

V. Manimekalai, Research Scholar. School of English and Foreign Languages GRI-DU

Anjum Hasan gives a peek into Shillong in the very first page of her debut novel *Lunatic in My Head*. From the dull and dreary weather that weighs down on its residents, who hardly venture out of their house, to the multi-cultural society that Shillong is and in spite of the tension caused by it, people still not wanting to let it go, makes the town "a context and a character in itself." (Johny ML, *Artconcerns.com*, Aug 2008) The novel "is the reflection of the soul of the place through the eyes of three characters." (Rehman, *hindustantimes.com*, Feb 17, 2011)

As one of the lead characters in the novel, Firdaus Ansari takes a walk after a rain-washed afternoon in Shillong, the pine trees around her drip "slow tears" (LMH, 9) and film posters turn mushy. The town is almost always rainy or misty. So the environment is generally lethargic. Hasan herself has admitted "I can't remember what I did with my youth except wait for something to happen, write bad poetry and laugh." (Singh, *jaiarjun.blogspot.com*, Dec 23, 2007) The youth in *Lunatic in My Head*, are indecisive and do not think much about the future "waiting for many years now for someone or something to show them the way." (LMH, 66)

Shillong takes over the novel. It is not only the place in which the novel is set in. It is a character that lives with the people. The town has become a trap not only for Hasan's lead characters, Firdaus, Aman and Sophie, but also for almost everyone who live there. "Shillong did that to people [...] – preserved them in its Shillong-flavoured timelessness – the same rumours, the same gossip, the same petty jealousies. The scale of the town corresponded to the scale of people's imaginations." (LMH, 66) Hasan says that it might be due to people from different parts of the country living together in this town. "They didn't fit and they hadn't noticed...." (Singh, *jaiarjun.blogspot.com*, Dec23, 2007) Like the Das family – the wife, a Punjabi and husband, a Bengali – who moved here due to social ostracism, the Moondy family, who are basically from Uttar Pradesh, Aman's friends, Bodha, a Bengali, Ribor, a Khasi (the majority tribe in Shillong), Sarak Singh, the Bhojpuri *aloo-muri* vendor, Elsa Lyngdoh, the kind Khasi landlady and Max, the militant Khasi. Nobody wants to leave Shillong. But the co-existence of the Khasis and the dkhars [meaning outsiders in the local language] has been quite an issue for a long time. Due to this and the lack of opportunities in this small town, many people have been forced out of it.

Firdaus, Aman and Sophie – all dkhars – though they were born and brought up in Shillong, feel they do not belong there. "Firdaus found that she longed for Shillong even as she lived there, even though she had lived there all her life." (LMH, 101) So, even though she has her grandfather living with her and a steady boyfriend, Ibomcha, a carefree Manipuri youth, she still feels lonely in the town. And one thing she does not like about the town is gossip. Her colleagues at college discuss their private issues without any inhibition. Discussions on cheating husbands and repulsion for tribals annoy her. Even Aman hates this, "how rumours got trapped in the webs of their own creation and hardened into petty little things that everyone know but no one acted on." (LMH, 19) He could not do much about the happenings in Shillong either and matters concerning his own life. With his books and notes lying open on the table and his favourite rock star's faded picture on the wall "The room reflected him back to himself." (LMH, 68) He wants to leave the town and do something with his life, but something stops him from doing it – "the town's clear night air, cold and spiked with the smell of wet pine trees. This town, he thought, longingly." (LMH, 65) He remains this way until he is forced to leave. Aman is never treated differently, as an outsider, by his friends. But he is still not sure of his place in Shillong, "an encroacher, a permanent guest of the hills-people, or someone who belonged here because he had never lived anywhere else? (LMH, 36)