

Outsider-Insider Dichotomies in Anjum Hasan's *Lunatic in My Head* and *Neti Neti Not This Not This*

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Abstract: *The paper aims to investigate the insider-outsider paradox in Anjum Hasan's Lunatic in My Head and Neti Neti Not This Not This, set in the background of Shillong, Meghalaya, India. The research paper explores how characters of the stories like Firdaus, Sophie, and Aman traverse the complex layers of belonging, ethnicity, identity, marginalization, and alienation. Even though the characters lived in Shillong for year after year, they are still labelled as 'dkhars', and they tend to experience discrimination and exclusion that reveals the in-built nature of regional identity that exists in the post-colonial state. Employing postcolonial theories by Franz Fanon and Homi K. Bhabha, the paper attempts to analyse how identity is shaped and disintegrated by collective memory and ethnic politics, often amounting to confusion and dissociation with self. The study draws on analytical and descriptive methods, placing the novels in the context of Northeast Indian state formation, cultural memory, and ethnic politics. Hasan's technique of narration provides character representations poised between their geography and cultural inheritance. The analysis is further supported by insights from other scholars like Baruah, Anderson, and Kikon, who elaborate on marginalization, imagined communities, and the politics of belonging in Northeast India. Nongbri and Misra's sociological perspectives on Khasi-majority tensions also inform the paper's arguments. The findings reveal that identity in such contested terrains is inherently unstable, constructed not just through spatial belonging but through emotional and psychological rootedness, shaped by inherited trauma and public memory. The paper unveils that although territorial belonging can be challenged, a profound mental and emotional ground can give various kinds of reconciliation that can enable individuals to assert space, albeit denial of legitimacy by hegemonic discourse. The study contributes to broader debates on regional nationalism, cultural displacement, and the complexities of postcolonial identity in multi-ethnic societies like India.*

Keywords: Belonging, Culture, Ethnicity, Exclusion, Identity, Northeast

1. Introduction

The population of North East India consists of original indigenous inhabitants together with various ethnic groups, including people from Tibet, Burma, Thailand, and Bengal who migrated into the region at various periods of history. Although there are migrants of long standing who in these years have been integrated with the main population, migrations of recent origin have caused friction with the local population. These recent migrations have not only posed a threat to the local population but have also threatened the existence of the migrants who had migrated to the region a long time back and had integrated with the local population. The local population now not only resists these recent migrations, but they also view the longstanding migrants with suspicion, thereby leading to conflicts between the so-called insiders and outsiders. The problematization of the insider versus outsider debate is, of course, not a new phenomenon. Insiders and outsiders, like all social roles and statuses, are frequently situational, given the prevailing social, political, and cultural values of a given social context.

The history of separation and isolation from the rest of India in the colonial period created a problem for the national formation and integration of independent India. In the North East region, a sense of incompatibility grew into one of resentment against being made a part of India, and an anti-India sentiment emerged amongst the region's people, especially when the Indian government cold-shouldered local aspirations. Given the region's historical background, antagonism could be easily instigated. The North East exists outside the conscious mind space of the average Indian, and "chink" is how people in the 'mainland' often greet visitors from this region. Ignorance, coupled with racial

insensitivity, has created a vicious cycle of racial discrimination. Made to feel like outsiders in the mainland, many tribals opt to go back home and then target the non-tribals — 'dkhars' in Shillong, 'mayangs' in Manipur, 'bangars' in the Garo Hills, 'bhais' in Mizoram, and 'plain mannu' in Nagaland.

Talking about the reorganization of various states in the Northeast, the establishment of Nagaland brought about various demands for statehood from other hill regions, and secessionist movements for state designation were intensified. For instance, at the time of the state reorganization, representatives from the Khasi and Jaintia Hills District and the Garo Hills District expressed the hope of forming their own Hill State. This was not accepted by the State Reorganization Commission. But the aspiration turned into a stronger demand for statehood when Asamiya (Assamese) was proposed as Assam state's official language in the language bill of 1960. The representatives of the hill area formed an All Party Hill Leaders Conference in July 1960 and demanded the separation of the hill area from Assam in 1970. The movement for statehood continued, and in 1970, Meghalaya Autonomous State was established. It became a fully-fledged state in 1972. Shillong was a Khasi hamlet before the British established it as the capital of Greater Assam in 1864. Soon, it was inhabited by British officials, Bengali bureaucrats, and Nepali soldiers. As time passed, a bustling town sprang to life around the British settlement. However, the Bengalis, Nepalis, Marwaris, Sindhis, among others, who have inhabited Shillong for multiple generations, have now become the outsiders. Discriminated against and made to feel like second-class citizens, they are moving out. Shilling-born novelist Anjum Hasan's novels *Lunatic in My Head* and *Neti Neti Not This Not This* focus on the insider-outsider conflict in the small

hill capital and elaborate upon issues of identity, the sense of belonging, and identifying oneself with a particular geographical region. She basically deals with the dilemma of being both insiders and outsiders, and the experiences that the non-Khasis underwent during the conflicts and demands for statehood.

The ethnic prospect of Northeast India is complex in its own way, and essential to understand the mechanisms of insider-outsider politics. Baruah (2005) and Kikon (2015) highlight the varied identities in Northeast India, asserting that ethnic belonging is often refurbished through both policies and movements. Baruah indicates the marginality of the Northeastern region in the Indian context, and the nation-building processes often neglect it. His focus is placed on the relationship between Northeast India and the Indian state, arguing that developmental policies conceal the structural marginalisation of tribal and non-tribal communities (2005). Kikon emphasises that identity is arbitrated through daily encounters of exclusion, and explores the experiences of migration and settlement that get intertwined with ideas of belonging, legitimacy, and citizenship. Similarly, Saikia's (2011) work on memory and violence in Assam suggests that ethnic violence and trauma often form notions of home and belonging, henceforth underpinning insider-outsider divides. It provides a crucial point to comprehend the emotional toll of identity disintegration in Northeast India. Phukan (2010) underscores that Northeast India fiction contests the established mainstream narratives by accentuating local voices and stories. As per Phukan, this region's literary fictional work reveals the tensions between expulsion and rootedness, mainly in multiethnic and multilingual societies such as Shillong. These literary partakes exacerbate the reading of Hasan's works by exhibiting that the dilemmas endured by characters like Firdaus, Sophie, and Aman are not solitary but structurally implanted in the socio-political history of the region. Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined communities helps in understanding the idea of national identity that is created against the perceived outsiders, which often excludes groups that have their historical and cultural roots ingrained in the same territory (Anderson, 1983).

Objective of the Paper

The paper aims at exploring the insider-outsider dichotomy in Anjum Hasan's novels *Lunatic in My Head* and *Neti Neti Not This Not This*.

2. Methodology

Analytical and descriptive methods have been used to explore the two novels. A reference to postcolonial theories has been made to closely read the texts and identify shaped identities influenced by ethnic politics, and memory, often leading to disintegration and exclusion.

Analysis of the Texts

The very first page of *Lunatic in My Head* presents a cosmopolitan Shillong through the eyes of one of the characters, named Firdaus Ansari, who is a teacher in a

college in Shillong. It is a Shillong inhabited by quarter British quarter Assamese people like Sharon, Nepalis whose ancestors had migrated from Nepal long back and now who had not known any town other than Shillong because they have never been out of this hill capital, Bengalis who were born and brought up in Shillong, Goans who were few and ran liquor shops and there were people like herself — Firdaus Ansari who though having hailed from Bihar failed to identify herself with the place of her origin because Shillong for her was her homeland. However, this motley of people, despite their affinity with the small hill capital, were termed as dkharas — a term used by the Khasis to label the non-Khasis as outsiders in their land.

Walking along the streets in Shillong, Firdaus Ansari experiences a sense of alienation. She is a part of Shillong, and yet she is not. Her attempt to move out of Shillong was thwarted by the death of her parents, leaving her with her grandfather alone. Firdaus found that she longed for Shillong even as she lived there, even though she had been born and lived there all through her life. Misra (2011) states that a sense of awareness of the cultural loss and recuperation emerged from its interactions and engagements with different cultures. It is a common feature that can be seen in the literature of the North-Eastern states. It echoes with Sophie's and Firdaus's sense of cultural intermediacy.

She never wanted to go with Ibomcha to Manipur, for instance. Aman, too, at times, wanted to leave Shillong:

"Shillong did that to people, he knew-preserved them in their Shillong flavoured timelessness - the same rumours, the same jokes, the same gossip, the same petty jealousies. The scale of the town corresponds with the scale of the people's imaginations. Aman wanted to be somewhere else." (pg 72)

The sense of belonging is closely associated with the insider-outsider concept. Sophie Das was born to parents who belong to different linguistic communities. While her father is a Bengali from West Bengal, her mother is a Hindi-speaking North Indian. After having been denied acceptance by their relatives, her parents, in search of better prospects, had settled in Shillong. For the Shillong-born Khasis, Sophie is an outsider: a dkhar. On the other hand, as an eight-year-old girl, she does not have many Bengali friends like Banerjees and the Chatterjees because she cannot speak fluent Bengali, and her Bengali is broken here and there. Again, when she accompanies Elsa Lyndoh to various Khasi festivities, she clearly recognizes the discrimination that she has to encounter as not "one of them". In one such situation during her visit to a wedding in a Khasi household, Sophie was excluded from being offered snacks, and her discomfort was witnessed by everyone present, highlighting her marginalisation. Sophie felt embarrassed at her invisibility, her invisibility being born out of the fact that she was not born a Khasi. However, she feigned ignorance and pretended as if she did not want any snacks or tea. Kong Elsa noticed that this was making her uneasy and a butt of joke for two other Khasi girls and hence she pointed out to the girl who was serving snacks that she had forgotten to offer Sophie tea and snacks. The girl came reluctantly and

put the plate in front of Sophie, lying that she had forgotten to do so initially. This particular instance showcases the intersection of ethnicity, identity, gender, and social belonging. Nongbri's observation that "in the Khasi case... it is the women who bear the burden of upholding identity" (Nongbri, 2010) offers a central layer to Sophie's alienation. Even though Khasi women are mostly seen as empowered because of the matrilineal structure of their society, it is mainly in this system that non-Khasi women like Sophie end up bearing the sharp end of the discrimination and exclusion. Identity politics, even in matrilineal societies, burdens women unfairly, both Khasi and non-Khasi women alike, illustrating the struggles faced by Sophie in a larger cultural context.

"...maybe she should pretend that she had not wanted the snacks and now did not want the tea either. But a girl of her age from the facing row had noticed that Sophie had been ignored, that the dkhar had been shown her place. She whispered something to her friend. They began giggling." (pg 98)

As a small child, this made her regret the fact that she was not born as a Khasi; she wished to be "one of them," and hence she started weaving stories that she had been adopted by her parents. A feeling of disorientation makes her conclude that: she must have belonged somewhere else" (pg 82). She even tells Elsa Lyndoh's son that the Dases are not her real parents; she has been adopted by them. Contrarily, when her parents talk about the plains, the places from which they have come, Sophie is not interested. She cannot appreciate their nostalgia for the plains because, since her birth, she has always lived in Shillong, and Shillong is what she has known. In *Neti Neti Not This Not This*, we find Sophie grown up into a twenty-five-year-old girl who works in a BPO. It is during one of her encounters with Killer Queen when she is asked what she is doing in Shillong, that Sophie realizes that it is time for her to escape from this small capital town reeling under conflicts of insiders and outsiders, conflicts between Khasis and the outsiders Dkhars. She applies for a publishing job in Bangalore but fails to get one. Despite that, the desire to escape from Shillong is so intense that she lies to her parents about it. Somehow, she manages to get a job in a BPO and tells her parents back home that she works in a publishing company.

However much Sophie tries to escape from Shillong, she does not accomplish that to the true extent. During her stay in Bangalore, she cannot help thinking about Shillong. Even when she goes to Anil's party, she associates his big furnished apartment and the gaps between the furniture with the streets in Shillong. In the claustrophobic atmosphere of Anil's party, when Sophie leaves his apartment, which she describes as feeling like "Alice leaving Wonderland", Sophie feels a sense of association with the place. Almost suddenly, she recognizes it to be a feeling akin to her walks in the by-lanes around her home in Shillong.

Although she has a boyfriend named Swami in Bangalore, it is Ribor who constantly occupies her mind. Whatever she comes across in Bangalore, in her imagination, she narrates that to the invisible Ribor. She often imagines how Ribor

would have reacted in similar situations, what Ribor's advice would have been under similar circumstances. Ribor, who had always lived in Shillong, never thought of leaving the place under any circumstances but had instead discouraged Aman in *Lunatic in My Head* against moving out of Shillong whenever he spoke about it. For Aman, Shillong had no future, but for Ribor, he knew of boys who were like him, and they went away only to return back sheepishly, weakened by the weight of bearing the strangeness and also to deal with everyone else in that matter. He knew other individuals who had stuck it out and became engineers, doctors, actors, and preachers.

".... these were those who had first reached Bombay, had shouted and wept at the sight of the sea.... but there were also those who would never leave, who, having read Shakespeare and trigonometry and proudly worn a missionary school blazer, would go on to run a dusty wine shop that didn't sell wine, marry early, have too many children and drink wine." (pg 76)

Despite her endeavours, Sophie cannot escape from the clutches of memories of Shillong. In the din and bustle of her "Bangalore life", her memories now and then take her back to Shillong. Amidst Anu, Shiva, Ringo Saar, Rukshana, Swami, and Sophie, she experiences a sense of disorientation. Although she spends her time in Bangalore, she at times fails to relate to them:

"...and Sophie, standing there blinking, was suddenly overtaken by a powerful sense of disorientation. Who were these people and what place was this and why was she here? For a moment she had no clue." (pg 119)

Having hailed from the North East in spite of the irony that she is considered an outsider in her hometown, Sophie has to encounter various uncomfortable questions about her homeland, questions which she does not have answers to. At Anil's party, she has to confront the statement that it is a pity to belong to the North East. Shiva, Anu's boyfriend, had remarked:

"I hear you are from the Northeast. What a tragic place." (pg 124)

To people like Shiva living in Bangalore, in Hasan's words Northeast is an amorphous, eternally misty region whose people apparently spent their lives either fighting each other or resisting the bullying arm of the Indian state. Similarly to Sophie, living in Shillong was not living in India; to her, India was a feeling. As a young child in Shillong, India to her meant reading Tagore poem, learning about King Harshavardhana in history classes, getting to know about Vivekananda, reading Swami and Friends, Amar Chitra Katha, watching the Republic Day parade on television: experiences which she considered very much different from the environment she lived in. Sophie, during her return to Shillong, contemplates the homogeneous scene in the Bangalore airport. To her, one would hardly differentiate between people in Bangalore airport as they sported their branded jeans and homogeneous accents and conversations.

Whereas she reached Calcutta airport to board the flight to Guwahati, she would notice the multifariousness. The Northeast, which to her was a country within a country, started coming into view with:

“..... faces from the Northeast stood out-a woman with slanting eyes wearing a checked shawl, a nun with flesh-coloured stockings, a boy with naturally spiky hair.... In Calcutta airport, it was possible straightaway to tell where people belonged. This is what Sophie had always understood as home — a place where everyone is a different ethnicity from you and where your ethnicity defines who you are.” (pg 185)

Back at home despite various ethnic clashes, inspite of having to face experiences of being an outsider in one's own homeland, inspite of not knowing to speak Khasi language and not being one of them, back at home Sophie realized that this small town was their context and there was no need to invent another context for her own self although her Hamlet quoting father and her extremely religious mother were pursuing separate dreams of their own. It was the town that defined her. She, in fact, never felt the necessity of relating to her parents' past; their place of origin, the town of Shillong, was enough to define her existence.

The novel *Lunatic in My Head* is also preoccupied with the dichotomy of the insider and the outsider. Hasan's characters, who are people born and brought up in Shillong but are non-Khasis, have to pay the price for being dkharis. Among Aman's group of friends, Ribor is a Khasi, and hence it is Ribor who often saves him and his friends whenever other Khasi boys try to bully them. during one of his walks in the town, when a car approaches Aman, he feels insecure because Ribor is not with him, and he can very well recognize the driver of the car to be a Khasi fellow. But then he is relieved when the person halts the car asking for a match in order to smoke his cigarette, and does not bully him. He says that not all Khasis are bad; there are some good ones as well. The incident involving Aman and Ribor, along with the channawalla Sarak Singh, where the channawalla is bullied by a group of Khasi boys because he is an outsider, reflects the troubled times in Shillong.

Ibomcha, Firdaus's boyfriend, is from Manipur. He has plans to take her to Manipur after their marriage, but Firdaus does not want to leave Shillong. during his visits to Imphal, he often asked Firdaus to accompany him, but she always declined, saying that she was not prepared at the moment. To her, it is Shillong that she has known throughout her life. At times, despite living in Shillong, she had longed to be there. Back in college when she hears about her colleague Nivedita's husband's extramarital affair with a Khasi lady, she sought pleasure at the fact not of deteriorating relation between the husband and the wife but at the thought that Mrs. Nivedita (Firdaus's coinage to refer to Nivedita's husband) had chosen a Khasi lady. Unfortunately, the Khasi lady died as a result of the affair, and Mr. and Mrs. Nivedita had to leave Shillong and move to Calcutta. In her letter to Flossie Sharma, Nivedita is

nostalgic about Shillong and complains about the hot and humid weather of Calcutta; she wishes they had never left Shillong. after reading the letter, Flossie Sharma remarks:

“Thank God we are not compelled to go to awful places like Calcutta. We keep complaining about Shillong but think of all the good things in this place.” (pg 344)

Homi Bhabha, in his essay “Dissemination: Time, Narrative and the margins of the Modern Nation,” (1995) reveals nationalist representations as highly unstable and fragile. According to Bhabha, on one hand, while nationalism is a pedagogic discourse as it claims a fixed origin for the nation and asserts a sense of continuous history, on the other hand, nationalist discourses are simultaneously performative and must be continuously rehearsed by the people to maintain a sense of comradeship. It is this sense of the performative that enables all those placed on the margins to intervene in the signifying process and challenge the dominant representations with narratives of their own. These counter narratives represent different experiences, histories, and representations and challenge the formation of a homogeneous nation. It is the performances of these people on the margins that create a friction between the major signifying process and the narratives of the marginalized. This is what we find in the case of the Khasi, non-Khasi, or the Indian state conflict. The Khasis think that inspite of being a majority in population in the region covered by present day Meghalaya, after the British had left India, a neo colonialism has set in where the trade in the area is dominated by the Marwaris, administration is dominated by the Bengalis and the Assamese, education by the Christian missionaries and the original inhabitants, that is the Khasis have been relegated to the background. Hence, they rose against the Indian state, demanding the formation of a separate state. Franz Fanon in his essay, “The Pitfalls of National Consciousness” (1995) mentions about the rise of neo colonialism, a situation where after the period of colonialism is over, some natives who are educated in the ways and manners of the colonizers start taking their place and dominate the natives thereby leading to conflict between the two factions in due course of time. Hasan in both the novels by highlighting the plight of the non-Khasis and the sense of belonging that these people too nurture having lived in Shillong for two or three generations and how they think of Shillong as their homeland and inspite of getting the opportunity to go back to the place of their origin would not do so because Shillong to them is their context; has tried to bring about some sort of reconciliation between the two factions.

Saikia (2011) states that alienation comes with emotional dissociation, where people grapple to form their ties with spaces that tag them as outsiders. Kikon (2015) explores how legal structures and statehood fail to apprehend the lived realities of communities who discern rootedness and rejection as seen through Sophie and Firdaus's experiences. Mitra Phukan's literary concerns indicate narratives of displacement regarding the social and psychological weight of being considered peripheral in their own homeland (2010). As Misra (2011) observes that the frantic relationship that the North-Eastern states have with

mainland India even finds its way into the literature. The novels of Hasan reveal this strain by showing non-Khasis as symbolic outsiders even in their birthplace.

3. Conclusion

Thus, we see that the insider-outsider dichotomy forms a major concern in Anjum Hasan's novels *Lunatic in My Head* and *Neti Neti Not This Not This*. Being born in the small hill capital of Shillong and presently residing in Bangalore, Hasan beautifully portrays the life and experiences of people caught in the conflict of being both insiders and outsiders. These are people like Sophie, Firdaus, Bodha, Aman, and many more who have been born in Shillong and have lived most of their lives in this small hill town, but these people have become outsiders in their own homeland because they are not Khasis, who had claimed this land to be their own. Various instances also show that although a separate state has been carved out, discrimination still prevails at times. Other than that, Hasan has also been concerned about the unifying factor in transcending borders and boundaries, and bringing people together.

Hasan's *Lunatic in My Head* and *Neti Neti Not This Not This* offer a close and politically reverberate portrayal of the insider-outsider dilemma in modern Shillong, a town permeated with questions related to territorial identity, language, and ethnicity. Hasan attempts to humanise the strain between the ethnic majority and non-Khasi communities who are long-term settlers through her characters, indicating how the sense of belonging and legitimacy are socially created and often unjustly rejected. Firdaus and Sophie signify a generation of Indians who struggle with the bequeathed displacement. They are not accepted as insiders, and also do not see themselves as complete outsiders. Their emotional fabric is deeply connected with Shillong. The dynamic matches with Bhabha's concept of the "Third Space," a hybrid space where their collective identity is navigated rather than rigid. These characters reside in this specific zone, and continually adapt, resist, and redefine their self-identities.

Furthermore, Hasan's work shows the irony that the ones who are invested socially, culturally, and emotionally in a setting are still refused legitimacy because of fixed notions of identity. The dkharas are "perceptible minorities" in the region where they live and make their home, which parallels Fanon's warning about neocolonial frameworks superseding colonial ones, where new hierarchies came up to sustain hegemony and marginalisation. Hasan engages beyond cultural representation, offering political critique by shedding light on such frictions through fiction. Her texts question the reader to reassess solid perceptions of nativeness and legitimacy. The emphasis is rather placed on an inclusive view of belonging, grounded on respect, understanding, and lived experiences. The rejection and the labelling as "outsiders" reveal an apprehension regarding erasure, which even highlights the ignorance and discrimination towards the Northeast region from mainland India. This exclusion reflects the ingrained issues in the national imagination of India.

The novels highlight that displacement is not only spatial but is heavily connected to psychological and emotional aspects. The sense of rootlessness that Sophie feels in Bangalore, even after she physically escaped Shillong, displays that the insider-outsider dichotomy moves beyond geography and gets internalised within. Her feeling of melancholy, nostalgia, regret, and alienation remains, suggesting how memory and cultural similarity connect people together to places that dismiss them. The notion of "home" gets riddled with uncertainty and indecision, characterised by simultaneous love and exclusion.

Hasan not merely documented an identity crisis but also tried to provide an alternate way of observing: one that affirms the blurry lines between insider and outsider. The characters given by her often reject the binary; instead, they choose to occupy liminal domains with finesse and dissent. The potential of reconciliation comes from individual acts of imagination, memory, and emotional affinity. Anjum Hasan's novels are gripping literary explorations of identity, ethnic politics, cultural displacement, and the vulnerable nature of belonging. Her portrayal of non-Khasis in Shillong indicates that identities are lived instead of being inherited; they are enacted, not prescribed. *Lunatic in My Head* and *Neti Neti* allude towards an understanding of coexistence rather than giving their readers basic answers or ideological conclusions. These fictional accounts open up a territory for imagining different modes of citizenship, those that are not bounded by geographic endowment or ethnic purity. Hasan makes sure that her narratives are guided by shared stories, histories, cultural predicaments, and emotional involvement. These perspectives are necessary to envision a culturally pluralistic society and to heal the regional fractures and divisions often witnessed, even resulting in ethnic conflicts in the nation.

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