

## Affinity and Alienation: Unheard Voices of Non-tribal People in Anjum Hasan's *Lunatic in My Head*

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### Structured Abstract:

**Purpose:** In the era of large-scale shifts of people, information, objects, and image across continents, the internal displacement is often overlooked. Such migrations are largely the result of uneven development in the aftermath of colonization and are seen most starkly in the northeastern state of India. For a long period of time the region has been beset with many problems, underdevelopment, militancy, ethnic conflicts, cross border refugee and smuggling problems, that have led to widespread disaffection among its inhabitants. This has resulted in the phenomenon of widespread migration of the people of the northeast to the metropolitan cities like New Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata and Bangalore.

*Lunatic in My Head* is a reflection of lives of three protagonists, lecturer Firdaus Ansari, IAS aspirant Aman Moondy and eight-year-old Sophie Das. They have all been born and brought up in Shillong. Yet, by virtue of their identity of being Dkhar – the Khasi word for a non-tribal – a constant line of ethnic divide separates them from the locals. The book deals with not-so-much-talked about topic, the confused state of the Dkhars, who are not completely insiders and yet not completely outsiders.

The present paper situates at this problematic juncture of existential questions of the non tribal people. It will try to investigate the multi-cultural situation in Shillong and will also ask questions about identities and whether they really matter so much as to inflict irrational violence and play dirty politics on one another. Several instances in the book are evocative of this discrimination against the non tribal people. Sophie is scoffed at by Khasi girls of her age because the waitress refuses to serve her tea and snacks at the wedding. Aman, consciously aware of his outsider status, remains silent when the bully Max abuses the boiled-potatoe seller. And Firdaus feels no less that an alien when Ibomcha, her boyfriend, talks about taking her to Manipur to meet his mother. Yet they cannot help loving Shillong.

**Methodology:** This paper follows the methodology of Interpretive research that tends to read a text with reference to certain theories of literature. It follows broadly the theories of postcolonialism. Apart from this, my paper also follows the method of Discourse analysis – a process of analysing the language of a text.

**Findings:** The paper ventures to deal with the sensitive space that exists between the insiders and the outsiders, their desire to belong to the other, and their agony of not being able to do so. Moreover, the paper will throw into question the concept of home, identity and multicultural society.

**Value:** The relevance or value of this paper lies in the prospect that it questions certain hegemonic concepts like that of home, identity, self, other etc.

**Keywords:** Northeast India, Migrancy, Ethnicity, Affinity, Social Exclusion.

*Lunatic in My Head* (2008) by Anjum Hasan is set in the northeastern part of India, which is known to other parts of India and world as the hotspot of ethnic violence, extremism and insurgency. Northeast India is the homeland of large number of ethnic groups who came to the region from different directions at different historical times. These groups belong to the different racial stocks, speak different languages, and have varied socio cultural tradition. As a result the region has become the epicenter of various ethnic nationalities. Tensions between various ethnic and linguistic communities are quite commonplace here as they struggle for space and identity. Hasan's novel situates itself in this sensitive point of ethnic tensions – between the Khasis and non-Khasi people in the state of Meghalaya.

One of the unique features of the state of Meghalaya is that majority of tribal population follows matriarchal system where lineage and heritage are traced through women. The non-tribal communities in Meghalaya are made up of migrants from other parts of India and recent migrants from neighboring countries particularly Nepal and Bangladesh. A large scale exodus of Bengali and Nepali people had taken place on several occasions. Since the late eighties numerous cycles of ethnic cleansing rocked the state and people belonging to Nepali, Bengali, Bihari and Marwari communities became the target of attack. Unfortunately, these postcolonial feuds have failed to grab the same level of national and international attention, as the feuds in regions like Kashmir, Sri Lanka or Syria. This region since Independence witnessed migration of Bangladeshis, Nepalese and migrant workers from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The 'insider' and 'outsider' syndrome crippled the social, political, economic and cultural life of tribal communities as they carry a strong feeling of distrust against the center. The region remains marginalized from mainland India which, they feel, has always regarded them as the "Other."

For a long time, the small town India remains under represented both in the hands of sociologists and anthropologists. Even there is a conspicuous lack of assessment of small town culture in the field of urban studies. Literary scholars too have long neglected the

intensive reading of small town culture in their principle engagement with the dichotomous framework of the rural versus urban. Thus, they have rarely tried to understand the differences between the cultural worldviews of the metropolis and small town. In case of India, every small town bears a distinct identity very much recognizable from its people, culture and belief. Therefore, the urban space of a small town is not without its share of imagination of the people that live in it. It is the people that give a place its character and colour. Challenging the common notion of a small town to be a homogenous space, Shillong, historically, never bears an identity like that. Since the colonial period, Shillong emerges to be a cultural melting pot where people from the plains of Assam in particular, and the neighbouring provinces of Bengal, Bihar and the distant land of Punjab, Rajasthan and Nepal, came to reside along with the indigenous population as government servants, doctors, army personnel, teachers and small traders. Over the time, these immigrant people settled permanently in their host land being enamoured by the peace and harmony prevailing here. But the situation changes and the space began to transform itself. The partition of India and the transfer of Sylhet to East Pakistan led to the migration and settlement of lakhs of East Bengal migrants in the then undivided Assam. Shillong's cosmopolitan nature collapses as the tribes in the region begin to view immigration as an encroachment in their autonomy and interest. The group of non-tribe Shillong novelists, in their attempt to narrativize the issue, tries to rearticulate their claim, in love, to the land and its history.

The writings of Hasan in this context is a truthful attempt to represent the people of the North east and their complexit. Most importantly, *Lunatic in My Head* is a powerful yet understated attempt to throw a light on this troubled region. *Lunatic in My Head* gives us a glimpse into the lives of people who are considered as 'outsiders' in the context of latent political tensions. This paper will try to examine Hasan's debut novel *Lunatic in My Head* in the light of its engagement with issues like migrancy, displacement, cultural confrontation, and the exilic condition of non-Khasi immigrants in the Northeast. *Lunatic in My Head* is a reflection of the lives of three protagonists, lecturer Firdaus Ansari, IAS aspirant Aman Moondy and eight-year-old Sophie Das. They have all been born and brought up in Shillong. Yet, by the virtue of their identity being Dkhar – the Khasi word for a non-tribal - a constant line of ethnic divide separates them from the locals. The book deals with not so much talked about topic, the confused state of the Dkhars, who are not completely insiders and yet not completely outsiders. The heterogeneous nature of the society is reflected in the very first page of the novel through Firdaus's outlook at it:

A mere glance was usually enough to reveal the important things about them – the languages they spoke, their social position, how long they had lived in Shillong. Firdaus knew that the woman waving to her from the window of the beauty parlour, her friend Sharon, was a quarter British, a quarter-Assamese of the tea-planter variety, and half-Khasi. She knew that the college boys whistling raucously from across the street were entirely Khasi; that the short, scruffy men from the restaurants, out shopping for vegetables and chicken to put in the evening's noodles, were from distant Nepal but had probably never stirred out of Shillong since their parents migrated here; that two men with long black umbrellas and jholas, out to fetch their children from school, were Bengalis who were born here; that the woman with orange hair who ran the liquor store was Goan and, since there were very few Goans in Shillong, something of a freak case, but that the man with the spherical bald head leaning on the counter of his bookshop was not, because he was Sindhi and had plenty of compatriots in the city (Hasan 3-4).

Firdaus herself belongs to none of these categories. She refused to be identified as Bihari because though her parents were from Bihar, she was born and brought up in Shillong. Categorically she falls into the group of second generation migrants who had to negotiate their own sense of belonging and identity in the postcolonial nation-space. On the other hand, the older generation had to suffer migration as a life-long stigma of being an outsider. The pain of migrancy, with its fears and anxieties, experienced by the first generation of migrants is different from that of the second generation. Firdaus had lived among the local Khasi people in Shillong since her birth; yet her life in the hill station had always been precarious. Therefore, in Shillong's eyes she is simply a *dkhar*, a foreigner who did not have roots here, did not have the ground needed to put roots in. She shares neither of her grandfather's castist belief that being a muslim she cannot marry outside her own caste; nor of his strong sense of nostalgia for his own homeland. At the end of the novel we see Firdaus planning to marry Ibomcha, a Manipuri boy and tell it to her grandfather though she knew quite well that her grandfather would be terribly unhappy about it. Firdaus lives in a strange state of flux; she is tremendously conscious about the difference of culture when she was proposed by Ibomcha, a Khasi young man. She is pretty sure that she shares nothing of his homeland, his tribe, his love for his mother, his dozens of cousins, his schemes and his beliefs; yet she decides to marry Ibomcha just as she decides not to leave Shillong in spite of its bleak prospect in future:

She had at the time been looking forward to leaving Shillong and enrolling in a university in Delhi. All through college she had imagined what it would be like to leave home . . . Firdaus had imagined herself . . . disappointed by her parent's inability to grasp the immensity of the difference between the big city and the small town. She had never been to Delhi, but already then she saw clearly how her experience of it would swallow her life in Shillong, drown it, push it to the verge of meaninglessness, and how this irrelevance would be symbolized most starkly by her parents' incomprehension of what it meant to live in the metropolis (Hasan 107).

Through the course of the novel Firdaus seems to gain maturity over this practical world. Earlier she found the match between Sharon and Nivedita's husband sheerly romantic; she was enamoured by the idea of two people separated by everything – age, community, religion – reaching out for each other; she had loved the irrationality of it. But now she comes to realize that the same irrationality seemed to be the cause of Sharon's death.

The ethnic relations are highly complicated in the Northeast. For a long time, many of the Northeastern ethnic groups have been fighting the Indian state in their quest for political autonomy. Ethnic groups like Naga, Mizo, Bodo, Khasi, and Kuki, are challenging the state-constructed definition of a nation, and trying to build up new narratives of their nations based on ethnicity and distinctive cultural moorings. They always felt a lingering sense of alienation from the rest of India due to geographical and historical factors. Moreover the dynamics of demographic shifts due to large scale migration from the rest of India seems to doubly spur the issue of militant nationalism and ethnic assertions for political autonomy. The issue of migration has been put under tremendous threat as the local tribes have always regarded the successive waves of migration as posing threats to their cultures and economic resources. Therefore, the insider-outsider dichotomy of the nation state gets reverted in the ethnic world of the Northeast. The polemics of power seems to be very much functional in creating an atmosphere of doubt and distrust between the 'insider' and the 'outsider'. The divide between them may also be seen as the postcolonial distance between the 'self' and the 'other'. Several instances in Hasan's *Lunatic in My Head* are reflective of this discrimination against the non-tribal people of Shillong. Sophie was scoffed at by Khasi girls of her age because the waitress refused to serve her tea and snacks at the wedding ceremony of a Khasi family where Sophie went with her landlady Kong Elsa, another woman from Khasi community.

Hasan's novel engages itself with the liminal subjectivity of the non-ethnic migrants of the post-colonial India. In opposition to the state recognized citizenship these internal migrants could never become full-fledged citizens in the new country and here comes the issue of social exclusion which is a multidimensional process covering social, economic, cultural and political domains. Marshall Wolfe talks about various kinds of social exclusion – exclusion from livelihood, exclusion from social services, welfare and security networks, exclusion from political choice, exclusion from popular organization and solidarity, and exclusion from understanding of what is happening (Wolf 81-101). The socially excluded is deprived of social recognition, self-respect and social values. The basis of exclusion can be race, ethnicity, gender, religion, language, region, or caste. Each form of exclusion has its nature and manifestation. In *Lunatic in My Head*, exclusion on the basis of race and ethnicity predominates over every other forms of social exclusion. It is as a result of this social exclusion that Mrs. Das takes exception to Sophie's close attachment to Kong Elsa's family even though the latter is the woman who helped them in the worst phase of their lives by giving a relaxation to house rents. Mrs. Das, being apprehensive about Sophie's future, tells her husband: "It's good thing that she spends time with the old lady but she's getting obsessed with that family. After all, their culture is different . . . I know we can trust her- she is a very fine person. But what is the effect of all this on Sophie? She's becoming obstinate. She doesn't want to help me in the house. And have you seen her science exercise book? Each and every test she's done poorly in." (Hasan 287). Interestingly enough, all that is bad in Sophie, opines Mrs. Das, is the outcome of her engagement with a tribal family and her picking up of all sorts of tribal habits. Mrs. Das is too much concerned about retaining the culture promoted broadly by nation state: "My worry is – what will happen to Sophie? She will lose her culture. As it is she knows nothing about anything. Ask her about Mahabharata, why Diwali is celebrated, who Meera Bai was – nothing. Zero." (Hasan 289). Amartya Sen says that sense of one's identity creates a sense of exclusion from mainstream (here in this context 'mainstream' is the tribal culture) and in "many cases carry with it the perception of distance and divergence from other groups" (Sen 2). Mrs. Das's sense of their own identity compels her to look at the tribal culture in disapproving terms. Constructing a national identity and in the process ignoring the specificities of smaller communities further creates exclusionary tendencies.

The issue of social exclusion is usually related to the problem of equal opportunity. Though modern liberal democracies formally recognize full citizenship, very often it creates unequal

citizenship in actual practice. The politics of northeast India is marked by ethnicity and extremism for a long time. The assertion of various ethnic identities and the attitude of the state in containing ethnic extremism make the region distinct from the rest of India. The root cause of ethnic assertion can be found in the identity crisis of various tribal communities who extend over the territorial boundaries drawn by the Indian nation state. Most of the ethnic assertions are due to ethnic group's desperate attempts to protect their identity, culture and language. The basis of ethnic assertion can be seen in two contexts. Firstly, the tribal communities' subjective consciousness of being excluded, oppressed and marginalized. Secondly, the process of development failed to address the legitimate concerns of the people. Though after independence the Indian state tried to integrate and assimilate various ethnic communities in the mainstream national identity, the development process generated a feeling of alienation among them. That is why when Aman and Ribor went by their old school, near the escarpment on their right the graffiti in dripping red paint read, "We Are Khasis by Blood, Indians by Accident" (Hasan 32). Shillong is a wasteland for everybody living here with no such hope to keep them alive. On their way Aman and Ribor met their old school friend Partho who had a big dream of making a career in Indian army. On his way to fulfilling his dream he gave himself another name – Stephen Pratt but shortly his dreams are shattered:

After a failed attempt at a career in the Indian army, Partho had returned to Shillong, married a girl his mother had located for him, and now worked desultorily as a computer instructor. He no longer called himself Stephen Pratt. His father was severely alcoholic and Partho himself did not always speak as if he were in absolute command of his reason. Aman felt grief every time he met Partho. This boy, whose panache had once fascinated him, was now an unshaven depressive given to making jokes that weren't funny. (Hasan 32)

Mrs. Moondy is anxious at the thought that Aman, her only son, would fail the exam and become a clerk in some horrible government office or, worse still, a school teacher and never get out of Shillong. Issues of home and exile are also raised by Mrs. Das's words to her husband, which again, in a way, brings forward the cultural conflict: ". . . why don't you apply for a job elsewhere, outside Shillong? Where is it written that we have to stay in Shillong? There is nothing in this place anyway. No jobs, no culture." (Hasan 286).

The material existence of tribal communities was threatened by the influx of migration, occupation of key government jobs by non-tribals leading to further exclusion. The phenomenon of ethnic extremism is further activated by declining job opportunities in the government sector. Ethnic communities begins to feel in terms of 'us' and 'them' and gradually comes to realize its relative deprivation in comparison with others. Ethnicity, in this context, is the "phenomenon of an ethnic group coming to self-awareness that enables it to reaffirm its identity and pursue its interests" (Heredia 1011). Thus the frustration of the unemployed youth was utilized by the extremist groups to serve their interests. The demands of extremist groups are varying from autonomy to secessionism. They often challenge the sovereignty and integrity of the nation state. We find so many instances of ethnic extremism in smaller scale in the novel, *Lunatic in My Head*. Aman was frequently made victim of racist attacks by a gang of Khasi boys even when he is with his friend Ribor, a Khasi boy. The boys who clustered around them in a threatening ring were Ribor's kinsmen. Aman was, in the language of the bullies, a dkhar – an outsider. Ribor started addressing the gang but in an interesting way he had not reasoned through what he wanted to say – he was merely speaking of an instinct for peace, a desire that people leave other people alone. Aman himself was tormented by a kind of identity crisis. That is why, "He found it particularly hard to defend himself against racist attacks because he was never sure who he was defending – an encroacher, a permanent guest of the hills people, or someone who belonged here because he had never lived anywhere else? Which one of these? He didn't know. He would have liked to avoid the issue." (Hasan 37) As the story unfolds we discover that the leader of the bully group, Max is actually Ribor's brother and he has shot a man in Laitumkhrah last week. Even after shooting a man dead, Max continues to be desperate in bullying dhkars, be it aloo-muri-wallah. Sarak Singh or his brother's friends, Aman or Bodha. Max is not at all afraid that the police are on to him; he is walking about town like a man without worries. This is the reality in which most of the tribal youths waste their lives.

In her lyrical yet restrained prose, Hasan gently probes the sense of alienation. What makes the theme of alienation more problematic is that the characters dwindle between affinity and alienation. They are in love with sylvan beauty, camaraderie and solitude of Shillong but at the same time they abhor the stagnancy of their lives in a small hill town of Northeast India. The exact reflection of it is hinted in Mrs. Das's words. She is full of contradictions as Mr. Das assesses her nature. She asks her husband to leave this place as there is no jobs, no culture here. But after a while she reflectively says: "You stay here for eight, ten years and



then you can't go anywhere else. You get used to this place. Remember when we went to Delhi last time, how difficult it was? Everything seemed strange. People were rude, taxi-wallahs cheated us. Even though we consider ourselves Dilli-wallahs." (Hasan 28). Therefore, the insider-outsider dichotomy gets disturbed as the 'outsider' feels more comfort in another's land rather than their own. The comfort of the outsider in an alien land is much more intensified in Mr. Das's words: "But that's the beauty of this place. The rain, the hills – just look at the garden, it looks alive. I'm not moving anywhere. That I've decided. Job or no job, this is where I'm going to stay. . ." (Hasan 288). Interestingly, Hasan, even after raising so many problematic issues in her narrative, ultimately make peace with everything just the way Firdaus makes it with Hemingway. The end of the novel can be drawn into a single thought line by Sophie Sharma: "Thank God we're not compelled to go to awful places like Calcutta. We keep complaining about Shillong, but think of all good things about this place." (Hasan 344). On a final count, Anjum Hasan seems to suggest that affinity and alienation are fluid states, constantly changing in this era of large scale migrations.

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