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Reading Literature on Riots as Affective Testimony

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Abstract

Through a reading of Tabish Khair's *Night of Happiness*, the paper looks at affective strategies deployed in literature that write of sectarian violence in postcolonial India. Thinking through the affect-trauma paradigm, an argument for looking at literary responses to sectarian violence as affective testimonies– one that records both the ungraspability of pain and the *more than* of representation– would be made. A reading of these affective strategies in Tabish Khair's *Night of Happiness* would help us understand the writer's attempts at establishing affective connections between different bodies, both the writing body and the reading body, which open up the reading body to feel the inaccessible experience. It is affect and its contagion that further make way to feel what has *not yet* happened to the readers, which makes a possibility of intersubjectivity, allowing readers to access the psychic space of the characters in the fiction.

Keywords:

Affect; Haunting; Riots; Trauma; Pain; Memory

Affective Encounters in Tabish Khair's Night of Happiness

The affective turn that began in the mid 1990s responded to the limitations of post-structuralism and deconstruction and signified a return to bodily matters. Further, the affect–trauma paradigm emergence post 9/11 brought an alternative approach to theorising trauma, proposing a distinct model for understanding and interpreting violent conflicts and the traumatic aftermath. It looked at the visceral forces that exist beyond our conscious knowing, which often go unnoticed but have the potential to move our bodies. The forces that exist in *more than* of emotion and representation (Seigworth and Gregg 1). That affect exists beyond conscious knowing and has an element of unrepresentability attached to it; scholars working on it are often faced with the question of its representability in language. This has often divided scholars into two groups who attempt to understand affective processes. On one hand, there are scholars like Massumi, Thrift, and Clough for whom language cannot be a medium for understanding of affect, but it can only be understood as carrying distorted traces of affects. While for scholars like Ruth Leys, Lisa Blackman, Butler, and Wetherell, language becomes an important arena of analysis owing to its important role in the social shaping of bodies (Knudsen 4). That affects travel between bodies, both human and non-human, has been an argument that most affect theorists have in common. Body, thus, becomes a common ground of analysis for scholars working on affect.

In order to understand the body, I look at Spinoza's understanding of it, who sees it as composed of infinite particles that share relations of motion and rest, speed and slowness that define its individuality. In order to understand the body, I look at Spinoza's understanding of it, who sees it as composed of infinite particles that share relations of motion and rest, speed and slowness that define its individuality. Body, for Spinoza, is filled with indeterminicies and "no one has yet determined what the body can do" (Deleuze 17). What Spinoza meant by this often cited quote was that the body's capacity to act remains indeterminate and that it "surpasses the knowledge that we have of it, and that *thought surpasses the consciousness that we have of it*", bringing into light the *yet-ness* of a body's *affectual* capacities, its doings and undoings (Seigworth

and Gregg 3). This indeterminate capacity, which we know *not yet*, takes us to the unrealised potential of the body's becoming. Since the study of affect involves impingements on bodies, the study of it in literature would mean a reading of how those affects are embodied in the language. Further, a body has capacities of affecting and being affected by different bodies (Cullen 21). It is this capacity of the body to affect and be affected that I rely on to understand how the writing bodies affect the reading bodies. In her *Writing Shame*, Probyn discusses writing as a corporeal activity where she suggests how writers work ideas through their bodies and get them into the readers' bodies (Probyn 76). She argues that "Writing is a corporeal activity. We work ideas through our bodies; we write through our bodies, hoping to get into the bodies of our readers. We study and write about society not as an abstraction but as composed of actual bodies in proximity to other bodies" (Probyn 76). Her work looks into the embodied dimensions of writing, where our bodily experiences of writing are translated into language. The processes that involve writing from thinking to reading and the act of writing form a part of our capacities to affect and to be affected (77). Writing, therefore, is an encounter of bodies that includes the writing body, which is the affected body, the text's body, which tries to capture the affects. The process of writing involves a relation that takes place in the felt intensity between the body and the word. This felt intensity between body and word forms the basis of affect transfer between different bodies, forming a circuit from the writing body to the reading body. What enables the formation of this circuit is the idea of bodies as having capacities of getting affected and affecting other bodies. Fiction writing on violent events, as the paper argues, becomes an affective responses that use certain affective registers that establish *affective* connections which then open up our bodies to inaccessible experience or feel the *not yet*. It is affect and its contagion that further make way to feel what has not yet happened to the readers, which makes a possibility of intersubjectivity, allowing readers to access the psychic space of the characters in the fiction. The body moves, and the movement is connected to the larger movement of the political forming communities.

This paper looks at affective strategies used by Tabish Khair in his novel, *Night of Happiness*, a story that deals with the traumatic afterlife of a character following communal

violence. It looks at how those affective strategies establish connections between the characters in the texts and the readers. Through the protagonist who had lost her wife in the violent events, the novel renders her as a haunting presence throughout the story, informed by his refusal to accept her death. Haunting becomes an affective strategy that, through its invoking of visceral responses in different bodies, both within the text and the readers affectively

The novel narrates a surreal tale of a Muslim protagonist, Ahmed, a hardworking employee who worked without taking any break for a businessman, Anil Mehrotra. The only day when Ahmed requested leave was the festival of Shab-e-Barat – the night of happiness for Ahmed– a festival when some sects of Muslims pray to the graves of their ancestors. The narrative of the novel takes a turn on one evening of Shab-e-Barat when Ahmed's employer, Mr Mehrotra, offers him a lift to compensate for calling him to work that day. It is on this day that Mr Mehrotra encounters Ahmed's unsettling and uncanny behaviour when he requests "halwa" from his wife Roshni– a character Roshni who remains unseen throughout the novel. When the halwa that Mr Mehrotra had asked for is served, he is shocked to notice that the plate did not have any halwa, but he is still pressed by Ahmed to have them. This astounds Mr Mehrotra to the point where he feels compelled to hire a private detective, Devi Prasad, to investigate Ahmed's life. That Roshni was a casualty of the violent events of 2002 is learnt by Mehrotra after the reports given by the detective, a report that opens the archive of Ahmed's sufferings. It is through Devi Prasad's findings that Mehrotra encounters haunted histories of his past that draw Mehrotra affectively into the circuit where the possibility of intersubjectivity between the characters takes place.

The affective nature of the novel is introduced at the very beginning, where he states that the story might catch the reader 'by the sleeve' making them 'feel its desperate tug' (Khair 2). Turning to the imagined readers– *the reading body*– who might find the manuscript lying in the hotel room where the narrator was going to write and leave the manuscript is how the story's narration begins. After the note to the imagined readers, the story shifts to the protagonist, Ahmed, who works at the narrator, Anil Mehrotra's office. The narrator thinks about his interview

in which he hired Ahmed, whom he describes as an exceptionally dedicated employee who requested leave only for Shab-e-Baraat, the festival after which the novel is named. The protagonist during that interview says:

> During Shab-e-baraat, we recall our ancestors, those who are dead, the ones gone before us to the realms of eternal peace and joy, the ones who made us possible on this earth. It links the past to the future through our present. That is why for me it means the night of happiness. We visit the graves and burn incense there. (Khair 15)

The *Night of Happines*s, for Ahmed, signified an event that links the dead and the alive, the past, future and present, suggesting the novel's preoccupation with ghostly matters, matters that exist in *more than* of representation, reading of which involves more listening than seeing and recording registers that escape the human ears. The hauntings in the novel represent the limits of representation or the need to go into the dimension of *more than* of representation. It becomes a way of knowing the past and the present of the characters, which, for Gordon, "draws us affectively... into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge but as a transformative recognition" (Gordon 8). It is haunting that invokes a visceral response in Mehrotra, who is moved to the extent of demanding justice towards the end. For Gordon, haunting becomes a method to investigate the subjectivities and social life of the traumatic characters. It calls for an attentiveness to ghostly matters that haunt us and our surroundings (195). The study of social life entails an engagement with ghostly matters owing to haunting constitutes an important element of modern social life (7). Ghosts are also social figures, and investigating them could lead us to historical and subjective sites that shape social life (8). Even though *Night of Happiness* does not explicitly have a ghost, it is the haunting affects that draw us *affectively* to a new *becoming* by making the reading body feel the psychic state of the characters involved in the text, opening our bodies to assume intersubjectivity. As the story moves, the affective nature of haunting enables the readers to feel connected to the events, which may not have necessarily impacted them to the point where the bodies open to experience the *not yet*. What is conveniently

forgotten in public memory is brought to us hauntingly through the eyes of a private detective, moving us to feel the event.

The novel's spectral tone intensifies when we encounter Ahmed's strange behaviour on a Shab-e-Baraat evening, after Mr Mehrotra offers to drop him home. During his visit to Ahmed's home, Mehrotra begins to perceive the spectral elements at play. The invisible halwa becomes a crucial point that heightens Mehrotra's suspicions about Ahmed in the novel. Mehrotra says:

> He chewed, he swallowed. Then he grasped the spoon again, this time to scoop up the empty air from the vacant part of the plate and 'eat' it, his jaws and throat muscle moving exactly as if he was chewing and swallowing. It filled me with a sense of horror, horror of the sort I had never experienced or imagined. (34)

The protagonist's conversations with his dead wife and his eating of the invisible food lead Mehrotra to initially dismiss him as insane. Yet, as Mehrotra initially feels unsettled by Ahmed's actions, he begins to doubt his own sanity towards the end—a transition that also draws the reader into it. It is the act of eating the absent food that becomes the first moment where the protagonist tries to insert Mehrotra into his fiction.

Throughout the novel, we see Ahmed's refusal to accept his wife's death, pointing to the unassimilated nature of his trauma, represented through haunting moments where he is seen talking to his dead wife. Ahmed's wife's death is marked by the *not-yetness* of ending, as it is an event that does not end but continues to go on. The event does not become the past but continues to live *alongside* his body. For Caruth, the latency period, which is the delayed recognition of the experience, is what marks the beginning of the traumatic event (Caruth 8). In this case, the latency period is marked by a *not-yetness*, as there is a refusal to accept the death, as it is the wife's

memories that present a sense of continuity in his life. Trauma, which has not been grasped owing to its ungraspable nature, exists on the surface of the bodies.

On encountering Ahmed's trauma, Mehrotra has a transforming impact on him. There is a refusal to think of him as insane and with additional sympathy. An affective connection is established with Ahmed's trauma passing on to Mehrotra's body. For Mehrotra:

> If on the one hand, it left me with no choice but to face up to Ahmed's basic insanity– his traumatised refusal to accept the death of his wife– on the other hand, it added to the sympathy and affection I felt for the quiet, peaceful, almost entirely self-contained man. (132)

The past, for Ahmed, has not passed, and the distinctions between the past and present, real and virtual, get blurred. The experiences cannot be understood through binaries of past and future or virtual and actual, but through "experiences between which the body fluctuates" (Richardson 147).

Because Ahmed's traumatic story had the potential to affect him and others, Mehrotra tries to protect himself and others. He says:

> Facts have to be faced." This was something I firmly believed. And whatever the fiction behind Ahmad's existence, the fact was this: he was living a fiction, and that fiction was gradually living him. He was not reliable. There was no avoiding the matter: He had to be relieved of his responsibilities in my business. "I had to protect myself and others. (134)

The novel, in its more from the corporeal to the incorporeal, not just gives the reader an archive of what has been conveniently forgotten but also represents trauma as existing *beyond* representation, that is, existing in the realm of *more than* representation. To use Richardson's words, it gestures something *beyond the pages* and shows the non-containable aspect of trauma, something that cannot be totalized and exists *beyond* representation (Richardson 155). This is a reason why both the readers inside and outside of the novel feel the ungraspability of Ahmed's story. The excess of trauma spills over, and the story goes into assuming different incorporealities defying representation. So the texts impart the *not yet,* making the readers feel the virtual. It bears

witness not just to the violent events but also to the incapacity of language to represent the trauma. Roshni's spectre or Ahmed's attachment to his dead wife, and Mehrotra's inability to see what Ahmed bears witness to what language could not. It does not go into understanding and representing Ahmed's pain, which is impossible, but rather speaking beyond words. Apart from the *not yet* of experience, the text has the *not yet* of what language we cannot speak and what we have not experienced. The non-containable nature of trauma is something that makes its remnants cling to their bodies, moving them towards understanding the known unknown. The following extracts from the novel make some very important points:

> What was it, I wondered as I stopped into the car: had I been prevented by the closeness of life from seeing and tasting the halwa that time, and had the distance of death enabled a connection that life no longer allowed? All along, I had seen the failure as Ahmed's: why did he have to *insert* me into his madness, I had asked. But what if that was mine? What if it was my failure to see, feel, smell, touch- a lack Ahmed could not have imagined or expected after those years we had shared? (150-151)

Not just the binary between madness and sanity is diffused, but the actual and the virtual also entangle the insertion of the protagonist in Ahmed's story. Ahmed's story is something existing *beyond* recognition, something that cannot be fully explained or represented. That is to say, sense cannot reach this limit of thought. There is an acceptance by the protagonist of his having a lack of understanding. The novel closes with a call for justice, which, in my opinion, is a crucial element of affective fiction and the subject of my last section of the paper. This is possible when there is an openness to being *affected* by the pain of others. I want to bring in what Ahmad calls an ethical practice of responding to pain, which involves being open to "being affected." Even if speaking of or listening to another person's pain is different from speaking of one's own pain, as the person in pain exists in the realm of "certainty," while the other person's pain is "to have doubt", the *affective* practices pull the readers into the circuit of affects, forming a community.

The affective testimonies take into account the surroundings and are written from the victim's position to affect, implicate, and demand justice. There is a demand for justice that comes from the narrator towards the end, after intersubjectivity and *affective* encounters. He says:

> I was sorry to learn of it, and I hope such saffron ruffians are brought to book. I tell them to lock them and throw away the key. But, Ahmad, you must accept that your wife is no longer with you. (136)

What happens here is the establishment of affective communities through the memories of an event, highly contagious in nature, embodied in Ahmed. The affective testimony created an affective environment enabling formations of collectives, both memory and communities. There is a social power in the sensual, the felt, which makes a community. Returning to embodied hauntology, in his attempts to interrogate and listen to ghosts in Ahmed's life texts and understand the characters who are haunted by the absence and presence of the dead, we are drawn into the circuit of *affect* through haunting. In the end, not just the protagonist but characters both inside and outside the novel form a collective. Therefore, Khair's novel *Night of Happiness* calls on the readers be *affected* by what remains in the realm of the *not yet* for the readers. A collapse of the virtual and actual and assuming of different subjectivities is what the book ends with. To quote the novel's ending lines as said by the protagonist:

> The story is all told, though I do not know if it is my story of Ahmed's, or whether, as I believed once, we even have separate stories. (153)

The reader *becomes* aware of the hidden grammar in the "unresolved" and "unclear" nature of the events. What has *not yet* been resolved and is unclear makes its presence felt in Mehrotra, making him a part of the fictive world of Ahmed. What began as a "private pretence" assumes a "factual" bodily shape. There is then an insertion or *affective* connection that gets established when the invisible food is served to the narrator. The invisible here makes connections that are visible.

The case of Ahmed is that the unreal reality of events he cannot control has contained him, taking over his psyche as well as neurobiological aspects, which his cognitive processes were not

able to make sense of. The event had penetrated his body to the extent of diffusing lines of sanity and madness and imploding sense of time and tense. His wife's violent killing had penetrated his body, taking from him the language or the capacity to speak of it, unmaking his world. So, to read testimonies of torture and pain becomes about encountering the limits of language to even comprehend pain. That is to say, feeling what is marked by limits of language, or to say it differently, touching what cannot be touched, that is, others' pain. That is why we have to go into the affective dimension of it, that is, what the pain does to us. Pain in Ahmed's case becomes the last attachment to his wife. Even though the loneliness of pain is such that it often requires it to be disclosed to a witness in the text, Ahmad doesn't explain how to comprehend this desire to have a witness to one's pain or for the other to feel it. There is a traumatic refusal to acknowledge the pain and a fear that if the pain goes away, the last connection that he has established with his wife may get lost. This takes us to Lauren Berlant's understanding of cruel optimism, which is "a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realisation is discovered either to be *impossible*, sheer fantasy, or *too* possible and toxic" (Gregg and Siegworth 95). The content of Ahmed's attachment to his wife gives him continuity and defines his being in the world. The loss of this attachment object would mean a loss of any hope about anything. The content of his wife's memories presents a sense of continuity in Ahmed's life. It is this hope that becomes sensually felt in Mehrotra, travelling and making him occupy the same psychic space, making him a part of an affective community. In the novel, even when there is a desire from Mehrotra, the employer, to acknowledge and share Ahmed's pain, there are no signs from Ahmad owing to his non-acceptance of his loss. Quoting Mehrotra:

> Can one pity suffering that refuses to show? Can one comfort someone who remains calm? "Can one hope for the healing of a patient who refuses to acknowledge the chasm between health and illness, sanity and madness? (138)

Fiction on Riots as Affective Testimonies

Reading Literature on Riots as Affective Testimony

I want to return to my argument about *affective* testimonies to understand whether one should read literary testimonies as having memorial or *affective* value. The question lies not in the authenticity of ways of dealing with memories but rather in the feel that the text conveys or the *affect* that they imbue. This explains why one must look for *affective* value that the text carries and what it *does* to the reading body. Since literary narratives always fall short of capturing the exact experience of the participant in the events in question, one must focus on the affective force of the testimonies. That is why I call the narratives "affective testimonies."

These *affective testimonies*, as I call them, are driven by an urgency to remember the hurt and simultaneously bear witness to events that undergo various manipulations as the aftermath of those violent events, which often witness state control over the information and the discourses around it. The writers who are *affected* by these events, events that carry *affects* that penetrate the bodies, undergo a *becoming* which, for Deleuze and Guattari, is a rejection of fixed identity and a destabilisation of stability toward accepting and assuming different subjectivities and taking up different identities. This also takes us to the understanding of "how the virtual and actual are complexly entangled in one another's emergence," pointing to the *not-yet-ness* or the *yet-ness* of the body (Richardson 101). The body is involved in the process of writing and reading the text, and the body *becomes*.

Another reason for calling the writings *affective testimonies* is language's unmaking and its inefficiency, as exposed in the very contact of pain. Scarry's concept of how the mere contact of language and pain exposes the limits of both language and representation is what it takes to explore the *affective* dimensions. Quoting Elaine Scarry's very important remarks, "Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned" (Scarry 4). Even if speaking of or listening to another person's pain is different from speaking of one's own pain, as the person in pain exists in the realm of "certainty," while the other person's pain is "doubt," for Sara Ahmed, the ethics of responding to pain entails being open to being *affected* by that which one cannot know or feel (Ahmed 30). *Affective* testimonies, as we

have seen above, call the readers to be *affected* by what is not theirs. Furthermore, because the writing of pain resists language and its representation, the affective capacities of *affective* testimonies lie in the *in-between-ness* of the felt intensity and the expressive capacities, as pain is not just pure feeling but also carries an *affective* dimension. To take Tomkins' response to this, pain is distinct from affect, even when affect can be about pain[1]. Therefore, speaking of the pain of torture is to rage against a seemingly incommensurable gap between language and experience (Richardson 138). The *affective* quality[2] of pain is what the pain does. It is what the pain *does* that determines its *affective* nature. The body's relationship with itself is revealed in such moments of pain, and its expression involves a complex entanglement of affects and pain. Therefore, the task of *affective* testimony to those violent events is to both record and cause these movements: to record what the words cannot represent and grasp the ungraspability of the experience.

What we see in the story is a destabilization of stability as well as a way for intersubjectivity to occur taking to a new *becoming*[3]. Not just the virtual and the actual are entangled, but a collapse happens due to traumatic refusal, pointing to the not *yet ness* or the *yet-ness* of the body. However, as in Ahmad's case, the body of not just the protagonist, but the employer Mehrotra, the knower, or the witness to Ahmad's "fiction," *becomes* in the process of writing, reading, or knowing the text. This act of *becoming* is the body's doings which has been enabled by this *affective* testimony. One more example of the entanglement of the virtual and the actual can be seen in these lines:

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[1] See Richardson, Gestures of Testimony, p. 143.

[2] Richardon gives an example of how the pain of drowning and the painful explosion in the lungs of waterboarded detainees are different, suggesting that pain involves "complex associations, attachments, and histories that are imbricated in the body, as well as the surfaces, objects, and other bodies it encounters" (Richardson 144).

[3] See Somers-Hall, Henry, Bell A, Jeffrey, and Williams, James, editors. *A Thousand Plateaus and Philosophy*, Edinburgh University Press, 2018, p. 22.

> What was more, after years of this private pretence, for some reason his *fictional world had spilled into our factual one*. He had inserted me into the fiction of his wife the evening he offered me that plate of nimkis and the invisible halwa. (134)

Ahmed's strange behaviour that the novel started with has not destabilized the binary between fact and fiction for Mehrotra, making the last scene immensely affective. He can no longer observe it without immersing himself in Ahmed's fiction. This results in a collapse between the boundaries of the observer and the participant. With Ahmed's world spilling over to Mehrotra, we see the readers share his psychic space, just as Mehrotra does. The affective nature of haunting ends up immersing multiple bodies in its folds, making the virtual a felt actual.

Conclusions

Tabish Khair's *Night of Happiness* emerges as a significant work in the theorisation of affective testimonies, particularly in the context of literature that engages with communal violence. Taking Spinoza's understanding of bodies and its affective capacities, the paper argued for an affective methodology for approaching literary texts. The idea of bodies as having capacities to affect and be affected, took us to a reading of literature as an affective encounter of different bodies. The novel showed how texts become a site of embodied affective response between characters, narrator, and reader that enables a possibility of intersubjectivy. Such a reading practice foregrounded bodies' visceral response moving bodies both within the text and outside connects these movements to the broader political.

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