



Rethinking Landscape In Northeast Indian Narratives With Reference To Anjum Hasan's A Lunatic In My Head

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Abstract

In this paper, the reconfigurations of landscape in Northeast Indian narratives have been explored using the specific work *A Lunatic in My Head* by Anjum Hasan. Eschewing traditional concept of landscape as visual setting, the paper contends that space in the novel works as a narrative agency that dominates the emotional life, identity formation, and stagnation of social life. Located in Shillong, the text does not depict an exotic or idyllic locality but rather a psychologically dense and politically marginal urban zone of inertia, decay, and unfulfilled aspirations. A spatial reading of the novel, the paper delves into how the outer physical space reflects inner disruption, alienation, and waiting that is experienced by the youth and the women characters. Placing the narrative into the context of the postcolonial spatial theory, the research points to the idea of landscape as a tool of soft social criticism, which mirrors the greater issues of marginality and regional invisibility in Indian discourse. Finally, the paper shows how landscape becomes a silent but mighty protagonist in the fiction of Hasan organizing the narrative meaning and postcolonial identity.

Keywords: Landscape, Northeast India, Spatial Narrative, Postcolonial Identity, Marginality, Shillong, Emotional Geography

1. Introduction

In literary analysis landscape has come to be seen not passively as an opposition to the narrative but rather as an active element affecting narrative meaning, emotional experience and identity formation. Traditions in realism tended to think of physical spaces only as spectacle within which human action took place, but modern critique sees space as something culturally constructed and politicized (Lefebvre, 1991; Tally, 2013). Landscape in postcolonial writing especially serves as a locus point of intersection between history, memory, power and marginality as it informs us of how geography is involved in the making of subjectivity (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 2002). This transformation in ornamental landscape to a narrative agency enables researchers to study the impact of places on psychological conditions, social interactions and political awareness in fictional worlds. In the setting of Northeast Indian literature, landscape gains an even more important role with the fact that in the mainstream Indian cultural discourse this territory was historically invisible. The Northeast has been romanticized but constructed and exoticized (Baruah, 2005; Sen, 2017) and at the same time pushed to the periphery. Such representations are more likely to make the region seem picturesque otherness ignoring the realities of stagnation, negligence, and displacement of feelings of the people living in the region. Modern authors of the region and of the area define these simplified images by introducing landscape as a space of lived, multifaceted, psychologically sensitive space instead of a tourist spectacle.

This is a rethinking of landscape which has been critically displayed in *A Lunatic in my Head* by Anjum Hasan. The novel is slightly outside the picturesque of romantic hill stations, with its setting mostly in Shillong, here the town is characterized by emotional stagnation, urban wastelands, and unrealized dreams. The story of Hasan shows that the physical space reflects the inner world of her characters, and it would be reasonable to conclude that the geography is involved in creating the sense of alienation, desire, and discomfort (Hasan, 2007). The streets, houses, rain-dipped landscapes, and deserted neighbourhoods are symbolical forms of psychological claustrophobia, which goes in making the sensations of lives caught in limbo between desire and disappointment.

The novel portrays space as being emotionally oppressive and socially constrictive as opposed to providing landscape as escapist beauty. This practice follows the idea of spatial theorists that place is not disconnected but instead laden with power and relations, historical denial, and cultural significance (Soja, 1989; Massey, 1994). Shillong in the story of Hasan can be viewed as being representative of the wider postcolonial situation in the peripheral areas, between colonial legacies, unsuccessful modernity, and mobility. The silence of the town, routine and nothing to do with are the determinants of futility of the characters, especially the young and the educated ones, who have a vision of escaping but cannot move out of the known geography. Moreover, the theme of landscape and gender experience also clash in the novel. The restricted emotional life of women, mainly by social requirements, is emphasized in domestic interiors and narrow streets where women have limited emotional lives and the physical space structure (McDowell, 1999). Landscape, therefore, is a mute imposer of cultural values, to strengthen emotional submission and restricted self-expression.

The work by Hasan serves to further a more extended reimagining of the Northeast Indian fiction, which escapes exoticism and deals with space as a space of lived reality, imbued with the richness of the psychological and political suggestion. The paper thus claims that the role of a landscape in the story of *A Lunatic in My Head* is an active agent of the narration that shapes emotion, identity and social criticism. By performing a close textual analysis, the study aims to show how the reconsideration of landscape can be used to have a better grasp of marginality, stagnation, and postcolonial subjectivity in the Northeast Indian narratives.

2. Northeast India and Literary Marginalization

The Northeast Indian region has long been a marginal place in the Indian English literature, geographically and imaginatively. Historically, mainstream literary stories revolved around urban cities like Delhi, Bombay, and Calcutta and the Northeast has been underrepresented, as it is either stereotyped as insurgent, as tribal, or picturesque remoteness (Misra, 2011). This peripheral visibility is a reflection of the more general political and cultural location of the region in the Indian nation-state in which the region has often been perceived as a frontier region and not as a cultural zone. Consequently, the Northeast Indian landscapes have been romanticized or silenced in literature instead of studied as social environments of life to be lived in, historically, neglected, and facing daily challenges (Dutta, 2015). Postcolonial commentators believe that literary marginalization portrays unequal power relations when it comes to knowledge production where majority regions dominate the visibility of the narratives whereas the peripheral spaces are culturally suppressed (Said, 1993). The fact that the Northeast is not a central part of literary discourse, therefore, becomes a kind of symbolic erasure. When it does emerge it is usually made in outsider terms that focus on natural beauty or political upheaval overlooking emotional facts, urban stagnation and social complexity. The representations make the region an adventure or conflict arena instead of a humanized area of normal lives (Baruah, 2013). Such selective visibility is part of cultural invisibility because it deprives the people of the region of depth of narratives and social voice. Landscape is very instrumental in the articulation of this marginalization. Physical setting in the Northeast depicts stagnated progress, financial withdrawal, and emotional confinement in numerous stories. The lack of mobility literal and social in the inhabitants is often represented in the form of hill towns and the remote roads, and the deteriorating urban spaces. Instead of the symbol of peace or purity, the landscapes are used as a metaphor of political desertion and restricted chances. The lack of fast life, the deserted open spaces, and the monotony of the daily routine demonstrates the involvement of geography with stagnation as opposed to providing the escape (Misra, 2011).

This is eloquently portrayed in *A Lunatic in My Head* by Anjum Hasan, in which Shillong is seen not as a beautiful hill station but as a town that is in emotional and financial stasis. The emptiness of streets, the repetitiveness of routine, the decay of colonial buildings all convey a greater tone of historical forgottenness. The scenery represents a postcolonial state where pledges of development have not been made to pass as people are stuck in spaces that do not promise much change (Hasan, 2007). It is with this description that the novel reveals how regional marginalization is imprinted to the very space of the physical. Making the foregrounding

of stagnation and emotional weight, Hasan challenges hegemonic exoticized images of the region. The Northeast is not depicted as a romantic frontier, as it is in the novel, but as a socially real place influenced by neglect, paucity of opportunity, and even dampened ambitions. This is a pivotal change in the way of reconsidering the representation of marginalized areas and the approach to them in Indian English literature. It underlines the fact that invisibility is not merely lack but a deformed presence where the landscapes are perceived but not experienced.

3. Shillong as a Space of Emotional Confinement

In *A Lunatic in My Head*, Anjum Hasan makes Shillong an urban postcolonial city that is not vibrant or growing but rather still, battered and stagnant. Even though the town in the novel is historically influenced as an establishment of a colonial hill station, the town also symbolizes a suspended present where modernity has not yet fulfilled its promises. The unresponsive streets, old architecture and low levels of social mobility are some of the factors that induce the mood of stagnation, which heavily weighs on the psychological lives of the characters (Hasan, 2007). Instead of being a neutral place, Shillong turns out to be an emotionally restraining place that prevents movement, ambition and release of emotions. Spatial theorists assert that postcolonial towns usually reflect failed modernity in which colonial infrastructures continue to exist in their present state with no meaningful adjustment which generates the ambience of disappointment and disillusionment (Lefebvre, 1991). The city of Shillong in the novel is a representation of this condition as it is not economically dynamic and socially changing. The town seems to be caught between colonial history and a troubled future and the people living in it are left hanging between their routine and unfulfilled expectations. The characters have fantasies of being out of the dilemma, becoming successful and finding emotional satisfaction, but are physically and psychologically confined within the same small areas, which makes this feeling of paralysis even stronger (Hasan, 2007). Shillong is also emotionally desegregated by the lack of the stimulating public life. In contrast to the metropolis of India in English fiction that is a place of opportunity and mobility, the landscape of Shillong is characterized by silence and isolation. Such spatial silence does not bring tranquility but creates monotony, irritation, psychological suffocation. Both roads and houses turn into places of waiting instead of acting, as the characters can do nothing to move forward in relationships, career, and personal goals (Dutta, 2015).

4. Nature and Atmosphere as Psychological Landscape

The physical aspects of rain, fog and the hills around serve not to produce any feeling of comfort or aesthetic enjoyment but rather to make the mind more tense and uneasy. In opposition to conventional literary depiction of hill landscapes as something relaxing and soothing, the novel introduces nature as something pressing, closing and even emotionally oppressive. The continuous rain and fog make people feel that they have no clear view and they are emotionally in suspension, which reflects the confusion, indecisiveness, and inner conflicts in characters (Hasan, 2007). This way, nature becomes entangled with the experience of the psyche as opposed to being an aesthetic backdrop of the experience. Shillong is more than once characterized by wetness,

darkness, and closeness, something that adds to the sense of emotional suffocation experienced by the characters. Rain does not bring the feeling of freshness but rather it is used to represent the dullness and unavoidability as this increases the sense of being stuck in the loop of time waiting and getting disappointed. The fog which surrounds the hills obscures the view, and this is indicative of emotional ambiguity and the impossibility to see a bright future. With these natural tropes, the novel projects the turmoil of the inner world, making landscape reflect psychological instability instead of the place of romantic flight.

Literary landscapes according to environmental critics tend to serve as emotional extensions of character consciousness on mood and perception (Buell, 2005). The story of Hasan is an excellent example of this kind of relationship as it gives the atmospheric conditions the power to control the tone of emotion. The grey hue of the surrounding is constant just as the emotional state of the characters is not very active, and there are very little happy moments. Nature in this case hardly finds any solution but increases isolation, underlining the mental burden of occupying the socially stagnant area.

5. Landscape, Waiting, and Failed Mobility

In my Head by Anjum Hasan, landscape is finally not an inactive background scenario, but rather a silent, yet potent story-teller initiating the emotional life, social experience, and postcolonial identity in the Northeast Indian fiction. The novel shows how geography is actively involved in creating psychological enclosure and stagnant aspirations through the depiction of the stagnation of urban spaces, the emaciated urban zones, the closing hills, and the constant rain as well as the emotionally limiting domestic environments of Shillong. Space practices normalize waiting routines, enforce gendered restrictions and indicate more extensive histories of political dismissal and cultural marginalization. Instead of providing either escape or romantic beauty, the landscape increases loneliness, uncertainty and inner turmoil, making the environment a continuation of character awareness. Through fighting exoticized images of the Northeast and showing it as a lived and emotionally charged social world, Hasan reclaims the place as a stereotyped image and preempts the human realities of the place. The novel therefore conforms to the spatial and postcolonial critical methodologies that understand landscape as a socially constructed and ideologically charged space that discloses the place as a power relation, historical abandonment, and emotional outcome. In the end, landscape in the story also serves as a mute protagonist because it influences identity, emotional rhythm, and a hint of social criticism, which is rather subtle yet powerful. It is with this rethinking of space that the novel broadens our perception of Northeast Indian narrative in that geography turns out not just to be where stories take place, but to be an active producer of meaning, subjectivity and marginal experience in the current Indian writing.

landscape is turned into a very strong image of suspended life, as the physical immobility reflects emotional and social stagnation of characters. Shillong life is lived by following the same patterns of going to the same workplace, coming back home, and walking up and down the same silent streets following a pattern of waiting instead of moving. Such repetitive motion turns space into the location of emotional stasis where all perspectives of personal development, love, and financial progress are constantly delayed. Escape to bigger

cities or fantasy relations are often sought by characters but they seldom come true and this further supports that mobility is always postponed (Hasan, 2007). The geographical isolation of the town that is encircled with hills and characterized by the lack of opportunities serves as the tangible impediment to the development whereas the emotional tone of the town exacerbates the frustrational and hopeless sentiments. Postcolonial space scholars observe that such neglected spaces tend to be in a state of arrested development with contemporary desires having no structural channels of actualization (Baruah, 2013). This state is brightly expressed in the novel where waiting turns into one of the primary ways of life instead of a transitional state. Time appears to extend beyond measure and space is devoid of opportunities to alter anything and thus, making the routine of life an experience of survival rather than activity. Landscape, therefore, contributes to the phenomenon of the psychological paralysis by the fact that landscape constantly supports the impossibility of the movement forward. In tying space to deferred dreams and routine, Hasan introduces Shillong as not just a town but as a state of living in stasis, where geography itself helps to keep people emotionally locked up and socially inactive, to represent the intensive human price of marginalization in Northeast Indian life.

6. Challenging the Exotic Image of the Northeast

In *A Lunatic in My Head*, Anjum Hasan is resolute in opposing the hegemonic exoticism of Northeast India which has tended to define popular Indian imaginaries. The area is often portrayed by travel literature, mass media, and even literature as a scenic border characterized by hilly terrain, green landscapes, tribalism, and peaceful seclusion thus turning it into an aesthetic spectacle instead of a socialized space that is inhabited (Dutta, 2015). These images alienate landscape to the realities of its history and politics and commodify it as an image to foreigners. The gaze is interrupted by Hasan story because it prefigures boredom, emotional weariness, and stagnation rather than picturesque view. The hills, the rain and the mist are literally there, but they no longer have romantic glamour they are now endowed with psychological depth, which further isolates the protagonist and creates turmoil within him (Hasan, 2007). The Shillong in the novel is not Shillong in a tourist postcard but a town characterized by little to do, unfulfilled dreams, crumbly structures and muted dreams. The story makes the region look more like people than exotic stereotypes, since the author concentrates on the mundane lives of people, the poor relationships, and how desperate the youth are without any meaning to live. Postcolonial critics say that exoticism is a more oblique version of marginalization in that it aestheticizes difference and fails to acknowledge structural inequality (Said, 1993); the depiction that Hasan gives to the landscape puts it in the experience of life and emotional conflict. The Northeast is not mystified and romanticized but is made complex, imperfect and socially real. With this down-to-earth description, the novel takes back a narrative power of representation of the region, and turns the spectacle into a subject. By doing so, it compels the reader to engage with the emotional and social textures of the life in the Northeast to display the landscape that is no longer based on fantasy but rather on the lived experience of endurance, aspiration, and silent disillusionment.

7. Conclusion

Landscape, as the silent but very strong narrator, comes out in *A Lunatic in My Head* by Anjum Hasan as neither a passive backdrop but as a force that is not only the driving force of emotional life, social experience and postcolonial identity but it is also a force within the Northeast Indian fiction. The novel, through the image of the stillness in Shillong, the urban decay, the sealing hills, the sideways rain and the restrictive domestic interiors shows how geography plays an active role in creating psychology of confinement and stagnation. Space practices normalize waiting routines, solidify gendered constraints, and incorporate greater histories of political marginalization and cultural minoritization. Instead of providing escape or romantic beauty, the landscape adds to the feelings of loneliness, uncertainty, and inner conflict, and turns the environment into a continuation of character consciousness. Defying exoticized images of the Northeast, and making it come alive as an emotionally complex social world, Hasan reclaims the region as a grey area and prefigures its human realities. The novel therefore follows spatial and postcolonial critical practices that consider landscape as a socially constructed and ideologically wrought space, exposing how place can be powerful, historically abandoned and sentimental. Finally, in the story, landscape is used as an eloquent hero that defines identity, guides the emotional rhythm, provides minor but deep social commentary. The novel broadens our concept of Northeast Indian stories through this rethinking of space which shows that geography is not only a site of narratives but a constitutive entity that creates meaning, subjectivity and marginal experience in the current Indian literature.

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