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Missing North-East [Indian] Elements in Anjum Hasan's Poetry

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Anjum Hasan, a poet from Shillong, is claimed as one of the North-east Indian poets. Her works have been included in various anthologies and have been reviewed by various notable scholars and critics. However, her poetry is a far cry from any Northeastern elements. Her poetry do not inform us of the violent times in the North-east like the poetry by her contemporaries, who are so deeply entangled in battles to claim their different identities through folklores and myths, restore peace through their poetry, and lament the peaceful past by contrasting the present state of turmoil. My article is an attempt to prove that Anjum Hasan does not fall into the canon of North-east Indian poets. This I have done by endeavoring to show her view of an unattached observer unlike her contemporaries who display deep sense of rooted-ness with their homes and lands. Her poetry rather displays her superficial relationship with the North-east; she is more of a nature poet whose hobby it is to observe without being complicated and responsible.

What is the picture of the North-eastern part of India? What comprises the literature of the North-east in India? What are the subjects or themes of the poems from North-eastern India? Answers for such questions are easy to seek, and the most common response to such questions is: incredible natural beauty, primitive land, rich literary traditions, oral narratives, multiplicity of culture, and ethnic community. Studies also sum, says Sen, "the North-east as the problem area of insurgency, terrorism and political factionalism", and "the North-easterners as 'outsiders'" (viii). The literature from the North-eastern region of India is depicted also as the literature of "real conflict" (Ali 22) and "Poetry from the Troubled Zone" as carried by reviews in the newspapers like The Telegraph.

The poetry from North-east India too mostly represents a wide array of subjects like lamenting, presenting, or reacting to the state of turmoil or corrupt situation of present-day life where terrorism and insurgency are common. Some poetry recalls the past seeking or establishing their identity through folklores and myths. In citing the terrorism, insurgency, folk and mythical elements in their poetry, the poets "find common ground in chronicling their subjective realities and the particular predicament of their people" (Ali 41). JayantaMahapatra in his foreword to the *Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast* writes about this common subject - the values and patriotism for their land shared by the North-eastern poets:

"Undoubtedly it is poetry that unites us. It is the poets who will not keep us away from one another, who will not separate us. This is the strongest feeling one gets in when one reads these poems from the very different regions of the Northeast of our country" (ix).

The seven states of North-east India are inhabited by different people belonging to different tribes and following different religion and culture and speaking different languages, but when it comes to poetry the poets write on the situation in their homelands. This rooted-ness is

what unites the seven states of the North-east and in this rooted-ness is evident the uniqueness of the North-eastern poets of India. This –

“...roots of their beloved land; the roots of their people’s culture; the roots of their times; and most of all, the roots of the past that is “lost” to them, have sunk deep into their psyche. And this is the chief reason why their poetry is found to be bonding- even though it may come from “very different regions...”” (Sen viii).

And sad though it is this is the identity of the North-east, or the identity that has been formed.

But what is so North-eastern about Anjum Hasan’s poetry? Anjum Hasan, famous as a *North-eastern* poet, also writes fiction and criticism in English, has published *Street on the Hill*, her first book of poetry, in 2006. Besides that her poems have been published in various journals like *Kavya Bharti* and *SahityaAkademi*, and anthologies like *Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast* edited by Nongkynrih and Ngangom, *Reasons for Belonging: Fourteen Contemporary Indian Poets* by RanjitHoskote and many more. Her poetry deals with the landscape in the North-eastern town of Shillong in the hill state of Meghalaya. So does writing poems about the North-eastern part of India and about its beauty qualify her to become a North-eastern poet? At this juncture, one is confronted with the larger question which has remained as a query and for which several attempts to come to a conclusion has been made; or even worse still, it had been answered with more questions: who are the North-eastern poets in India? Or how does one identify poets and tag them as (Indian) North-eastern poet, or even as an Indian poet? Can an English man living in India and writing about India be called an Indian writer, or is an Indian living in a foreign land and writing about India called an Indian writer?

It is possible that Anjum Hasan is called a poet from the North-east India because she had spent her childhood in Shillong. Otherwise her poetry does not seem to represent anything North-eastern. She does not quite present the picture of the North-east as her contemporaries like Nongkynrih, Ngangom and Mamang Dai do. But labeling someone as a North-eastern poet only because she writes about the exotic and breathtaking landscapes and hills and waterfalls is not credible enough, as not all poets who write about the river Thames are called English poets. According to A.K. Ramanujan too, the Indian poetry in English can derive strength from going back to the roots and by drawing the artistic sustenance from the heritage, and by visiting his/her childhood experiences in the cultures [of South India in Ramanujan’s case] (Naik 180). Anjum Hasan’s poems have a detached tone from the larger issues like terrorism and insurgency which are evidently rampant in North-east India. Unlike notable poets like Mamang Dai, Robin S. Ngangom, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, Mona Zote and others Anjum Hasan does not lament the past peaceful times and present disintegrating conditions like Ngangom’s *Bad Places* or Mona Zote’s *This is So*. Anjum Hasan does not satirize the political figures like Chandra KantaMurasingh does in his *Of A Minister*. Her poetry does not have that element of sadness or myth or tribal folklore as the core subject as in Mamang Dai’s *The Missing Link* and *The Voice of the Mountain*. In her collection of poetry *Street on the Hill* Anjum Hasan includes a variety of her poems. In the section *Time of My Childhood* she gives an elaborate account of her life in a convent school and about her coming of age. She shares her experience where she is in the threshold of her adolescence and “realize that there are only, only women in the entire school building” and is “astonished at the thought” and does not place her memories and experiences in a specific time and space of that time in the North-east (8-9).

Landscape forms a major part of Anjum Hasan's poetry and brings local observation of her daily life to life. She puts down her series of deeply attentive uninterrupted thoughts as vignettes. For instance the rat pausing at the doorway to the world before stepping into the kitchen, blind kittens weeping beneath the stairs in *June Night in the Middle-class Home*, the monkey trainer with his two hungry monkeys in skirts in *Time of My Childhood*, the soft-spoken *pakorwallah* and the fakir of the *Neighbourhood*, the greasy garages and ice-cream parlours, red dragons surrounding the chairs they occupied demonstrating their boredom in *To the Chinese Restaurant*, *Afternoon in A Beauty Parlour's* whores with their red nail paints on Saturday mornings, sports goods shop owner with his tattooed arms from the *Small Town*, mauve beef in *Mawlai*, and so on. Though Anjum Hasan pens down what she sees and thinks about the things she had seen, there is a disconnection from the rest of the North-east India. The detachment is not only limited to her subjects of poetry but is extended in the tone of her poetry too. They reveal a certain sense of isolation from current poetic scenario pertaining to the happenings in the rest of the states. Anjum Hasan separates herself and the world that she lives in, and also in her observation of mundane objects. The poet addresses the world within another world, like in the opinions of the owner of the shop, in the unfamiliar world behind the netted curtains of *Mawlai*. Anjum Hasan acts both as an inhabitant and observer who is far from experiencing things first hand, as a humane insider and a wondering outsider, who is both unattached and unbothered, and who has a superficial relationship with the subject.

In *To the Chinese Restaurant* they sit among the dragons at a red table near "the curtained-off street-facing window" (Hasan 23). The window and the curtain separate her and the world outside the window. They keep eating to fend away the dangers of the boredom and seek comfort in soup and chopsuey "to fend off the memory of cities unvisited" (Hasan 23). In the poem *Hills* the line: the windows which are a reflection the inside valley also separates nature and the people inside, and gives a mirror reflection of the surrounding; producing a kind of mirage. The poem *Mawlai* demonstrates Anjum Hasan's detached tone greatly. For seventeen years they have been passing through a place called *Mawlai* and have seen things and people from the bus but "we didn't live there and those who lived there didn't care about / the buses passing through at all times of the day", and in a few years' time they would all forget whatever they had seen: "We'll forget what they looked like", but they will want to tell someone about all these and realize that there is nothing much they can fill in the listener with because-

"we never really got off there or bought things from its shops
or stepped into someone's boiled-vegetables-smelling house
to watch the street through netted curtains" (41-42).

In the poem *Kitchen* too Anjum Hasan can see someone else from the place where she is standing in her kitchen "cocooned in the yellow light/ of distance that makes her appear happy and loved" (47).

From the place where she is standing she is assuming the woman standing in her kitchen is content. She does not display any immediate knowledge of if the woman, who probably is her neighbor and since their kitchens seem to face each other, is really happy. Her assumption is based on her role as a detached observer. She then considers the kitchen as a comfort zone and an area where one does not nurture doubts, but towards the end she stirs clear of that zone of comfort as:

“My kitchen will not hold me, will not
teach me the good in repetition.
I will be a doubting woman
with an unreasonable love
for shining adjectives” (48).

In another poem *Holiday* Anjum Hasan puts down the opinion of her friends: “Good, says everyone. Excellent” (52). She describes the small town with shirtless man with the baby boys, large families, and married girls blank with confusion but it is her friends who seem more involved in the logic and excitement, who are turning browner and browner, “full of careful happiness among waterfalls”, who drinks in their hotel rooms and it is they and not her who “presume to touch the heart of the things” (52-53).

In the *Yellow Curtains*, the yellow curtains are a metaphor for happiness, and signify the ultimate divider of the two worlds – the world where she lives and the constricted world outside; the *There* and *Here*:

“There: was, traffic fumes, lanes full of hungry bitches.
Here: bedrooms, soup boiling, 3 a.m. dreams” (64).

Her tone does not address any sort of sadness or lament but sends a message to the readers which reveals that she would rather live and enjoy the comforts and coziness inside her house than become a part of the war, which is prevalent in the North-eastern states of India, or inhale the polluted traffic fumes and walk and witness the hungry bitches or the poverty around. She is shutting her eyes away from the problems in the North-east plainly establishing that “The curtains are an act of selfishness” (64). She will pull up a yellow curtain and isolate herself from the rest of the North-east India rather than show sadness, despair, lament or satirize the condition outside and be a part of the North-east India like the rest of the poets from the region.

There are longings in some of her poems as she is aware of the tyranny of the mundane and limitations of the familiar things around her. In the section *A Place Like Water* Anjum Hasan longs for the real sea. She longs for other place that is worked by the sun and not some place that is wet, a place where time is not in short, a place that is cut off and isolated from the routine prose of the plains, away from dripping taps, fridge food, yesterday’s newspapers, empty clothesline, patch of lawn, smell of fried onions, dreams “of cities unvisited,/ unknown and unknowable affairs,/ people with never-fading lipstick and/ confident gestures” as she feels “Life is not moving” (59-64).

Comparing Anjum Hasan to the contemporary Khasi poets also shows her deviation from the poets of the region. Sumanyu Satpathy in his review describes Desmond L. Kharmawphlang as a folklorist (16). Kharmawphlang’s *Letter from Pahambir* has quintessential Khasi elements in it. Satpathy sums Pahambir as a remote village where the village chief demands an explanation of the reason for their visit from the man from the city, and to this the visitor explains in supplication intending to reassure the native.

Kharmawphlang’s *Letter from Paham Ri-oh Village* too talks of the natives and their culture like *Letter from Pahambir* in his reference of a strong built bare-footed man, rice-beer and fish. Such sense of deep impression is lacking in Anjum Hasan’s poetry. She does not exhibit any of the native elements in them like other native poets. Neither does her poetry display

resistance like poetry by Kharmawphlang. The Khasis had a powerful folk tradition that was destroyed by the conquest, and thus, the poets lament this loss in their poems. Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih's and Robin S. Ngangom's poetry too is rooted like Kharmawphlang's. Ngangom in spite of being a Meitei from Manipur made Shillong his home and had absorbed the cultures and ethnicity of the place and understood the terror-struck city. Ngangom is familiar with the communal clashes and has penned down genuine situation and personal responses to the situations drawing many renowned reviewers' and notable poets, like Jayanta Mahapatra and Makarand Paranjape's, attention. Satpathy rightly puts down Makarand Paranjape's opinion of Ngangom's poetry, which the notable poet and critic refer as the "poetry of a quiet intensity and unhurried melody" (197-199). He also adds Adil Jussawalla's point of view, who, in one of his reviews, commented how Ngangom mixes Khasi and Meitei myths, politics of the present conditions of the North-east India (198).

Another of Hasan's fellow poets, Almond Dean Syiem's, poems laments "the ravishing of his land" as evident from his poem *On Top of a Hill* says Satpathy, again (20):

"I'm standing on top of a hill
which is bare like a naked woman
whose breasts have been uncovered
by a ravishing madman" (Syiem, 174).

Anjum Hasan's contemporaries are laden with a deep sense of responsibility as is evident from their subjects. They deeply reflect and yearn perhaps for peace and serenity. The ravishing madman in Syiem's poetry could refer to the external elements outraging the modesty of the North-east. The sorrow is more than evident and it stands testimony to the native elements in his poetry. Anjum Hasan's poems are devoid of all these native elements. The memory in her poetry reflects a sense of isolation detached from the unifying rooted-ness evident in North-east India's poets. Her poetry is "evocative, emotive, and built around memories of people, and places" (Satpathy 21). He also adds:

"Apart from deeply personal poems, her poetry seems to be least direct. She writes poetry about suffering, love, destitute, and the drunk without naming and sentimentalizing them. Her ideas and emotions are subjected to a zigzag path of metaphors and images..." (21).

Folk elements are an integral part as they establish the identity of the culture of a tribe, which is also an identity of the North-east. But Anjum Hasan's poems do not demonstrate any folk element which is a vital part of North-eastern poetry. Her poetry is also devoid of documentation of conflicts and this subject had been and has been felt, experienced and lived by many of the poets from the region. Anjum Hasan's poetry exempts the ethos and important part of the rubric of literature of "real conflict" of the North-eastern Indian poetry deeming her to be viewed differently from the poets of troubled zone. And this, in turn, reveals that there are certain vital North-eastern elements missing in a poet who has been identified and classified as a North-eastern poet.

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