The Poetics of Place and Identity: An Interview with Anjum Hasan

Md Jakir Hossain[1]
Krishnath College (University of Kalyani), Murshidabad, West Bengal, India
Md Rakibul Islam[2]
Aligarh Muslim University, Centre Murshidabad, West Bengal, India

Anjum Hasan. Photo: Lekha Naidu

[1] **Md Jakir Hossain** is Assistant Professor of English at Krishnath College (Kalyani University), Berhampore, Murshidabad, West Bengal, India. He completed a PhD at Aligarh Muslim University. Hossain co-edited (with Md. Rakibul Islam) *Rewriting Resistance: Caste and Gender in Indian Literature* (Vernon Press, 2022). He has published in the Journal of *Borderland Studies*, *Contemporary Voice of Dalit*, *Journal of Department of English, Vidyasagar University (W.B)*, *Muse India*, and others. Email: mjheng@msduniv.ac.in

[2] **Md Rakibul Islam** is Assistant Professor of English at Aligarh Muslim University, Centre Murshidabad, West Bengal, India. He completed a PhD at Aligarh Muslim University. His research papers have appeared in *The Grove - Working Papers on English Studies*, *Contemporary Voices of Dalit*, *Journal of Postcolonial Writings*, and others. His research and teaching interests include postcolonial literature, linguistics, English for specific purpose, and legal language. Email: rakibul.mbb@amu.ac.in

Abstract
This interview delves into the intricate and vibrant literary landscape of contemporary India and focuses among others on themes of migration, nostalgia, and urban life in Anjum Hasan's work. It offers deep insights into the complexities of urban existence, including the fast-paced lifestyle, diversity, and myriad opportunities and challenges that characterize urban spaces, and their impact on human identity, relationships, and culture. The extensive conversation explores the struggles of individuals and societies to adapt to change while preserving cultural heritage and reflecting personal history. A detailed analysis of Hasan's work reveals how she intricately weaves the poetics of place into her literary creations. Her writings reflect and engage with the multifaceted realities of modern India. Through an exploration of the poetics of place, Hasan invites readers on a journey of self-discovery and introspection. The interview highlights her foundational literary works such as *The Cosmopolitans*, *Neti, Neti*, *Lunatic in My Head*, and the short story collection *Difficult Pleasures*.

Keywords
Search for identity, phenomena of migration, poetics of place, rural life, urban life

Introduction

Anjum Hasan (1972–) is a celebrated Indian novelist, poet, short story writer, and editor. Renowned for her distinctive voice, she explores urban life and contemporary social issues through her work. Hasan studied philosophy at North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU) and has established a significant presence in the literary world. Influenced by literary scholars such as Philip Larkin (1922–1985), Pablo Neruda (1904–1973), Cesare Pavese (1908–1950), and Arun Kolatkar (1932–2004), her body of work spans various genres, including novels, short stories, poems, and essays.

Hasan has received critical acclaim for her works, which bridge the gap between literary fiction and personal introspection. Praised for her sensitivity, empathy, and thought-provoking narratives, her writing style is distinguished by poetic language and keen observations. Hasan's writings often delve into the complexities of personal relationships, identity, and the evolving landscapes of Indian cities. She is recognized for her ability to capture the nuances of modern life and the emotions that accompany it. Detailed analysis of her work reveals how she intricately weaves the poetics of place into her literary creations, crafting rich tapestries of physical and emotional landscapes that resonate deeply with readers. Her ability to connect emotions to specific places reveals her characters'

inner worlds and motivations, which enhances the depth and relatability of her stories.

Hasan captures the urban Indian experience in a manner that resonates with readers who appreciate literary fiction and contemporary storytelling. In addition to fiction, Hasan has written poetry and essays, contributing to various literary magazines and anthologies. Her work often focuses on themes of alienation, yearning for home, and the contrasts between contemporary urban and rural life.

Many people migrate from small towns and rural areas to big cities or metropolises, contributing to economic growth and social change while ushering in a new modernity. This migration defines contemporary India, creating a sense of discomfort amidst the bustle of big cities. These individuals are often caught between nostalgia and self-discovery, navigating the tension between past and present.

Hasan's first published work is a poetry collection titled *Street on the Hill* (*Sahitya Akademi*, 2006). She debuted as a novelist with *Lunatic in My Head* (2007), which was shortlisted for the Crossword Book Award. Set in the fictional city of Shillong, the story follows the interconnected lives of three characters, each shaped differently by their surroundings as they navigate personal challenges and aspirations. Her second novel *Neti, Neti* (2009) revolves around the experiences of 25-year-old Sophie Das, who returns to India after living abroad. This novel was longlisted for the 2008 Man Asian Literary Prize and shortlisted for The Hindu Best Fiction Award in 2010. Sophie, adrift in the big city of Bangalore and her hometown which she left behind, explores themes of identity, belonging, and the complexities of cultural transitions. Her *Difficult Pleasures* (2012), a collection of short stories, was shortlisted for The Hindu Literary Prize and the Crossword Book Award. This collection delves into the lives of various characters, each grappling with their desires, aspirations, and challenges in contemporary India. Her another work, *The Cosmopolitans* (Penguin Books India, 2015) is set in Bengaluru (Bangalore) and revolves around the lives of Qayenaat, a retired professor, and her tenant, Babu. It is

> an adventurous novel of ideas that traces the life of Qayenaat, an art critic, her relationships with lovers, old and new, and what art means in India today — new age art and art that is a sediment of heritage. It confirms, not for the first time of course, Anjum Hasan's fierce intelligence, both as writer and thinker, and it gives voice to an artistic consciousness that has rarely found space in the pages of the Indian English novel. (Roy 2015)

A Day in the Life (2018), a collection of interconnected short stories that won the Valley of Words Award in 2019, explores an evolving friendship and the city's changing landscape. It takes readers through a day in the lives of various characters, offering glimpses into their thoughts, emotions, and experiences. Hasan's latest novel, *History's Angel* (2023), vividly captures India's past and present.

Her writings have been featured in *Granta*, *Baffler*, *Five Dials*, *Wasafiri*, *Drawbridge*, *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, *The Asia Literary Review*, and *Caravan*. Hasan is a jury member for the *JCB Prize for Literature* and the books editor at *The Caravan*. She has won the Outlook Picador Non-fiction Contest and is currently a Homi Bhabha Fellow, the Charles Wallace Writer-in-Residence at the University of Canterbury, and a Visiting Professor of creative writing at Ashoka University.

In this wide-ranging conversation, we explore contemporary India's vibrant and complex literary landscape, focusing on themes of migration, nostalgia, and urban life and how they shape human experiences. Through her exploration of the poetics of place, Hasan invites readers on a journey of self-discovery and introspection, making her works a testament to the enduring power of place in literature. This interview examines the complexities of urban life, including human relationships and cultural encounters. It also delves into how a fast-paced lifestyle, diversity, and the myriad opportunities and challenges characterize urban spaces. We discuss how individuals and societies grapple with change and the passage of time to preserve cultural heritage and reflect personal history. By referencing her seminal works such as *The Cosmopolitans*, *Neti, Neti*, *Lunatic in My Head*, and *Difficult Pleasures*, the discussion provides insights into and engages with the multifaceted realities of modern India.

The following interview was taken via email.

Md. Jakir Hossain & Md. Rakibul Islam: *Let's start from the very beginning. Can you tell us about your early years?*

Anjum Hasan: In many ways my childhood was a typical Indian urban one of the mid-1970s through the late 1980s. Working parents; convent school; living in small rented houses; walking everywhere or taking public transport, reading haphazardly and hungrily but also an uninhibited relation to the outdoors – the garden, the street, the playground, the neighbourhood. There was not too much and not too little – the moderately austere lives that most middle-class Indians perforce led before the 1990s. A moderation of quantity and also a moderation

of distance – the world was not too far and not too near. This is not to say that all was well in that society. But there was a balance between the limitations of our imaginations and the means available to us to express our desires and thoughts, and this seems to have gone out of kilter in the succeeding decades.

You come from the North-East part of India, where you spent half of your life, and then you moved to the plains. Does the geography of these two regions impact your writing in any way?

The North-East is not just a geographical direction. As the historian Sanjib Barua has said, it's a state of mind, a distancing attitude towards those who live there. So I was influenced by this mentality – the way it expressed itself in politics and self-imagining. But, equally, the North-East, if one grows up there, is not always exceptional – at least this is true of Shillong which before Independence has a history comparable to, even if not identical with, other Indian hill stations. I am trying at the moment to write about the modern shaping of Shillong.

Your acclaimed debut novel Lunatic in My Head *(2006), which is set in your hometown of Shillong, narrates the story of three characters: Sophie Das, Aman Moody, and Firdaus Ansari. You seem to have a longing to return to the scenic landscape of Shillong. How has your connection with the place influenced your narrative?* Lunatic in My Head *also creates an imaginary world reminiscent of the settings in Brontë's novels, reflecting the chilly, wet hill town where you spent your childhood with your sibling. What are your thoughts on that?*

I'll answer both questions together because the themes of romance and nostalgia are connected. There is definitely a longing for Shillong in that novel – I wanted to see how that could be put to good effect, so in the minds of the characters there is an idealisation, a longing for the place even when they are in it, as Firdaus realises at one point (as Basho said, "Even in Kyoto, I long for Kyoto"). This tension fascinates me – loving a place and being unhappy in it; missing a place and wanting to leave it. Partly this is the outlook of the provincial who is torn, partly it's the colonial romanticisation of hill stations that we inherited, and partly it's the recent history of Shillong which makes the three main characters outsiders.

Neti, Neti: Not This, Not This *(2009) is about a young urban immigrant who moves to a metropolitan city and explores issues such as alienation, modernization, and a yearning for home that plague the modern individual. Does this novel have any personal significance for you? Is your protagonist a victim of Page 3 culture?*

Only in the very broad outlines does it follow my own story – that is, the move from Shillong to Bangalore and some of the emotions Sophie feels as a migrant to the city. Alienation in general, yes, but I also wanted to capture the feel of new money in the Indian metropolis in the late 1990s and the early 2000s. Novels are, or usually aim to be, both thematic and highly specific. At that point in Bangalore, which already feels quaint, there is a sense of astonishment, even madness, at the sudden eruption of wealth. Even the page 3 culture that Sophie fumes at is new. There is no way to capture this except through the consciousness of someone who finds it fascinatingly distasteful.

In The Cosmopolitans *(2015), you reveal the inner world of a forty-three-year-old protagonist whose life extends beyond domestic confines and breaks various stereotypes. Her independence and lifestyle, although unconventional in traditional Indian society, challenge societal norms. What inspired you to portray such a character?*

She's actually fifty-three. Breaking the stereotypes is itself a stereotype and she doesn't aim to, she is just an unsettled woman. I don't think in contemporary Bengaluru in which I frame her she is especially radical; she has friends who are similar. I tend to write about characters who find themselves at some angle to the norm without being rebels or avant-gardists. They are low-key figures operating with a sense of "inner exile," in JM Coetzee's wonderful phrase.

The Cosmopolitans *presents a sharp contrast between urban and rural India, highlighting different ideologies and the positions women hold in Indian society. How are these two worlds brought together in the novel? Is any compromise possible between the modern and conservative world orders?*

Qayenaat in the village is preoccupied less by the position of women in Indian society and more by the anachronistic but still wonderfully alive man she meets there, a former king. For sure there is a conflict between the city and the village. But at the same time, there is something of the city in the king who is a faded cosmopolitan and something of the village in Qayenaat who longs to have roots of the kind her father, even though an adult product of the city, had.

Migration and a never-ending search for identity are central to the collection of stories titled A Day in the Life *(2018). How do you see the phenomena of migration in the current global scenario?*

It's not so much migration – that is the business of sociologists, not writers of fiction – as the question of what makes a place enabling for someone. In the first story for instance "Stranger,", in its very first line, the character says there were no new ideas to be found in the city so he moved to the small town. In another story called "Yellow Rose,", the character cannot be imagined outside the city but she has a completely hands-off and anti-physical relationship to it. In a third story called "Nur" the character negotiates the city as a series of obstacles and opportunities in her search for her missing husband.

In Difficult Pleasures *(2012), we hear thirteen voices familiar to those of us living in an urban environment. The urban characters in these stories represent our own lives, either as reflections of our own voices or those of people around us. How accurate is this statement? Which story do you like the most? What is your take on Nietzsche's quote, "Hope in reality is the worst of all evils because it prolongs the torments of man" (qtd. in Blackie's* Dictionary of Quotations*, 98), in relation to* Difficult Pleasures*?*

I'll take that as a compliment but I don't really know if it's true. It's for the reader to judge. I've come to realise that hope is an aspect of personality – some people can be hopeful in despair and others morose in paradise. How much are people's lives determined by their cultures – the time and space that I mentioned above – and how much by their instincts? I would rather look to a writer like Anton Chekhov (1860–1904) – because he asks this question about people – than Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900). Take a play like Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* (1904). All the characters are trapped in a very revolutionary moment of history which is changing their lives forever but they are as much imprisoned or liberated by their personalities.

First published in 2006, Street on the Hill *is a collection of poems primarily about middle-class life in a small city. In "Mister Language," it is evident how dissatisfied you are with the town and the difficulty you face in coping with its limitations. Can you explain why you seek space and freedom amidst the constraints of a small town? What leads you to express cynicism and loneliness in the story?*

It's not plain dissatisfaction with the town – more the provincial feeling stuck but also full of the everyday beauty of it. It's a position one associates with poets like Philip Larkin. Cynical and lonely and even tight-lipped could apply to a great many poets – but someone like Larkin brings a sense of the local which I find fascinating – of a piece with others such as Thom Gunn (1929–2004) and later Carol Ann Duffy (1955–). Something distinctly English here which I have been

affected by since childhood, starting with the sometimes cynical and lonely Christopher Robin in the work of AA Milne (1882–1956).

In the poem "England" in Street on the Hill*, we observe a diasporic touch and the dilemma of double existence in the psyche of the poetic persona. Does this poem reflect Homi K. Bhabha's concept of the "third space"? Additionally, the poem "Neighbourhood" offers an escape from the confinement and restrictions of city life through companionship. Can you be considered an escapist in this sense?*

I'm not sure. Aren't these the timeless human emotions, the need to belong, the longing to escape, feeling divided between places? The great poet of all this is not Bhabha but AK Ramanujan (1929–93). I don't think he had any special influence on *Street on the Hill* but I've been reading more of him lately and find that his poetry combines all the special contradictions of being Indian – not the standard, intellectual distinction between tradition and modernity but that distinction as experienced through perception, through every day lived experience.

In an interview, Keki Daruwalla (1937–2024) said the following words about you, "There are two kinds of poets. The first who craft their poems so well that when you finish the poem you look back and say – what a tremendous, haunting poem that was. But if you pick out a stanza from that poem [you say] … fair enough but nothing great. There are the other kinds who play with language and you'll have something scintillating in every second line, something being put forward differently. Anjum Hasan is both" ("Anjum Hasan", n.p.*). How do you respond to Keki Daruwalla's comment on your poetry? Are there any Indian poets whose work has motivated you to write such fine poetry? Does Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926) or Mirza Ghalib (1797–1869) have any impact or influence on your poetry?*

Responding to both questions together. It is obviously very generous of Keki to have said this. I think I was drawing on two very different kinds of poets, though I am not sure they exactly correspond to the distinction he makes. One is the Firaq-Ghalib-Rilke-Hardy tradition which is asking larger, let's say more metaphysical, questions of the universe. The other is the more immediate style of the Movement poets, Europeans such as Cesare Pavese (1908–1950) and Adam Zagajewski (1945–2021), Russian poets like Marina Tsvetaeva (1892–1941) or Indian ones like Arun Kolatkar (1932–2004). Not watertight distinctions and there are of course poets who can combine this like Ramanujan does. But I do see a difference.

In an interview, you talked about the future of poetry in India where you essentially mentioned that we don't live in the age of poetry. What do you mean by this statement?

There are still poets writing good poetry but there are two problems. One is a growing illiteracy regarding poetry – the feeling that readers are not really readers anymore, that is, they are not basing their judgement on a history of reading. And the other even more fundamental problem, which applies to all of our literature, indeed to all of the arts, is one that the scholar Pratap Bhanu Mehta (1967–) often raises – which is that there are so many artistic and critical contexts in India that we are often at sea regarding which context we're operating in and judging from. That confusion affects the quality of everything – our reading, our writing, our discernment.

In your writings, we gain insights into the lives of women in the city. Can you share your perspective and experiences as a woman living in an urban environment?

I don't think of it as exclusively female experience since I write about both men and women in the city – my forthcoming novel, *History's Angel*, is about a man living in Delhi as well as the women among his family and friends. I am interested in women's problems of course but more than that what works on me is contemporary Indian life, the breakneck speed at which our lives have changed materially and emotionally since the late 1990s and what this has done to our sense of ourselves.

In an interview with the Hindustan Times*, you said, "Shillong is the place that formed me. Probably if I were born and brought up somewhere else, I would have been a different person. It made me an observer. It made me the writer that I am" (Rahman 2008) What role does a place, as a tangible element, play in the formation of identity and persona?*

I think Shillong made me in good and bad ways. I lived there as one remove from history, if one could put it that way. What I mean is that I grew up fairly bookish but the stuff I was reading – that is the English literature component of it – had only a metaphorical relationship to the landscape, not a historical one. It's like you said – Shillong appears like Emily Bronte's scenery. But there is also a sense in which, as I'm discovering now researching the history of the place for a non-fiction book, that the landscape was not just metaphorically like England but that it was definitely created as an English-like place, following on the love of the "picturesque" in English culture.

Many of your creations draw inspiration from your connection with Bengaluru, a connection you've characterized as sensuous, especially considering the city's dynamic and often less-than-beautiful aspects. Could you elaborate on your bond with the city?

If I have a home, it's Bengaluru. Despite the constant remaking of the city to fit global lifestyles and global consumerism, despite the fact that we're running out of water, can't seem to manage our traffic, and have torn down most of our old buildings, it remains a place that is not difficult to love. There are elements that soften it – the presence of artists and writers, tree-lined back streets, an essential cheeriness in the people.

What is your opinion on the process of writing? How do you see the process of writing a novel? Do you keep readers in mind while writing a novel?

There is no great mystique about writing a novel, though readers and even writers like to indulge in that mystique. A lot of the forming of one's sensibility actually happens off the page, in one's thinking. And so the more important question becomes: in what tone and with what stance are we going to talk about what has already been written? As Arvind Krishna Mehrotra (1947–) recently pointed out, the world of Indian writing in English a happy one. He was talking about our mindlessness. As for readers they are an indeterminate mass, or rather a scattered handful, so it's impossible to keep them in mind. One is usually writing for oneself and strangers, as Gertrude Stein said. Sometimes though that one friend or partner or acquaintance does set up residence on one's shoulder and the writing becomes snatches of conversation with this person.

What do you think your function is as an English fiction writer and critic in India? What are some of the current literary trends that you are noticing?

The function of any writer and critic is to try and bend the clichés and challenge routine rituals of the times, while hoping to grab the spirit of the times with both hands. Now, when books are churned out faster than ice-cream, and in more flavours, I am resistant to trends and to the idea that newness is an index of anything. Ezra Pound's "make it new" was a call to writers, not consumers, a suggestion that we go against rather than with the tide. The tide in our hyper-greedy age is all for newness so I am drawn to the opposite – not just old but the qualities that enable reflection, attention, noticing, and valuing. As Milan Kundera (1929–2023) says in that slow novel *Slowness* (1995), our current, technology-driven speed is a way of forgetting, of sundering ourselves from past

and future. So the writer's job seems to have become attenuated to just this – pausing to take stock.

Thank you for accepting our invitation and giving your precious time for the interview.

You're very welcome.

References

"Anjum Hasan." Anjumhasan.com. Accessed on 30 July 2023. https://www.anjumhasan.com/poetry/street-on-the-hill

Blackie. *Blackie's Dictionary of Quotations*. Mumbai: Blackie & Son, n. d. https://www.google.co.in/books/edition/Blackie_s_Dictionary_of_Quotations/8l8tDAAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=0

Hasan, Anjum. *Street on the Hill*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2006.

---. *Lunatic in My Head*. Zubaan: Penguin, 2007.

---. *Neti, Neti: Not This, Not This*. New Delhi: Roli Books, 2009.

---. *Difficult Pleasures*. New Delhi: Penguin Random House India Private Limited, 2012.

---. *The Cosmopolitans*. New Delhi: Penguin Random House India Private Limited, 2015.

---. *A Day in the Life*. New Delhi: Penguin Random House India Private Limited, 2018.

---. *History's Angel*. London: Bloomsbury, 2023.

Rahman, Azera. "Lunatic in My Head: A Migrant's View of Shillong." *Hindustan Times*, 6 June 2008. Accessed on 12 August 2023. https://www.hindustantimes.com/books/lunatic-in-my-head-a-migrant-s-view-of-shillong/story-yaYRFV4WTgd0zGd2XzNN1K.html

Roy, Sumana. "The Lyrical Expression of the Ordinary Attracts Me: Anjum Hasan." *The Punch Magazine*, 1 October 2015. Accessed on 17 August 2023 https://thepunchmagazine.com/the-byword/interviews/the-lyrical-expression-of-the-ordinary-attracts-me-anjum-hasan