

# Outsider Narratives and Cultural Representation: A Postcolonial Critique of *Lunatic in My Head*

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## ABSTRACT

The representation of marginalized communities in literature is a complex and contentious issue, particularly in postcolonial contexts. Anjum Hasan's *Lunatic in My Head* (2007) offers a nuanced yet problematic depiction of the Khasi community in the capital of Meghalaya, Shillong. The article studies the 'outsider' perspectives that shape the narrative, through an in-depth analysis of the key incidents, urban landscape and the characters of the novel. Indeed, the novel unsubtly assigns regional stereotypes and obfuscates indigenous voices while ignoring the historical construction of tribal identity. Drawing on the works of Stuart Hall, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha and Frantz Fanon, the article situates Hasan's novel within broader theoretical debates on cultural representation and identity, offering a critical reading that challenges the ethics of such portrayals.

**Keywords:** Outsider, Cultural Representation,  
Cultural Hybridity, Socio-cultural  
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## INTRODUCTION

The mode of 'representation' in literature has been a vital medium through which we can understand the intricacies of identity, culture and the human condition. For example, the Victorian novel allows a reader to immerse themselves in the kind of world that 19th century England might offer as a bourgeois. Yet one learns much about the lives and mindsets of different communities, races and societies. Yet, when literary representation is proffered by some privileged outsider, the critical introspection it requires

is also an issue of its accuracy and reliability. In his criticism of Joseph Conrad's presentation of Congo as well as the Igbo community in the *Heart of Darkness*, Chinua Achebe underscored the Euro-centric perception that transformed the entire continent into banal savagery. The European virtue-signaling successfully created the 'Other' which bolstered the colonizing enterprise. Conrad's depictions, such as, "The prehistoric man cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us – who could tell?" (Conrad, 2009, p. 56), and, "A lot of people, mostly black and naked, moved about like ants" (Conrad, 2009, p. 26), present a perspective that can misinform readers unfamiliar with Africa. For the uninitiated, with no prior knowledge of the continent, Conrad's narrative becomes a lens in charting 'Africa'. Conversely, to an insider, these representations are likely to be perceived as deeply flawed and offensive. Chinua Achebe, famously condemned Conrad as a 'bloody racist' highlighting the novel's dehumanizing portrayal of Africans, devoid of language and civilization. Achebe's critique underscores the absence of any recognizable social or political structure in Conrad's depiction, rendering the African characters less than human by the Western standards. Such misrepresentations, as argued by Edward Said, contribute to the creation of harmful stereotypes or what he terms a 'textual attitude', shaping and often distorting the perceptions of readers toward the represented culture.

In postcolonial contexts, these representations are often influenced by power dynamics that marginalize certain communities. Each region, community, country, state, race has its own unique culture and identity and their own stories that are created by all. When an outsider enters this cultural sphere and makes it into his own story, the story becomes skewed and one sided. This process raises a particular image of the natives in the outsider's mind, embedding bias and perpetuating stereotypes. Edward Said's seminal work *Orientalism* addresses this phenomenon, arguing that such representations are not mere misinterpretations of some inherent Oriental essence—an idea he firmly rejects—but are rather deliberate constructions, shaped by specific historical, intellectual, and economic contexts: "My whole point about this system is not that it is a misrepresentation of some Oriental essence — in which I do not for a moment believe — but that it operates as representations usually do, for a purpose, according to a tendency, in a specific historical, intellectual, and even economic setting" (Said, 1978, p. 273). The most significant function

of Orientalism for Europeans was the construction of their own identity in contrast to that of the Orientals. Traits such as laziness, irrationality, primitiveness, and crudeness were attributed to the Orientals, thereby positioning Europeans as active, rational, civilized, and sophisticated. This hierarchical dichotomy allowed Europeans to stereotype, marginalize, and exoticize the native “Other” from a position of perceived superiority. These stereotypes, once established, are often perpetuated by the outsider, either consciously or subconsciously.

Anjum Hasan’s *Lunatic in My Head* presents a multifaceted portrayal of Shillong, a city in Northeastern India, with an outsider’s perspective perpetuating stereotypes about the Khasi community. The novel explores the lives of three main characters, all of whom are *dkhar* (non-indigenous) residents of Shillong, a city in Northeast India. These characters—Firdaus Ansari, Aman Moondy, and Sophie Das—struggle with a sense of discontentment and alienation, feeling marginalized in a city where the native *non-dkhar*s dominate the social fabric. Hasan skillfully constructs her narrative to highlight this tension, consistently portraying the *non-dkhar*s as marginalized within their homeland, juxtaposed against the *dkhar*s who seem to occupy a higher social position. These characters navigate the complex cultural and social landscape of Shillong, a city that represents both home and alienation for them. While Hasan’s narrative offers a rich tapestry of Shillong’s diverse communities, it also raises important questions about who gets to tell these stories and how they are told. This paper aims to explore how Anjum Hasan’s novel *Lunatic in My Head* inadvertently falls into this same trap of conforming to the stereotypes associated with the people of the Northeastern region.

## REPRESENTATION AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

The concept of representation is central to understanding how cultural identities are constructed in literature. Stuart Hall asserts that “representation connects meaning and language to culture. It is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture” (Hall, 1997, p. 15). In *Lunatic in My Head*, this is evident in the way Shillong is framed through the eyes of outsiders, such as Firdaus and Aman Moondy, whose perceptions of the city and its people are categorized through their own biases and experiences.

One of the pivotal incidents in the novel occurs when Firdaus, overwhelmed by her dissatisfaction with life and work, contemplates the futility of her existence in Shillong. Her internal monologue reflects a deep-seated frustration with her surroundings, which she views as limiting and oppressive. This sense of entrapment is not just personal but is also linked to her perception of the city and its people. Firdaus's alienation is compounded by her inability to connect with the Khasi community, which she perceives as insular and resistant to change. This aligns with Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, where the West constructs stereotypes of the East to assert its own superiority. Although Hasan's novel is set in an Indian context, it mirrors this Orientalist approach by portraying the Khasi people through an outsider's lens, reinforcing binary oppositions between the "civilized" outsiders and the "primitive" locals.

Firdaus Ansari, a teacher pursuing her M.Phil., epitomizes one of these narrative strands. Though of Bihari origin, Firdaus was born and raised in Shillong, yet she feels an overwhelming sense of dissatisfaction with her life in the city and harbors a persistent desire to escape. Her struggles extend to her professional life, where she feels disconnected from her colleagues, and her inability to complete her M.Phil. thesis exacerbates her frustrations. Her social circle is limited, and having lost her parents at a young age, she navigates her life with a sense of isolation. Firdaus's romantic relationship with Ibomcha, a native of Manipur, is depicted in a way that further reinforces the hierarchical dichotomy between *dkhar* and *non-dkhar*. Unlike Firdaus, who is portrayed as a well-educated and responsible college teacher, Ibomcha is depicted as an irresponsible, aimless individual with little regard for time or work. He is involved in vague and dubious business activities, making him an unsuitable companion for someone of Firdaus's stature, particularly in the eyes of characters like Flossie Sharma, who represents respectability and erudition. Hasan includes seemingly extraneous episodes, such as rumors of Ibomcha's involvement in drug deals and run-ins with the police, which serve to further diminish his character in the reader's eyes. These elements of the narrative seem to serve no purpose other than to elevate the status of the *dkhar* characters at the expense of the native population. Hasan's representation of the natives, particularly the Khasis, often appears to enhance the perceived superiority of the *dkhar*. This dynamic is vividly illustrated when Firdaus reflects on

the local youth: “Firdaus had never met twenty-two- and twenty-three-year-olds who appeared to have no function in life other than listening to rock music, boys just a little older than her students in college. Wasn’t she too old for him?” (Hasan, 2007, p. 103). Firdaus’s sense of superiority over Ibomcha is thus clearly established, and even the physical depiction of the Khasi characters is telling. Firdaus recalls them as “small, gentle boys in faded jackets who chewed kwai incessantly...” (Hasan, 2007, p. 103), further reinforcing the condescending tone that permeates her perception of the native population.

## REGIONAL STEREOTYPES

The device of stereotyping successfully reduces complex cultural identities to simplistic and negative caricatures. In *Lunatic in My Head*, the Khasi community is frequently depicted in ways that reinforce existing stereotypes. Hasan introduces the concept of the ‘Other’ early in the narrative through the portrayal of a woman engaged in an affair with Nivedita’s husband, who expresses her fears with palpable disdain: “If I leave the house even for a day, he might bring in that woman, she will take over. She will cook her stinky food in my kitchen, she will...” (Hasan, 2007, p. 16). The language used is carefully chosen, and laden with significant implications. She continues, “See, Miss. First of all, he is running around with some woman and dragging my name in the mud. Second, she is tribal, this woman who has totally ruined my life. I’m not saying it is better to be chasing non-tribal women, but after all... anyway, the point is that he’s shameless.” Flossie, a character who listens to this lament, nods in agreement: “Yes, yes. It’s pitiful indeed that the man has displayed so little taste” (Hasan, 2007, p. 16).

Hasan determinedly portrays the Khasi characters in an unflattering light, buttressing negative stereotypes. For example, Angel War, a Khasi woman depicted as intelligent and ambitious—having topped several universities and nearing the completion of her Ph.D.—is still portrayed through the lens of a degrading stereotype. Despite her academic achievements, she is shown attempting to seduce her M.Phil. guide, Mr. Thakur, to secure a recommendation. This portrayal perpetuates the harmful stereotype of ‘otherized sexuality,’ suggesting that even a highly qualified woman might resort to using her sexuality rather than her intellectual capabilities to advance her career. Hasan’s narrative here falls into the age-old trope of

depicting Northeastern women as being of loose character, undermining Angel War's intellectual accomplishments by implying that her success hinges on her sexual attributes.

Another character, David Rockwell, is included in the novel to represent the perceived future of Khasi boys. As a young boy, David had enjoyed music like The Beatles and Elvis Presley, but in the present, he is depicted as a man who has lost his way—jobless, directionless, and spending his days drinking and borrowing money he never intends to repay. He is portrayed as a permanent fixture at Ambrosia, embodying the stereotype of the Khasi youth with no future or ambition. Aman's reflection on David's fate—“He remembered the bullying boy at the aloo-wallah's, the boy whom he had seen cruising the night streets with his friends, and wondered if he would with time mutate into a David Rockwell” (Hasan, 2007, p. 115)—reinforces the narrative of Khasi characters as failures in contrast to Aman, who is depicted as confident, ambitious, and intellectually superior. Hasan's portrayal of Aman as the embodiment of rationality and ambition starkly contrasts with the depictions of the Khasi characters, who are repeatedly shown as lacking direction and purpose, further entrenching the stereotypical divide between the *dkhar* and *non-dkhar* in the narrative.

The character of Jason, Elsa's son, is the only *dkhar* in the novel depicted as well-established and educated, yet he is characterized as morally corrupt and malevolent. A successful IAS officer posted in Mumbai, Jason's character is tinged with shades of grey, as he is seen plotting to eliminate his own mother with the help of his aunt. Hasan leaves Elsa's death ambiguous, but the conversation between Jason and his aunt during dinner strongly suggests foul play, allowing the reader to draw the most obvious conclusion. Despite his professional success, Jason is portrayed as uncivilized and unsociable, with little regard for cleanliness or respect for women and children. His coercion of Sophie to drink beer and his callous abandonment of her in a restaurant underscore his depravity: “You want some beer. Here taste some from my glass.” “No,” said Sophie. “What, ‘no’? Stop acting like an *auntyji*, open your mouth” (Hasan, 2007, p. 198).

Through Jason's character, Hasan seems to suggest that even after living in a cosmopolitan city like Mumbai, his narrow-mindedness and negative attitudes persist, ultimately leading him to the same fate as the lazy and directionless Khasis portrayed in the novel. Jason's decision to abandon his

prestigious job in Mumbai to run a hostel in Shillong further cements this comparison, implying that despite his outward success, he cannot escape the stereotypical traits attributed to the Khasi characters in the narrative.

The character Aman Moondy, for example, looks down upon the local Khasi population, viewing them as backward and uneducated. His interactions with Khasi characters are marked by a sense of detachment and superiority, reflecting a deep-seated prejudice that he struggles to reconcile with his own identity crisis.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of the subaltern is relevant in analyzing the marginalization of the Khasi community in the novel. Spivak contends that "the subaltern cannot speak... There is no virtue in global laundry lists with 'woman' as a pious item. Representation has not withered away" (Spivak, 1988, p. 307). In Hasan's novel, the Khasi characters are often overshadowed by the narratives of outsiders, such as Firdaus and Sophie Das, whose perspectives control the story. This positioning of the Khasi community as subaltern figures with limited agency reflects the broader issues of marginalization and voice in postcolonial literature.

### INSIDER VS. OUTSIDER NARRATIVES

The tension between insider and outsider perspectives is a recurring theme in *Lunatic in My Head*. The novel's portrayal of Shillong, with its distinct cultural milieu, is largely shaped by characters who are outsiders to the Khasi community. These outsider narratives are often marked by a sense of detachment, misunderstanding, and sometimes even condescension towards the local populace. This dynamic can be critically examined through the lens of Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity, which challenges the clear-cut distinctions between colonizer and colonized, native and outsider.

Bhabha argues that "hybridity is a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other 'denied' knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 114). In the context of *Lunatic in My Head*, the characters' hybrid identities, particularly those of Sophie Das and Aman Moondy, reveal the complexities and contradictions inherent in their interactions with the Khasi community. These characters, while trying to navigate their own fragmented identities, often project

their insecurities and biases onto the local population, thereby reinforcing the outsider perspective.

Aman Moondy, a Bengali and IAS aspirant who lives in Shillong with his parents, represents another strand of the narrative where the juxtaposition of *dkhar* and *non-dkhar* is evident. Aman, a Pink Floyd enthusiast, is discontented with his life in Shillong and aspires to leave the city. His primary connection to the local Khasi community seems to be through his shared love of music, yet his interactions with his Khasi friends are depicted as frivolous and unproductive. Ribor, one of Aman's Khasi friends, is portrayed as talented but aimless—good at painting but lacking the ambition to make a career out of it. Instead, Ribor wastes his time at Ambrosia, their favorite restaurant, and struggles even in his job as a taxi driver. Another friend, Bodha, who has failed twice at graduating, is similarly portrayed as irresponsible. Hasan presents their lives as unstructured and lacking purpose, contrasting sharply with Aman's disciplined pursuit of the IAS. For instance, Ribor is depicted as someone who would rather spend time listening to music than focusing on a career, further solidifying the narrative of the *dkhar* as rational and ambitious, while the Khasi characters are portrayed as directionless. Aman's regret over Ribor's lack of interest in literature—"Aman regretted that Ribor didn't really read: his concept of high literature was Jim Morrison's *American Prayer*. Yet they could talk music and think music together" (Hasan, 2007, p. 34)—emphasizes this divide. The narrative continues to establish this dichotomy, as Aman is shown to value both music and studies, while Ribor's interests are limited to music alone. Aman Moondy's interactions with the Khasi community further illustrate the complexities of insider versus outsider narratives. Despite living in Shillong for a significant portion of his life, Aman remains an outsider, both culturally and psychologically.

Hasan's stereotyping extends further in her depiction of women and their roles in the narrative. At one point, Bodha remarks about a woman, referring to her dismissively as a "chick," to which Aman responds, "She's not a chick, man. She teaches in a college. Please distinguish between a mature woman and the kind of girls who are more in your line" (Hasan, 2007, p. 109). This exchange not only reinforces gender stereotypes but also serves to elevate Aman's character as one who distinguishes himself from the superficial attitudes of his peers. This sense of superiority is not only a

reflection of his outsider status but also a manifestation of his internalized colonial mindset, which views the local culture as inferior or primitive.

The narrative of Sophie Das, an eight-year-old girl, holds a crucial place in Hasan's *Lunatic in My Head*. Through her innocence, Sophie experiences a profound sense of belonging with the native Khasis and harbors a secret desire to become one of them. Her yearning to identify with the Khasis is so intense that she undergoes a psychological identity crisis, convincing herself that her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Das, are not her real parents. Sophie is often lost in thoughts of being adopted by someone from the Khasi community. Her internal struggle is poignantly captured when she muses, "She thought that 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" (Hasan, 2007, p. 88). However, it is essential to note that Hasan subtly suggests the root of Sophie's desire to become a Khasi: the discriminatory treatment that *dkhars* (outsiders) often face in Shillong. Sophie's longing to be Khasi surfaces immediately after she is slighted by Khasi girls who exclude her from sharing food at a wedding she attends with Elsa.

Sophie's disconnect from her parents is further deepened by the Das family's discontent with life in Shillong, particularly Mrs. Das, who never liked the city. She attributes all of her misfortunes to Shillong, including her husband's unemployment and her inability to breastfeed her infant daughter. Her frustration is evident in her lament, "This child has a bad *kismat*, that's what it is. I can't feed my own child... how will her blood increase, how will her muscles grow? There's something in the air here that is rotten, that's what it is. I somehow feel in the plains this would never have happened" (Hasan, 2007, p. 130). This negative portrayal of Shillong reflects the broader tension between the *dkhars* and the native Khasis in the narrative.

This dynamic of insider versus outsider perspectives is also evident in the narrative structure of the novel itself. Hasan's portrayal of Shillong is filtered through the experiences of characters who, despite their physical presence in the city, remain emotionally and culturally detached from it. This detachment is a key element of the outsider narrative, which often fails to capture the nuances and complexities of the local culture. Instead,

the local community is frequently reduced to a backdrop against which the personal struggles of the outsider characters are played out.

Furthermore, the novel's depiction of the Khasi community as a homogenous and insular group can be critiqued for its reliance on stereotypes. This portrayal aligns with Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, where the "Other" is constructed as a monolithic entity, defined by its difference from the "self." In *Lunatic in My Head*, the Khasi community is often portrayed as resistant to change, culturally backward, and socially isolated. This depiction not only reinforces existing stereotypes but also marginalizes the voices of the local community, whose perspectives are largely absent from the narrative.

The novel's reliance on outsider narratives raises important questions about the ethics of representation in literature. Who gets to tell the stories of marginalized communities? How do these narratives shape our understanding of cultural identities? These questions are particularly relevant in postcolonial contexts, where the power dynamics of representation are often skewed in favor of those in positions of authority. In *Lunatic in My Head*, the outsider perspectives dominate the narrative, while the voices of the Khasi community are relegated to the margins.

The insider versus outsider dynamic in *Lunatic in My Head* is a critical aspect of the novel's exploration of cultural identity and representation. The outsider characters, through their interactions with the local Khasi community, reveal the complexities and contradictions of postcolonial identity formation. However, the novel's reliance on outsider narratives also raises concerns about the ethical implications of representing marginalized communities. By critically examining these dynamics, we can gain a deeper understanding of the power relations at play in literary representations of cultural identity.

### BELONGING AND EXCLUSION: A MIGRANT'S PERSPECTIVE

In an interview with Punch Magazine in 2015, Hasan reflected on her nostalgic childhood in a middle-class family in Shillong in the 70's and the 80's<sup>52</sup>. It was a turbulent time especially for the migrant population as ethnic identity had calibrated as a form of identity politics. The

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52 <https://thepunchmagazine.com/the-byword/interviews/the-lyrical-expression-of-the-ordinary-attracts-me-anjum-hasan> (visited on 08.06.2024)

divergent population and ethnic configuration of Shillong was historically strengthened in the after-math of partition of India in 1947. A large number of Bengali Hindu population came via Sylhet, roughly 100 kilometers away from Shillong<sup>53</sup>. However, there were growing unrest and hostility developing against the Bengali population who mainly constituted of the middle class from erstwhile East Bengal. This pre-existing ethnic tension corroborated with the ideology of the anti-foreigners' movement of Assam of the late 1970's which had permanently displacement around a lakh of Bengalis and other minorities from Assam. The violence aimed at the Bengalis in Meghalaya engulfed the Nepalis and other communities from North India as seen in the year 1980, 1987, 1991 and very recently in 2020. It is estimated that 20,000 Bengalis were displaced in 1980 in Meghalaya (*Timesofindia.com*, 26 Aug, 2012).

Shillong, became a contested space of belonging and exclusion, and reified the migrant/*dkhar* existence. The flattering and unflattering representation of the 'Self' and 'Other' in Hasan's work could be argued stems out from her own experience of living in the times when 'indigenous' and 'ethnic' identity assertions became a level playing field. The self-awareness, autonomy and the process of legitimization hinged on the idea of being an 'insider/indigenous'. The indigene population was fighting and writing back, however, compromising Shillong's cosmopolitan virtue and ethnic dynamism. The usage of 'terms such as 'homeland', 'indigeneity' and 'tribal identity' produced a sense of well-defined 'self' opposed to the 'Others' (Biswas and Suklabaidya, 2007, p. 257). Hasan, posits the migrants/settlers as the 'Other' in her work. This contentious process of fashioning the natives as a 'self' within the ambit of the novel's landscape is eschewed for its erases the historical process of self-assertion and frames a deprecating form of 'self-autonomy'.

## CONCLUSION

Hasan's *Lunatic in My Head* vividly depicts the marginalization of the Khasis, portraying them as inferior to the *dkhars* in nearly all aspects of life. The Khasis are represented as a group of music-loving, non-serious, and

53 Smarat X, 'Shillong violence and the rhetoric of pure blood' News laundry.com <https://www.news laundry.com/2018/06/05/shillong-violence-and-the-rhetoric-of-pure-blood> (visited on 10.07.2024)

irresponsible people, whereas the outsiders are depicted as more organized and civilized. This portrayal misleads readers, suggesting the superiority of the *dkhars* over the Khasis and generalizing the culture of an entire tribe in a reductive manner. For many readers unfamiliar with Shillong, the Khasis, and the broader Northeastern region of India, Hasan's novel risks perpetuating harmful stereotypes.

From a broader perspective, Hasan's narrative seems to reinforce the idea of the Khasis as a community trapped in stagnation, juxtaposed against the perceived progressiveness of the *dkhars*. The novel's imagery of the Shillong plateau, particularly during the earthquake scene, symbolizes this tension: "Seen from an aerial perspective, it is clear that the earthquake originates roughly in the center of the Shillong plateau. Deep in the old rocks that make up the Khasi hills, some blind and minute shifting of the century upon century of stone, transmits its vibration to the earth's surface. The tremors spread outward – north to a little highway town called Nongpoh, west to the Garo hills, south to escarpments standing high above the plains of Bangladesh. Wave upon wave, fanning out across the hills like a tremendous bout of shuddering, though no one can tell what emotion it is that the stones are expressing – horror, revulsion, fear?" (Hasan, 2007, p. 267).

This passage, while evocative, also serves to underscore the novel's overarching narrative of a once-beautiful and scenic Shillong—known as the "Scotland of the East" by the British colonizers—now reduced to a dismal, corrupt, and bustling city, filled with laid-back, immoral, and irresponsible Khasis. This misrepresentation not only diminishes the rich and complex culture of the Khasi people but also reinforces outdated and damaging stereotypes.

*Lunatic in My Head* offers a complex exploration of cultural identity and representation in Shillong, yet it also reinforces certain stereotypes through its outsider narrative. The portrayal of the Khasi community in the novel serves as a reminder of the power dynamics at play in literary representation, where the voices of the marginalized are often shaped and silenced by those in positions of authority. As literature continues to reflect and shape cultural identities, it is crucial to critically examine these narratives to uncover the underlying biases and assumptions that inform them.

The solution to such a portrayal lies in narrating the story from the perspective of an insider—someone who truly understands and can authentically represent the nuances of Khasi culture and the realities of life in Shillong. An insider's story would offer a more balanced and accurate depiction, challenging the one-sided narrative presented in Hasan's novel and providing readers with a deeper understanding of the region and its people

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