



## MIGRATION AND MARGINALIZATION LEADING TO IDENTITY CRISIS IN ANJUM HASAN'S LUNATIC IN MY HEAD

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### Abstract

The issues of identity, identity crisis and search for identity have always been a major subject of concern for writers, scholars and critics irrespective of time and space. Identities in the Northeast are based on ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversities. In early Indian literature, all the tribes living in the Northeast were known by one common identity, i. e. the Kiratas (Bhattacharjee 2011). It is found that in course of time, many other tribes were born out of the common Kirata identity (Suniti Chatterjee, 1951). According to Prof. J B Bhattacharjee (2011), most of the identities of the Northeast basically seem to be colonial, ethnic and social constructs. Many old identities were shed off and new identities were created and recreated in the process of fission and fusion. The process of combination and proliferation during the British regime led to the problems of identity crisis in the Northeast. Migration to the Northeast India from different parts of India has also boosted to the problem of identity crisis in the region. The indigenous people feel marginalized, deprived and threatened of their identity due to the continuous migration as well as illegal influx of immigrants from the neighboring countries. On the other hands, the migrants undergo deep mental pressure due to alienation and become disillusioned and traumatized in the process of location and re-location of their identity. Anjum Hasan's *Lunatic in My Head* (2007) attempts to display this very illusion or crisis of identity in the minds of the outsiders who are engaged continuously in the quest of identity.

**Key words:** identity, identity crisis, migration, illusion, ethnicity, outsider.

### Introduction

The issues of identity, identity crisis and search for identity have always been a major subject of concern for writers, scholars and critics irrespective of time and space. The term 'identity' owes its origin to Middle French word *identité*, literally meaning "the same as previously given or mentioned". In psychology, sociology, anthropology and philosophy, *identity* is connected with qualities, beliefs, social and cultural

status etc. that make a person or group different from others. In other words, identity is associated with recognition of the individual in the society.

In psychology, the term identity is commonly used to refer to one's personal identity. Social identity, on the other hand, is constructed on the basis of the individual's role, status and involvement in the society he/she lives in. Richard Jenkins (1996) argues that all human identities are social identities. His observation implies that the

construction of social identity is grounded upon an individual's dependence on social interaction (65). By the same logic, Jenkins further maintains that race forms a part of social identity and shapes it as well. Without social identity human world remains incomplete. In the second edition of his book *Social Identity* (2004, 3), Richard Jenkins develops his argument that identity is both individual and collective, and should therefore be considered within one analytical framework.

Cultural identity is associated with one's involvement with certain sets of cultural beliefs and traditions which one shares within the bounds of a particular community. Long back, when civilization was in its blooming stage, the identity of the primitive man was based on his association with a community/ethnic group and obviously the traditional concept of identity was viewed as a fixed construct bereft of any political association or affiliation. During the colonial regime, identity was based on the binary opposition of the 'ruler' and 'the ruled' which was extended in Marxist thought in form of the conflict between bourgeois and the proletariat. The colonial mind set was obsessed with the dominant ideology of hegemony, divide and rule. The essentialist notion of identity as a fixed construct was contested by the post-colonial thinkers and critics of diaspora studies and cultural studies like Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, Stuart Hall, Richard Hoggart and many others.

The post-colonial discourse on 'identity' springs from the concepts of nationhood, nationalism, or national identity. Homi K. Bhabha (1994) argues that cultural identities cannot be ascribed to pre-given, irreducible, scripted, ahistorical cultural traits that define the conventions of ethnicity. Nor can 'colonizer' and 'colonized' be viewed as separate entities that define themselves independently. While contesting both, the essentialist view of identity as fixed and the colonial view of identity as a hegemonic construct, Bhabha suggests that the negotiation of cultural identity involves the continual interface and exchange of cultural performances that in turn produce a mutual and mutable recognition (or representation) of cultural difference. Bhabha gives a new dimension to the concept of identity by

arguing that identity is 'never fixed', because it is culturally negotiated in the backdrop of the post-colonial situations of migration, trans-national movement, and the vision of the diaspora. In his introduction to the *Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha talks about the 'liminal' negotiation of cultural identity across differences of race, class, gender, and cultural traditions and also talks about identity in terms of 'cultural hybridity' (4).

Stuart Hall in his seminal essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" (1997) tends to emphasize that the cultural identities of diasporic persons reflect the common historical experience of migration, trans-national movement and the test of exile. A diasporic person shares a cultural code of being one people under the banner of exile and conceives the imaginary world of home and space which points to a third world theorized as 'third space'. The diaspora is often caught between 'home' and 'house' and experiences location, dislocation and relocation. Once the paradise of 'location' is lost, the diasporic person is dislocated in an alien land and constantly carries with the help of his memory the culture shock that neither can he go back home to follow his own culture nor can he impose his culture on the foreign land. And this state of fluidity poses a formidable crisis of identity for him. When both the worlds are unpalatable, the diaspora dreams of a third world which is theorized in terms of 'third space' or what Salman Rushdie calls 'imaginary homelands' (1982). Rushdie brings to the fore the agony of an expatriate who struggles between 'dislocation' and a desperate desire for 'relocation'. In the absence of his own 'root', the diasporic person is uprooted in an alien land and hence nourishes the desire for re-rooting himself with the burden of a culture shock over his head. (Hall, 1989).

According to Stuart Hall, the migrants under the banner of exile constitute the third world. For Rushdie, an immigrant experiencing identity crisis develops a hybrid vision and attempts constructing multiple identities. In his essay 'Imaginary Homeland', Rushdie (1982) observes:

“Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel we straddle two cultures; at the other times, that we fall between two stools.” (7)

The expatriate sensibility of Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri and Stephen Gill is characterized by the idea of shared culture, cultural hybridity and instable identity. Uma Parameswaran, another expatriate writer goes to the extent of saying that “Home is where your feet are”. (Jasbir Jain, 2003,39)

#### **Identities In North-East India:**

Identities in the Northeast are based on ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversities. In early Indian literature, all the tribes living in the Northeast were known by one common identity, i. e. the Kiratas. It is found that in course of time, many other tribes were born out of the common Kirata identity (Suniti Chatterjee, 1951). According to Prof. J. B. Bhattacharjee (2011), most of the identities of the Northeast basically seem to be colonial, ethnic and social constructs. During the British regime, the province was divided into administrative blocks and the present Northeast came to be known as the NEFA. This combination and proliferation led to the problems of identities in the Northeast. Some independent tribal identities got merged into one larger community identity in the process. On the other hand, ethnic disintegration during the colonial period also brought distance between some tribes.

During the post independent period, the crisis of under-development reinforced the quest for identity in the Northeast. In the words of Bhattacharjee (2011), the reason of this quest for identity is purely political:

“...the political leadership of the states and intellectuals in general talked of the indifference or apathy (or even neglect) of the Government of India towards economic and infrastructure development of the region (which was unfortunately a stark reality), the ethnic and linguistic minorities in various states gradually became vocal in alleging exploitation and deprivation of the

minorities by majority community in respective states.” (6)

Another important factor leading to the crisis of identity in the Northeast is the social and political divide caused by the ‘mainstream culture’ of India. The north-centric concept always affected the other regions including the Northeast. This has led to the narrow divisions of ethnic and linguistic majorities and minorities in the states. Developments in the mainland always caused tension in the region in terms of alienation, marginalization and deprivation. The tribes of the Northeast have started to protest in order to preserve their ethnic identity. As a result, indigenous groups, local bodies are springing up from every corner of the Northeast to raise their voice against the policy makers, the Government.

#### **Identity Crisis in Anjum Hasan’s *Lunatic in My Head* (2007):**

Anjum Hasan’s *Lunatic in My Head* (2007) deals with the crisis of identity, search for roots, clash of culture and the conflict of inside-outsider due to migration throughout the novel. It focuses on the mental struggle, agony, depression caused by the humdrum of a metropolitan life which makes visible changes in one’s life and re-locate them again. The title of the novel itself suggests the characters to be essentially lunatic, traumatized, disillusioned. They undergo a mental trauma of separation, alienation and are marginalized in a land which is not theirs. Though they were born to the place, they do not have cultural roots there. They are considered ‘outsiders’, the *dkhars* – non-Khasis in the land of the Khasis. They are frustrated, disillusioned, and their dreams have been shattered into pieces. In a Post-colonial situation, lunaticism is more mental and not external. It can never be shown, but felt. It is also co-related with identity which is questioned. Hence, the characters have gone lunatic in their desperate quest for identity, in their search for roots.

The Northeast has always been known for its colourful tribes, namely the Nagas, the Khasis, the Bodos, the Mizos, the Manipuris and many smaller and big tribes. During the post independent period, the whole province was known as the NEFA

(Northeast Frontiers of Assam) under the British rule. Since that time, people from different parts of the country have migrated to the northeast for different purpose of business, work etc. The tea tribes of Assam have been brought to the Northeast by the British from the states of Bihar, Orissa and Jharkhand to work as labourers in the tea gardens. The Marwaris from Rajasthan, Biharis from Bihar came to the northeast mainly for the purpose of Business, trade and commerce.

Even after the independence, a major part of these emigrants have lived in the states of the northeast and settled there. They have learnt the local language, adopted the local culture and slowly become a part of this land. But the indigenous people of this part of the country have never accepted them as it is. In their eyes, they have remained "outsiders", having a different identity, belonging to a different culture. The non-local people of the northeast have always faced humility whenever it is concerned with their "identity". They live in this land, but they don't belong to it. Anjum Hasan has tried to portray this special category of citizens of the northeast who always try to assert and re-assert their identity with the mainstream. Their quest is never to be quenched, it lives with them, burns fresh in their hearts, like the breathing of life, creating anxiety leading to sadness and depression.

The central characters of the novel - Firdaus Ansari, a college lecturer of English literature, Aman Moondy, an IAS aspirant and Sophie Das, an eight-year-old school girl - who are strangers to each other but loosely connected by a common string of Non-residents, the 'Dkhars' (non Khasis) who struggle throughout the novel to get a way out to establish an identity, an existence for living. They are considered 'outsider' in Shillong and life there is a challenge, yet it has got its own charm, a type of belongingness to the place.

The characters of Anjum Hasan's novel are in a constant search for identity. They feel themselves as a part of the hill city Shillong, they love Shillong. Yet, they do not belong to the place. They cannot accept the hatred in the eyes of the indigenous people of the land, the Khasis, for the non-Khasis.

Their identity has been questioned. They are termed as the *Dkhars*, literally meaning "the non-Khasis". This leads to an identity crisis and the characters quest for a new identity, to establish their identity afresh. Firdaus Ansari never accepted to be an 'outsider'. She-

"refused to introduce herself as a Bihari though her parents were from Bihar, she was born in Shillong and had never lived anywhere else. ....In Shillong's eyes if nothing else at least a *dkhar*, a foreigner, someone who did not have roots here, did not have the ground needed to put roots in."  
(Hasan 4)

Aman Moondy, another character of the novel is in an ultimate search of identity by clearing the IAS exams, to make a future for himself. He has found that Shillong has rare opportunities for the Non-Khasis, no future.

Sophie Das, an eight-year-old girl, studying in Class III in a local English school is unsure of her birth. She belongs to a typical Bengali family. Her mother is from the North. Her father Mr. Das was a college lecturer and is out of work at present. Her mother is expecting a child very soon but afraid of the child's future.

There are voices in the novel raised on the issue of 'identity' born out of the outsider- insider conflict. The outsider also has an identity crisis, a fear of losing its originality. The Indian national identity /nationality/nationhood are simply political terms for Hasan's above mentioned characters. They feel indifferent to these ideologies, as they know that their existence in the northeastern city of Shillong is just like the expatriates. Their ethnicity, race, culture make them separate from the local residents. They live in exile, in a land where their home exits, but it is no homeland for them. The geographical lines drawn between states, though within the same country, dislocates them. They desperately long for a cultural bonding with the soil, its people, but all in vain. Thus the national identity is also in crisis, losing its ground in its own land, among its own people.

On the other hand, the local residents of Shillong, the Khasis, are onto a mission to get their rights (as is the case with the other tribes of Assam and other northeastern states). One can see the anger felt by the Khasis at the impact of colonialism on their life and land. The state of Meghalaya was created in 1972 out of Assam in order to empower the tribal people and give them control over their destiny. They feel that they are being cheated by the government of India in respect of their social status. They feel to be looked down upon by the people of the other Indian states. They feel deprived, alienated, laughed at for their low life. Some of them even protest against the republic in a unconstitutional way. They have taken up arms, formed illegal associations and marched ahead to fight for their right. They cannot decide between the choices to be an Indian or to be a Khasi (tribal) first. Anjum Hasan talks of a wall painting which reads:

“We are Khasis by Blood, Indians by Accident.” (Hasan 32)

Firdaus disliked all discriminations made on the basis of race, religion and culture. For her, all human beings are same. There is no question of difference in terms of origin, birth or anything else. She is an orient who has a soft heart for all Orientals. Firdaus has also a love relation with one of the migrants within the northeast region. Her boyfriend Ibomcha is a Manipuri, who lives in Shillong. Metaphorically, he is also an outsider for Shillong. But he hails from one of the northeastern state, Manipur. He is also a tribal. This close affinity between the tribals amongst themselves gives him an edge over the others, the dkhars. He is not considered an outsider in Shillong. He lives there, visits his home place occasionally and comes back to Shillong. Firdaus wonders about the future of their relationship. She could not find a definite answer to her question if it is possible to live her whole life with Ibomcha, a Manipuri, a tribal who has never felt the stigma of an outsider. Will he be able to understand and share the conflict of her mind about her identity, her roots?

The basic difference between Firdaus and Ibomcha lies on the fact that the latter has a local

identity. She wants herself to assimilate her identity with his and form a new identity. According to her,

“at least he had some place to go back to.”  
(Hasan 63)

Aman Moondy, on the other hand, tries his luck in the Civil Services Exam for the second time. Though he is not very confident of cracking the exam this time also, he puts in his efforts to try his luck. In Hasan’s words:

“Earlier, he had considered his options limited – now he felt that the Civil services was the only option available. The more he thought of this as the only meaningful thing he could do, the only passport out of town, the less confident he felt about passing the exam” (Hasan 66)

It is not like that Shillong has only the problem of cultural conflicts, the question of ethnicity in the process of assimilation. Aman’s father Dr. Gorakh Moondy even felt this in Calcutta, in West Bengal. He came to Shillong from Calcutta. He never thought of spending his rest of life in the metropolis. He was not sure of having a chance of succeeding here. But the reason behind his migration to Shillong also emerged from the desperate longing for an identity. His father, hailing from U.P., was the owner of a *mithai* shop in Calcutta. Dr. Moondy moved to Shillong entirely on a whim, without knowing anything about the place. To quote Hasan:

“He had moved here without even knowing what the place looked like, entirely on a whim, exhausted by the Bengalis among whom he’d grown up, tired of being an outsider.....” (Hasan 68)

Dr. Moondy is not happy with the political, social unrest affecting the youths of Shillong. He cannot understand what has led the people to become so un-social, so violent. What he can do is only to wonder:

“Now people, boys you know, boys half your height, barge into people’s shops, into offices, and demand money!” (Hasan 65)

This social unrest has also sprung from a quest for identity, a re-location of the self. It has got different attributes for different persons. At the time, when Firdaus is craving in a quest for her identity, some others have denounced it. Sarak Singh, a Bihari *muriwala* has learnt to live with the repulses of the locals in his eighteen years of stay in Shillong. He did not protest to the punch given by the local chap. He has learnt to accept the insult for his own living: "They keep doing this. And they never even pay." (Hasan 38)

Quest for identity or search for identity is even felt in the immature hearts. Sophie Das is a girl of eight years studying in Class III. She has also understood the pangs of being an 'outsider' in Shillong. May be she has learnt this from the conversations of her parents. In her wildest dreams she has thought herself to be an adopted child of her parents. She has developed an internal urge to assimilate herself with the local identity. She tells her friends in the class that her actual father is Uncle Syiem, a local inhabitant of the place. The person happens to be a friend of her father who visits them occasionally. She makes a story of her own-

"My real mother is dead... she died long back, but my father is not dead. He comes to our house sometimes. He always wears a raincoat, even when it's not raining." (Hasan 88)

The raincoat here, of course, refers to the weather of Shillong. Rain is common here. It comes and goes, without warning, throughout the year.

Sophie likes to spend time with Kong Elsa, the land lady who is a Khasi. At one occasion, she accompanies Kong Elsa to a marriage. The other girls of her age ridicules her to be a *dkhar*, a non-Khasi. The tea girls did not offer her tea and sweets, just to show her real ground, as a non-welcome person

"The girl with the tray put down a paper plate before Elsa, gave Sophie the barest of glances, and then turned right round and started handing plates to the facing row. Sophie sat frozen for a while." (Hasan 98)

The small girl of eight also blushed in embarrassment. She felt insulted, ridiculed at her being an outsider, a *dkhar*. "Her ears burned" in shame. She noticed that another girl attending the party observed the incident and laughed at her condition.

Shillong represents any town located on the laps of the seven, now eight, Northeastern states. Fear is common in the lifestyle of the Northeastern people. Fear for death, loss of property, loss of respect is not new here. It is as cool as the wind here.

The dichotomy of the insider-outsider conflict has predominantly a burning issue of politics in India's Northeast since Independence. Politics of displacement, migration, and ever-raising voices for new homelands have been ravaging the entire region. The polemics of power seems to be very much functional in creating an atmosphere of doubt and distrust between the 'insider' and the 'outsider'. The divide between them may also be seen as the postcolonial distance between the 'self' and the 'other'. This issue of insider-outsider dichotomy is addressed in Anjum Hasan's *Lunatic in My Head*. Migration, displacements, and separate homelands are dominantly postcolonial issues, and besides others, they have a great impact even on ecology. The issues of migration, displacements, or new homelands in contemporary politics of Northeast India are to be seen from their historical perspective.

### Conclusion

The post-colonial debate on nationality, cultural conflict takes a major role in Anjum Hasan's *Lunatic in My Head*. The central characters of the novel Firdaus Ansari, Aman Moondy and Sophie Das resemble the 'subalterns'. Some minor characters such as Mr. Moondy, Aman's father; Mr. and Mrs. Das, Sophie's parents, Firdaus' grandfather also share this conflict. Towards the end of the novel, Hasan's characters find their new identities. Though their quest is not quenched, they find alternative ways and means to settle down for some time. Aman Moondy fails to crack the IAS exam in his second attempt and prepares to leave Shillong and go to Delhi in search of better

opportunities. Firdaus finds her love relation with Ibomcha turning to a positive note. Ibomcha proposes her to marry him. She foresees a new future in the time to come with Ibomcha. She changes her MPhil supervisor and starts her MPhil dissertation afresh under the new Guide Mrs. Khan. Sophie does not feel herself adopted anymore. Her father has got a new job in a school and her mother has started to give tuition to some boys. Their family has become stable. She feels happy to play with her sister and does not wish to assimilate her identity with the locals anymore. Thus, the quest for identity in Anjum Hasan's *Lunatic in My Head* takes new turn and concludes with establishment of new identities.

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