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## Tabish Khair's *Night of Happiness*: An Effort of Negotiation of Identity in Reference to Minority Groups

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### Abstract

The present paper deals with the negotiation of identity of social and religious sub-groups while discussing the nature of identity and process of identity-formation. Issues like existential enigma, search for identity and intricate human relationships are critically analyzed here through Tabish Khair's *Night of Happiness* (2018). This novella set against Muslim festival "Shab-e-barrat" illustrates struggle for identity and poisoned cultural harmony in India through Muslim Ahmed's invisible 'halwa'. Written from multiple perspectives *Night* involves a political and religious narrative to tell how one can confront false assumptions and stereotypical notions about the minorities and to suggest that man's identity can be negotiated, altered and even constructed above religious, linguistic and racial foundations. Khair holds that the tragic cultural clashes and religious conflicts underline the discontent of people of numerous affiliations and destruction of their identity. This traumatic situation can be pacified through magnanimity and generosity of human behaviour.

**Keywords:** Ghostly, Identity, Minority, Religious, Sub-group.

An individual's in-group, out-group and intergroup behaviours decide his identity. It depends upon his social roles, moral commitments, religious conventions and group norms. It is a matter of great interest and significance how identity is formed, how it is altered during and after the formation process and what are the consequences of this change in social and cultural ambience. Hoover et al. establish, "Identity grows and is nurtured or frustrated in a complex bonding of self and society" (21). Identity formation is based on a person's perception about himself, difference of opinion from others, willingness for adherence to social rules, acceptance of social roles, performance and capability in fulfilling responsibilities in time and space. Identity is natural, normal and pre-fixed and

flexible concept but may be imposed, projected or altered also depending solely on the scenario or background.

The present paper gives the study of issues like existential enigma, search for identity, nostalgic feeling for home, anxiety of diaspora and intricate human relationships through the works of a writer like Tabish Khair, a thoughtful author from Muslim community who writes in different genres with equal dexterity. It deals with Khair's *Night of Happiness* (2018) in view of his perspective and stance towards loss and recrafting of social, religious and ethnic identities of minorities particularly along with issues like fundamentalism and difference between appearance and reality. *Night of Happiness*, a novella set against Muslim festival

"Shab-e-barrat" illustrates struggle for identity and poisoned cultural harmony in India through Muslim Ahmed's invisible 'halwa'. The work behaves like an apostle in recording the everyday unnoticed struggles of the marginalized minority groups for their subsistence and for the expression of their individual differential identity in the society.

Khair's longing for the home and his proclivity for differences provide a stimulus to his humanistic consideration of subcultures which should be accepted without compromising or subduing their energies and differences as is depicted in the novel. Gámez-Fernández and Dwivedi praise Khair, "He has often spoken of his understanding of 'minorities' as a shaping element in his life and work" (xi). Written from multiple perspectives *Night* involves a political and religious narrative to tell how one can confront false assumptions and stereotypical notions about the minorities and to suggest that man's identity can be negotiated, altered and even constructed above religious, linguistic and racial foundations. The story of faith and credulity of Ahmed becomes a saga of displacement and holy terror in the political and gothic environment and suggests the readers that there is only a thin line between the angelic and demonic; illusion and reality; good and evil; life and death.

In *Night*, Khair suggests how much painful may be the journey of one's life and how much a thin line is drawn between the appearance and the truth in reference to the particularly targeted and tortured minority groups in the society. The novel is based on a manuscript with a crossed title:

The Spectral Infinitude of Small Distances" which is found in the drawer of a hotel's room and is divided into unnamed seven chapters. The story which is a type of psychological case study or biography of a Muslim Ahmed trailed by his own people and victimized by those of other community revolves around a less-known Muslim festival Shab-e-baraat which is "the night of salvation. (Khair, *Night* 14)

The consecrated dish of halwa specifically prepared for the occasion of Shab-e-baraat forms the centre

of this suspense-thriller and also becomes the medium to convey the unheard sighs of sorrows and unattended scenes of miseries of minorities throughout their life. Adami analyzes the situation:

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. (323-6)

The charred body of Roshni, Ahmed's wife, suggests not only an end of mixed identities of humans but also questions the existence of the multicultural world. The frequent temporal and spatial changes contribute in the development of the story and present shocking revelations about characters. Muslim traditions with their negative and positive aspects are laid bare before the readers.

*Night* offers an insightful comprehension and keen perception into the conundrum of the common man especially belonging to minority who suddenly becomes the target of disruption and anarchy through the characters of religious and peaceful Ahmed, his wife Roshni, customary and bereft of knowledge about her father and religion, his orthodox mother 'Ammajaan' and the modern and xenophobic Anil. Ahmed, a lower middle class Muslim native of Maruganj in Phansa near Gaya, is forty two years old thin man with an average height. Well-known for his soliloquies, ideas and Ahmedisms, he never drinks alcohol nor chews paan. He is depicted by his employer-cum-narrator Anil as, "... I remember feeling awkward in his presence. He already had grey hair. Clean-shaven and with a way of looking at you directly in the face. Not hostile, but disconcerting. An austere face, deeply lined, with deep-set, almost unblinking eyes" (Khair, *Night* 8). Ahmed's family belongs to the Tableeghi Jamait, a modern, pacifist, and non-political organisation which follows strict Muslim rules and customs like traditional purdah for women in public but also believes in education and work for

them. Even after her husband's death, Ahmed's mother is not deserted by the community and is given work of stitching, knitting, weaving and so on. Ahmed has been reared up by his strictly religious and hardworking mother in poor conditions. Intermediate-passed Ahmed, an out-fashioned person of simple clothes, is a subject of respect in his neighborhood.

Ahmed's mother remains a constant source of love, support and trust for him lifelong whenever he is ditched by his community on issues like his meetings with Hanif, the changes in his personality after becoming a successful guide and his marriage with Roshni. Finally, Ahmed is deserted in the mohalla on the issue of 'niqaah' with Roshni and her conversion to Islam. Having lost any attachment with his community, Ahmed leaves Phansa for Mumbai with his wife within a week of his mother's death and finds a job in the office. Ahmed shifts to a new flat in Surat few months earlier of 2002 riots where both Ahmed and Roshni participate in all types of neighborhood activities and festivities like puja, celebrate vacations and weekends by going to cinema or beaches like a newly-wed couple and so are liked by their neighbors also. Ahmed works as the "right-hand man" (Khair, *Night* 13) in the business dealings of Anil who is operating his business in more than a dozen cities and four countries with six to seven full-time employees. He, workaholic by nature, makes his work complete in the office only though it is past midnight and willingly works overtime and even on holidays like Diwali and Eid without any grudging and never takes the work to home.

Ahmed never gets into the occasional arguments about Islamist terror. Otherwise secretive about his personal life, he discloses it in particular contexts and that only with Anil but this firm relationship comes to a halt with the visit of Anil to Ahmed's house on the occasion of Shab-e-baraat. He is deeply rooted in his family traditions and celebrates the festival of Shab-e-baraat to commemorate his mother as he is unable to visit her grave in the distant Phansa. On this day, his wife makes delicious dish of maida ka halwa taught to her by Ammajaan. He has no demand, even for a raise in his salary but he is firm for the holiday on 'Shab-e-

baraat which reflects a strong inhibited sense of religious identity of Ahmed though he himself accepts, "I am not religious or irreligious Mehrotra sa'ab, but ceremonies are necessary to live in a fuller world than this one" (Khair, *Night* 21). Ahmed invites Anil to his flat and offers him halwa in the plate which actually contains merely some nimkis and a spoon like Ahmed's plate. The completely shocked and confused Anil presents the situation, "I was filled with a sense of horror, horror of the sort I had never experienced or imagined" (Khair, *Night* 34). The ghostly appearance of halwa, the faint practice of eating halwa and dipping nimki in halwa make the narrator feel icy cold and get numbed. Ahmed is described as a rigorous and particular person who follows his self-applied norms very stringently.

Khair is thoughtful of the Muslim customs and stereotypes about the Islam and makes an attempt to present them discursively one by one to reveal the hard-hitting efforts of the minorities to negotiate their marginal status and other subtleties of the identity issues especially in the Indian nation space. The writer taunts corrupt Islamic practices like observing purdah, marriage with cousins, conversion in Islam and prohibition on female's education. Ahmed even blames his mother for the custom of purdah which his wife had never observed before marriage and for her denial to meet with strangers. In short, Ahmed, the spokesperson of humanity, virtuosity and enlightenment preferably over his hard-core religiosity, advocates the rights for poor, miserable and weak but struggles for his own survival for being a member of the minority group. The philosophies of Ahmed though sometimes beyond the comprehension of commoners' minds illustrate the need of multi-tasking identities being suitable to adapt with hybrid and cross-cultural atmosphere. He displays unique and ancient Indian thought process embedded in satisfaction and tolerance.

The religious separatism, interference of politics and related feeling of hatred for minority are the major disturbing issues in common man's life in modern era which Khair remembers to depict in the novel. Khair again does not forget to recount some human activities to spoil faith in harmonious relationship of different religions. He refers to the

bloodthirsty inhumanity in the Hindu-Muslim riots in 2002 in which many persons from both sides were brutally killed or fatally injured, women were molested and children were burnt alive and thus it proved a blot on the brow of mankind. The writer conveys that the magnanimity and generosity of behaviour can work as panacea against the plagued situations created due to the religious fundamentalism and national differences. The reciprocal relations of harmony and affection among persons of different groupings or associations and the mutual feelings of respect for each-other's ways and means of life can be maintained through the 'unity in diversity' than 'unity in uniformity' concept. Anil remembers, "Violence, Ahmed had once said, is a virus; it spreads by contaminating others" (Khair, *Night* 125) and thinks, "...the only way to resist violence is to refuse to harbor it, or you become a carrier of the virus and it spreads further through you. But what if the virus is injected into you? What if the doctors of your society infect you with the virus?" (Khair, *Night* 126). In such a situation, the staunch belief of Ahmed and his Hindu neighbors for each-other, their combined participation in all religious festivities underline the mutual prosperous relations of common man.

Khair holds that the tragic cultural clashes and religious conflicts underline the discontent of people of numerous affiliations, backgrounds and opinions and result in the dislocation of identity of sub-groups and vulnerable which questions the multicultural perspective of the postcolonial age. In *Night*, Khair tries to portray human realities and frustration in his proclivity to raise the stand point of sub-groups and devises a stratagem to counter the anti-human forces to enhance the possibilities of a successful assertion and assimilation of varied emotions and sensibilities without subduing them in a large spectrum.

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