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Aman as a Microcosm of Shillong's Fragmented Modernity: A Study on Anjum Hasan's *Lunatic in My Head*

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Abstract

A conflict between identity, belonging and ambition appears in Indian English literature, which often points to the conflicts of a nation in transition. This conflict is depicted by Anjum Hasan in her novel *Lunatic in My Head* (2007) through the portrayal of a young man, Aman Moondy, who represents the Indian middle-class youth. Torn between parental demands and personal desires, Aman is in search of meaning, reflecting the fragmented soul of small-town modernity. His preparation for the IAS examination can be interpreted as a manifestation of his aspiration to change his social position, while his interest in music can be taken as a sign of his desire to get rid of restrictions. Through moments of alienation, cultural opposition and self-exploration, Hasan explores the process of the formation of selfhood under pressure and displacement. Aman's failure turns out to be the point of rebirth instead of a deadlock, which implies that it is the strength of acceptance and self-knowledge. His leaving of Shillong symbolises both loss and development, which is an indication of the shattered but persistent soul of youth in postcolonial India.

Keywords: Alienation, Belonging, Identity, Small-town youth, Modernity

Introduction

The Indian writing in English, or Indian English Literature, is a pleasurable piece of diversity and complexity as well as imagination, mirroring the Indian experience. It contains the writings of Indian writers who have written in the English language. In its genuine nature, literature is an expression of the creative imagination of human existence in the forms of poetry, drama, fiction and non-fiction. It is seen as a reflection of society with its emotions, conflicts and changes over time and culture. Themes of identity, migration, gender and belonging have developed into a vibrant tradition, with writers of Indian English exploring these topics over the years and connecting the personal with the political.

Among contemporary writers, Anjum Hasan stands out for her deep sensitivity and quiet realism. Her fiction captures the pulse of urban India and the inner restlessness of its youth. She often writes about migration, displacement and the fragile balance between ambition and belonging. Hasan combines lyrical language with philosophical depth, revealing how ordinary moments can hold profound meaning. As Hossain and Islam observe, Hasan "intricately weaves the poetics of place into her literary creations, crafting rich tapestries of

physical and emotional landscapes that resonate deeply with readers" (174). This skill allows her stories to explore the tension between longing and departure, nostalgia and self-discovery, which has made her one of the most notable writers in contemporary Indian English literature.

Aman's Family and Early Struggles

Anjum Hasan's debut novel, *Lunatic in My Head* (2007), which takes place in Shillong and explores the struggles of Aman Moondy, a young man struggling to find a sense of individuality, aspiration and attachment. As Aakanksha Singh observes, "The title of the novel comes from Pink Floyd's song, 'Brain Damage', which makes one wonder whether similar lunatics, having an identity crisis, run through all our heads as well" (par. 10). Through this title, Hasan actively explores the inner turmoil of modern minds, those haunted by dreams, disappointments and self-doubt. Aman grew up in a middle-class household in Shillong. His father, Dr Gorakh Moondy, migrated from Calcutta, a city where he felt like an outsider among Bengalis, to Shillong in search of a new identity and acceptance. He recalls his childhood as being dismissed as "the never good enough U.P.-wallah, whose father was only, after all, the owner of a mithai shop" (Hasan 68). This migration and the subsequent struggle for acceptance deeply influenced Aman's father, which in turn affected his relationship with Aman. Determined to live with dignity, Gorakh earns his MBBS degree and builds his medical practice "inch by inch" in Police Bazaar, where he treats "school teachers and petty businessmen and office clerks" (Hasan 68). However, this hard-won stability carries resentment. He feels his father forced him into medicine, and now he pressures Aman to achieve success through the IAS. Although he once promised never to push his children into a profession, he now insists that Aman must clear the IAS.

Aman's mother is tender, diminutive and perpetually anxious, caught between her husband and son. Eating together is unusual for the Moondy family. Mrs Moondy tries to keep peace in the family and often urges Aman to spend time with his father, saying, "He wants to eat with you. Is he your father or some stranger? Go and sit. Talk to him" (Hasan 67). She is concerned with bills, routine and the future of Aman and instructs him to "study harder. You'll have plenty of time for music and friends later. When you become an officer" (Hasan 70). Her care often feels repetitive and anxious rather than inspiring. However, her constant reminders about Aman's future and the importance of his relationship with his father shape Aman's character and his approach towards his studies and his family. Aman Moondy represents the restless, educated youth who longs to escape the limits of his small-town world. He constantly prepares for the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) exams, seeing the IAS as a way to move beyond Shillong and enter the larger world. For Aman, the IAS is more than just a career; it is "a leap of acrobatic proportions from where he was to where he would land" (Hasan 16). His chosen subject, philosophy in college, offers "no security, no money, no status in a word, no future" (Hasan 15). By passing the IAS exam, he feels that he will not only be free but will be respectable as well.

Music as Freedom and Resistance

Aman's true passion is music. He reveres Pink Floyd, declaring, "Floyd was to other bands what angels are to mortals" (Hasan 15). Together with his friends Ibomcha and Ribor, he starts a band called The ProtoDreamers and they play Pink Floyd songs at small gatherings. For Aman, music is not just entertainment but a means of survival. His father, Dr

Gorakh Moondy, does not understand this love for music. He sees music as a distraction and expects Aman to focus all his energy on the IAS exam. He believes in a "hardy, gird-your-loins sort of philosophy" (Hasan 71). This generational gap makes Aman feel alone. His father sees Shillong as a dead end and says to him, "The point is, you have to pass this exam. Shillong has no future. In my time, things were different. One could make a life here. There were opportunities. People were open-minded… Sab khatm ho gaya. That time has gone" (Hasan 70). Aman listens but feels invisible, as if his father speaks past him. The silence between them becomes heavier than their words. He often feels that his father, when he speaks to him, is "actually speaking to someone who stands just behind him or a little to the left of him" (Hasan 67). This lack of support shapes Aman's sense of failure. From a young age, he notices that his parents are uninterested in his inner world.

At age seven, he realises "that they didn't really care about what lay inside the books they bought him, at ten he stopped showing them his poems, and at thirteen he started writing a diary in which till date he had never made any reference to them" (Hasan 71). He longs for recognition. He wants his parents to dream with him and believe in his future. Instead, he receives "patronising advice" (Hasan 73). The home that should inspire him becomes a place of distance. Aman sees his mother obey his father's rules, following his instructions even when she wishes otherwise. She secretly wants him to study engineering, but "she had had to grudgingly give in to her husband's policy of not interfering with their son's life" (Hasan 73). Her care feels limited by this obedience, leaving Aman lonely and unseen. He longs for encouragement and guidance, for someone to share in his excitement about the future, but all he finds is his mother's quiet resignation and his father's constant, subtle pressure. This emotional neglect weighs on him. Even small tasks become exhausting and his hope feels fragile. After walking to clear his mind, he sits at his desk, but "almost at once an immense weariness overtook him, and he lay down without changing into his nightclothes or switching off the lights, and promptly fell asleep" (Hasan 74). The weight of parental neglect, pressure from exams, and unfulfilled dreams leaves Aman drained, lonely and painfully aware of how much he craves recognition and understanding.

In the silence of his home, music fills the emptiness in Aman's life. With Ribor, Ibomcha, Bodha, and Partho, he creates his own circle of friends, a family united by sound. The music is

> 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. (Hasan 76)

Music is their common language. Their band rebels quietly against the narrow world of small-town life. Playing Pink Floyd, they stretch their dreams beyond Shillong's streets and walls. For Aman, music gives him a sense of dignity and freedom, a refuge that IAS books and exams cannot replace or touch. As Anjali Vaidya notes, "Aman, one of the protagonists of Hasan's *Lunatic in My Head* (2007), divides his time between studying for the Indian Administrative Service exams and taking long tea breaks to philosophize about classic Western rock music with friends" (par. 14).

Through music, Aman and Ribor navigate the fragile world of youth in Shillong. Some boys leave only to return, weakened by the weight of their strangeness and the expectations of others. Some move to distant cities, becoming doctors, engineers, preachers, or actors. Others, though they study Shakespeare and trigonometry and wear missionary school blazers, remain trapped, running small businesses, marrying early, having many children and dying of drink. Ribor watches this universe of choices and remains uncertain about his path, but for now, he lives through the music. The music binds them, connecting them in the small, ordinary realities of their lives. However, even here, there is no long-term stability; these friendships soothe his loneliness but cannot replace the support of a family.

Even this escape cannot erase the pressure of exams. Aman clings to philosophy books by authors such as "Kant and Hume with the determination of a drowning man" (Hasan 65). He fears that without clearing the IAS exam, society will dismiss him as a failure. The exam becomes both his hope and his fear. Aman "couldn't confess to anyone that he was afraid" (Hasan 66). In this conflict between duty and passion, expectation and freedom, Aman embodies the restless youth of India's middle class.

Alienation and Ethnic Divide

Aman's frustration with the people of Shillong intensifies when he encounters everyday hostility in public spaces. One evening, he and Ribor stop at Don Bosco Square to eat aloo-muri from Sarak Singh, a street vendor who has stood at the same corner for eighteen years. Aman watches with fascination as Singh slices potatoes, sprinkles chilli flakes, and mixes the tamarind water with "an energy approaching violence" (Hasan 35). The calm of the moment breaks when a group of Khasi boys in leather jackets arrives and threatens Singh. One of them warns menacingly, "Do you want to see what my boots can do?" (Hasan 36). The situation becomes tense because Aman and Sarak Singh are both outsiders called dkhars, while Ribor, being Khasi, is caught in between. The gang mocks Aman directly, telling him, "Shut up, dkhar" (Hasan 37).

Aman feels the humiliation but cannot fight back because he always finds "it difficult to meet anger with anger. Confrontations in school, insults hissed out on the street, feet shooting out to trip him up—all of these he faced with seeming equanimity. He found it particularly hard to defend himself against racist attacks. 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?" (Hasan 37). This moment captures the liminal condition of migrants in Shillong, who are recognised as citizens by the state but socially excluded by the local community.

Finally, the bullies walk away after stealing food without paying. Sarak Singh complains bitterly, "They keep doing this. And they never even pay" (Hasan 38). Ribor dismisses them as "sick people" (Hasan 38), but for Aman, the moment triggers a more profound crisis. He begins to

> experience the disorientation that always preceded his bouts of depression—the feeling that the different parts of his life were moving further and further away from each other as if something had blown away the centre that held them together. The exam, Concordella, Roger Waters, goons on the streets, Ribor, his mother watching inane serials—what could possibly be the connection between them?. (Hasan 38)

What is striking is how the same incident creates very different responses. For Sarak Singh, the attack is just another routine insult; he complains but continues with his work. For Ribor, it is ordinary street hooliganism, easy to dismiss with a shrug. For Aman, however, the encounter troubles him intensely. It forces him to face his outsider status and intensifies his sense of alienation. The scene shows how one act of violence is absorbed differently by individuals based on their position within Shillong's divided society. This incident is not just about a quarrel between locals and outsiders. It reveals how violence weakens Aman's fragile claim to Shillong and pushes him into an inner struggle. He cannot fully accept Shillong as home, yet he cannot imagine life anywhere else. The aloo-muri quarrel becomes a metaphor for his fractured identity. The street food, hurriedly mixed with chilli, spices, and tamarind water, mirrors his own life, where longing and hostility are thrown together without harmony, leaving him restless and divided. Aman's silent humiliation at Don Bosco Square reveals how deep the outsider stigma runs. As Paul points out, "a constant line of ethnic divide separates them from the locals. (Paul 33).

Conclusion

At the end of the novel, Aman fails the IAS exam for the second time, and his journey ends on a note of fragile hope amidst despair. His family sit together "facing each other like visitors" (Hasan 329), revealing the emotional distance that has always existed between them. When Mrs Moondy, unable to hold back her anxiety, bursts into tears and tells her husband, "This boy will be finished if you don't do something" (Hasan 330), Aman feels deeply shaken. Her rare display of emotion hits him like a sudden storm, and for the first time, he realises how much his failure hurts her. In contrast, his father remains calm and detached and he says, "Aman, you go to Delhi… Harish, my cousin, is there. The change will be good for you" (Hasan 330), hoping that distance and new surroundings will enable Aman to overcome disappointment and move on with life. This failure becomes Aman's turning point.

The IAS dream collapses, but a new self starts emerging and this one is no longer based on the approval of society but rather on desire and defiance. However, freedom carries a shadow of loss. As the day to leave Shillong comes, Aman tries to "suppress the salt and lemony flood of tears he could feel rising in his throat" (Hasan 336). He realises he cannot carry his Floyd tapes to Delhi, as "it would be unbearable, listening to them in a new place" (Hasan 336). The music that once gave him comfort now becomes a symbol of what he must leave behind. Like those tapes, Aman must shed a part of himself to begin again. As Hasan writes, "He'd have to find entirely new music to listen to" (Hasan 336). This new music becomes a quiet metaphor for rebirth, a rhythm of life that belongs to him alone.

In the end, Sarak Singh prepares aloo-muri with peaceful contentment, smiling "with such satisfaction that Aman, despite himself, despite the years with all the sadness, had to smile back" (Hasan 336). This simple act becomes a tender metaphor for endurance. Failure and loss do not eradicate the sweetness of life. Aman drives away differently, not out of victory, but with a muted sense that sadness and life, music and silence, failure and hope can coexist, a gentle reminder that resilience is found in the most ordinary rhythms of life.

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