barbarous massacre perpetrated by those who do not accept you? Is madness just a mental response to a shocking experience or does that carry other connotations? Here the descent into the realm of insanity looks like the effort of an annihilated subject who is trying to find a meaning in a desperate situation so that the ghosts of the past haunt the uncertain horizon of the present, but at the same time they warn about the consequences of the lack of negotiation and the triumph of fanaticism.

Constantly and intimately, the narrator feels the urge to solve the mystery and, little by little, he manages to reconstruct the intricate jigsaw of Ahmed's life, but he does not keep it for himself. Although Anil does not "look like that ancient mariner of the poem we had read at school" (151), he succumbs to the power of storytelling and decides to tell a stranger he accidentally meets in a hotel a story of love, death and memory because being reticent, obliterating the past and forgetting the past eventually mean passively validating the actions and ideas of those who spread the germs of hate.

