

**THE INSIDER-OUTSIDER DICHOTOMY IN ANJUM HASAN'S
LUNATIC IN MY HEAD
AND NETI, NETI: NOT THIS, NOT THIS: PERSPECTIVES FROM A
FELLOW SOJOURNER**

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Abstract

The Insider-Outsider dilemma has long been the subject of intellectual debates across many continents. Sometimes, the discussions have bordered on the rhetoric while at other times it has led to inconclusive dead-ends, leaving as an aftermath, only the sound of gunfights and wasted tears. As long as there are peoples and places and political boundaries, the division or distinction between the insider and outsider seems unlikely to be resolved. But such burning issues cannot be pushed below the carpet or kept in cold storage. From this parameter, the paper aims to explore the question of identity of the individual, and the sense of placement and displacement experienced by Hasan's pivotal characters in her novels, *Lunatic in my Head* and *Neti, Neti: Not This, Not This*. The fact that terms such as race, ethnicity, class, violence and effects of globalization recur and resonate in Anjum Hasan's writings definitely marks her out as a daughter of the North-East. In *Lunatic in my Head*, Hasan becomes the biographer of Shillong. The paper will examine the role of the locals, 'the insiders' and their attitude towards the *dkhars*, 'the outsiders' and vice versa. Even in *Neti, Neti: Not This, Not This*, the insider-outsider dilemma appears not to have been nudged out from the writer's thought. The eight year old Sophie Das of *Lunatic in my Head* is transported to Bangalore (in *Neti, Neti: Not This, Not This*) but as a twenty-five year old BPO employee, to experience the permutations of a displaced life. On one hand, Hasan lays bare the scepter of racism and localism while on the other, she ruminates about the western culture, diversity and the continuity of such a milieu that characterizes Shillong and Bangalore. The paper will also focus on Hasan's view on music and literature as agents that bind and unite people of diverse cultures together.

Keywords: Anjum Hasan, Insider, Outsider, Placement, Displacement.

The concepts of race and ethnicity are social constructs that compel us to see ourselves from the viewpoint of others. The gaze of the ‘other’ thus assumes relevance here. The positionality of Anjum Hasan can be located from the perspective of the doubly displaced outsider. Firstly, as a writer, she is an outsider gazing into the lives of the characters she is writing about. Secondly, though she is from Shillong her antecedents are elsewhere and therefore she is a ‘dkhar’ (which means ‘non-tribal’ in Khasi). This perceived ‘otherization’ has its roots in the politics and history of the region. It signifies the inclusion or exclusion of one group from the other. The criteria for inclusion or exclusion may be many but when viewed from a deeper perspective, all these are skin-deep differences. Anjum Hasan’s works reverberates with this realization.

In *Lunatic in my Head*, we notice Firdaus Ansari, a college lecturer, trying to clear the air when her colleague, Nivedita pronounces that her husband was

running around with some woman and ... she is tribal...I’m not saying it is better to be chasing non-tribal women, but after all.... (p.16)

Another colleague, Flossie Sharma, agrees sympathetically,

It’s pitiful indeed that the man has displayed so little taste. (p.16)

Hearing this exchange,

Firdaus felt that familiar irritation rising in her again, that helplessness she felt when people’s ethics were mixed up with their origins. (p.16)

In Firdaus’ view, if ‘infidelity is a grave sin...so is racism.’ (p.16). She understands that the presumed cultural superiority of ‘the outsider’ over the local, ‘the insider’ is wrong.

It is a truism that man’s knowledge of truth and the freedom of the mind to recognize the truth are derailed because of his dependence on social institutions which breeds mutual distrust and disharmony. When we read Hasan’s novel from this perspective, we notice that it is the man-created institution of marriage and caste/class/linguistic divide that is instrumental in causing the sentiments expressed above. To read from another perspective, all three central characters of the novel- Firdaus, Aman and Sophie seems to be encompassed in a different world of their own. Like characters in a Virginia Woolf or William Faulkner novel, they appear to be introvert individuals, busy and at ease only in the company of their musings and thoughts, while feeling uncomfortable even in their own homes. While Firdaus is obsessed with washing her hands, young Sophie Das not only assumes that she is adopted but ruminates:

the nicest thing, the nicest thing by far, even better than being adopted, would be if she could somehow turn into one of them, somehow become Khasi. (p.88)

Sumana Roy comments that they

feel alienated in every surrounding, even at home. In that, all three - Firdaus, Aman and Sophie – are “awkward”, all foreign, all outsiders to their place and themselves, in other words, lunatics in their heads (for isn’t that the etymology of the word ‘mad’—one who has come out of oneself?).

Though the novel is steeped in localism and the beauty of Shillong highlighted, Hasan also gives prominence to the concept of a plural society, where we see more than one race in cohabitation. Sophie Das is of mixed parentage, while her mother is from the North her father is Bengali. Further, at home, they use the English language more than Hindi or Bengali. In an episode in the novel, we see Aman Moondy and his friend Ribor trying to protect Sarak Singh, the ‘aloo-muri’ vendor from the impudent local bullies who were manhandling the hapless man without any provocation. Ribor understood that:

His friend, Aman, was in the language of the bullies, a dkhar-an outsider. As was Sarak Singh. Ribor, on the other hand, was Khasi, and the boys now clustered in a threatening ring around them were his kinsmen. He spoke their language, he was of their tribe. Aman knew, when Ribor started addressing the gang... that he was merely speaking out of an instinct for peace, a desire that people leave other people alone. (p.35)

Firdaus encounters the insider-outsider conflict when she reflects upon the improbability of her union with her Manipuri boyfriend, Ibomcha. Her lonely existence with her eighty-one year old 'Nana' for company is sharply contrasted with the scores of relatives and friends that breeze in and out of Ibomcha's life:

...nothing, not the smallest thing could possibly unite us. You, your homeland, your tribe, your love for your mother, your dozens of cousins, your schemes, your beliefs- I share nothing of this. I can't get onto a bus every second month and go home. They are no people I call my people. I don't speak a private language. How would you, always enfolded by this mist of connections, carrying it with you wherever you go, how would you understand this loneliness? (p.143)

But despite the above, Firdaus feels connected to Ibomcha. It is to him that she unburdens her heart telling him about her parents' death in a train accident almost twenty years ago, and the mental turmoil she went through. At the close of the novel, Firdaus decides to marry Ibomcha, the 'man with a good heart' realizing that she has wasted her time 'thinking her circular thoughts'. In this way, the author further focuses on the prospects of cultural hybridity and integration.

In fact, Hasan's narrative delves deeper to question the temporality and transient nature of the insider-outsider opposition. Since, such narrow insider-outsider polarisation appears to dissolve into insignificance when confronted with the larger world outside- as implied by the books, and western music and culture mentioned in *Lunatic in my Head*. Literary and musical icons such as Shakespeare, Hemingway, Dickens, Jane Austen, and Pink Floyd acts as uniting agents to bridge such a divide. Hasan writes:

The music was what united Ribor with baby-faced Ibomcha, waking up in his bare house, seeing yesterday's jeans hanging from a peg on the wall, yesterday's empty bottles of beer by the window. The music was what united them both with Bodha, poet and musician, sitting on his bed, trying out a couple of chords on his guitar, ignoring his mother's calls for breakfast. The music was what brought Aman into the circle, disillusioned and sad, putting a tape of *Atom Heart Mother* into his player. (p.69)

In the novel *Neti, Neti: Not This, Not This*, though the time zone has shifted and the young Sophie is now placed in Bangalore as a twenty-five year old BPO employee, the insecurities and

adjustment difficulties that one faces in a new place and situation remains. Having already lived for a year in Bangalore, Sophie's nostalgia for Shillong has not left her. Forced to leave her hometown to eke out a living, she spends every waking moment ruminating about her past life in Shillong. Her playing mother to Mani, the two-year old grandson of her landlord, Mr. Bhatt, reminds her of the time when she took care of her younger sister, Mukulika. Just as Firdaus in the earlier novel enjoyed the touch of the pleasant rays of the Shillong sun on her skin, Sophie too is reminded of all the winter mornings she had spent sitting in the 'gentler' sun of Shillong.

Again, Sophie finds "it hard to openly challenge her neighbours" (p.21) Mr. Bhatt and Mr. Chinnappa, who, despite living in the metropolis, have not shed their sexist hang-ups. Since she needed the rented room, she puts up with their moral policing:

The thought of losing Mani, of going over house after poorly built house for one that was inhabitable and suited her small budget, of dealing once more with dodgy brokers and nosy landlords, made her want to cry. (p.23)

At such moments, the desire to return to the sleepy peacefulness and serenity of Shillong is felt acutely. The bright city lights of Bangalore aggravate the feeling of loneliness and desolation. Sophie therefore tries hard to ingratiate herself to Mani, perhaps, to keep her moorings intact. As an alien in the city, her social circle is limited to the Bhatts, her boyfriend, Swami, and a few work-related acquaintances. Hasan has artfully interjected words and phrases related to Shillong in the narrative to bring out the theme of nostalgia. When a rock band from Shillong comes to perform in the metropolis, Sophie Das is both happy and sad at the same time. Happy, because they are a reminder of her hometown, and sad because the once hallowed Uncle Rock, the front man of the Shillong Blues Band appears to have lost the aura and zing that was once associated with him and his band. She thus pleads to everyone and no one to "Give them a chance." (p.111)

Sophie appears to be undecided as to which place she really belonged. She runs back to Shillong, to Ribor, her 'fantasy' dream lover, unable to bear the rapid pace of life in the big city, especially after Rukshana's death at the hands of their friend, Ringo Saar.

...you never arrived anywhere in Bangalore. You never turned a corner and experienced an epiphany. (p.36)

But the seductiveness of Shillong too, appears to have lost its charm. Her dream lover, Ribor, seems to have developed cold feet since he too evinces interest in moving to Bangalore for the small town has nothing to offer. Her disillusionment is doubled when she discovers that her once close-knit family is now on the verge of estrangement— while Mr. Das is contemplating to shift his base to Shantiniketan to pursue his lifelong dream of translating *Hamlet* into Bengali, her mother has plans to spend the rest of her life in Benares in order to wash away her sin of marrying outside her community. Further, her sister Mukulika, makes it clear to her that she will be following her boyfriend to Delhi. The political scenario of Shillong is also no more the same. Bribery, one-upmanship and the motive of political gain have erased the innocence and simplicity of its people. Sophie introspects that Shillong is no different from Bangalore. Conversely, she now escapes to Bangalore, to Swami and his dream car.

In an interactive session with the students of Jamia Milia, Hasan had echoed her character Sophie, when she remarked that “growing up in small towns is not the same today as globalization has changed the experiences of the past.”

Societal relationships, place of work and choice of life-partner are some dynamics that result in the placement or displacement of an individual from his/her erstwhile location. Anita Balakrishnan, in her study of Hasan’s *Neti Neti* writes,

...like Sophie, Hasan was the offspring of a union between parents hailing from different states of India. In a manner very similar to Hasan’s own parents, Sophie’s Bengali academic father and unassuming Punjabi mother might have settled in Shillong to escape the social ostracism that their marriage generated.

In addition, the novel further reflects on Sophie’s relationship with her boyfriend, Swami who also belongs to another State. The book, *Swami and Friends* by R.K.Narayan, becomes the link, the talisman that can cement their relationship. What had first drawn Sophie to Swami was

...the Swami and Friends look. Without Swami she’d be lost in this raucous city, still standing at some kerb and waiting for the traffic to slow down so she could cross the road. It was only with him that she had learnt how to do it- take on the city’s insanity and remain essentially unaffected. (pp. 106-107)

The book has such a fascination for Sophie that she even browbeats Swami to read the story of his namesake, to ‘read five pages everyday’. Some quirk in Sophie believes that if her boyfriend reads *Swami and Friends*:

He might become more like that Swami and less like the Swami that was hardening, leaving his sangfroid behind. (p.37)

Changes and permutations within and outside the individual is a constant continuity. Sophie realizes with a feeling of disquiet that:

Mani was now three years old and something had changed in him too. He no longer resisted his grandparents... (p.280)

Hence, there is no simplistic perspective of the insider–outsider dichotomy. Prominent postcolonial critic Trinh T Minh-ha has commented:

“I” is not unitary, culture has never been monolithic. . . . Differences do not only exist between outsider and insider—two entities—they are also at work within the outsider or the insider—a single entity.

To come back to the premise stated earlier, both the novels *Lunatic in my Head* and *Neti, Neti: Not This, Not This* appear to articulate the view that, music and literature not only keep the sanity of youths intact, but further serve as an olive-branch in fostering peace and harmony, especially in a pluralistic set-up like the North-East of India.

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