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Rescuing the Repressed: Emancipatory Possibilities of "Everyday" in Anjum Hasan's *Street on the Hill*

Nabanita Paul
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8409-6155
Research Scholar, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, India

Abstract

In an interview with Sumana Roy, Anjum Hasan told, "The lyrical expression of the ordinary attracts me." (Hasan) In poem after poem of the anthology *Street on the Hill* (2006), we find Hasan exploring the solitary and ordinary lives of the people, which go unnoticed most of the time. Hasan seems to rescue the routinized landscape of everyday life, replete with a deadening force of familiar boredom, from the sea of oblivion in her anthology. Marxist philosopher Henry Lefebvre, in 1947, came up with a prophetic note saying everyday life was being colonized by the commodity, by a "modern" postwar capitalism. The present paper aims to assess everyday life as portrayed by Hasan along the Lefebvrian line of arguments and thus explore if there lies any emancipatory possibility from the clutch of capitalist colonialism. By referring to every "insignificant" detail of ordinary life in the poems, the paper would go in search of the epic in the ordinary current study.

Keywords: Everyday, urban space, capitalism, festivals and gender.

Introduction

Looking for a single definition of the phrase "literature from Northeast India" is a futile attempt since the diversity of the region defies easy definition. Various writers like Harekrishna Deka and Temsula Ao expressed their discomfort with the term "Northeast India" at different points in time. In an article titled "Northeast Identity: An Artificial Construct", Kamaljit Deka contends:

> I disqualify the term "Northeast" as it is a meaningless neologism. Simply put, the Northeast consists of seven different states (now gone up to eight with the inclusion of

> Sikkim), distinguished by different characteristics. So why put in the "Northeast" qualification? The fact is, the "Northeast" category is an artificial construct, drawn up by the British as an artefact of convenience to lump the disparate groups. The "Northeast", by all means, is a geographical concept and nothing more (Deka).

So the hasty attempt at lumping together different sets of literature under the rubric of "Northeastern literature" is an injustice to the wide variety of literature produced in that region. Poetry, among all forms of literature from that region, is one of the most preferred ones. While delineating the terrain of English poetry of the region, Robin S Ngangom, a famous poet of Manipur, discerned an emerging tradition that is alternative to the detached, formal, craft-driven poetry of the metropolitan poets of the 1960s and their present-day descendants. The poetry of the "Northeast", Ngangom argues, ". . . can be 'statemental' in comparison to the verbally-dazzling metropolitan artefact, rooted against the alienated stance of modernist city poets, autobiographical as against the impersonal" (Ngangom). In an attempt to distinguish traits of "Northeast poetry" written in the English language, Ngangom, contrary to other scholars' rejection of "homogenization" in the name of the "Northeast", further falls under the trap of essentialization. As a result, the traits, which he rejected as the modernist urban sensibility of "Pound-Eliot academy", are found to be addressed by some distinguished poets of the land in their works. Anjum Hasan being one of them, took a dip into the "deracinated, culturally uprooted cosmopolitans cast adrift in a sea of exotic arts and cultures" (Ngangom). By debunking the age-old charge that "Northeast" poets are unduly obsessed with the poetry of politics and brutality, Hasan ventured to take interest in the aesthetics of the everyday. Dissociating herself consciously from a group of writers who had a long history of political subjugation, oppression and violence, Hasam unequivocally declared: ". . . while living in

Shillong, I'm not interested in marginality worn as a badge of honour" (Goswami). Hence, instead of showing her overt concern for issues like insurgency and the region's long history of oppression and violence, Hasan chose to reflect on her ordinary lived reality of being a small hill town girl, the history and architecture of the land, the people and their negotiation with everyday lives. This paper is an attempt to unravel the underlying philosophical base of Hasan's deceptively simple portrayal of the ordinary through Marxist reading.

The Poetics of Everyday Urban Life

The notion of "everyday" in Hasan's poetic universe is not to be confused with the commonly used phrase "daily life", the concept of which is devoid of temporality to some extent. In the context of Hasan's writing, the term "everyday" is to be understood as a critical concept capable of theorising the banal, trivial, ordinary and repetitive characteristics of life under the colonization of capitalism. An imperfect English translation of *la quotidienne*, the concept of "everyday", according to French philosopher Henry Lefebvre, denotes the repetition, uneventfulness and banality of daily life. For Lefebvre:

> the word *everyday* designates the entry of . . . daily life into modernity: the everyday as an object of a programming . . . whose unfolding is imposed by the market, by the system of equivalences, by marketing and advertisements. As to the concept of "everydayness", it stresses the homogenous, the repetitive, the fragmentary in everyday life (qtd. in Butler 24).

By focusing on the micro-structures of everyday lived experience in the poems of the anthology, Hasan tried to discover the possibility of "everyday" in dismantling the artificial and alienated existence of modernity. Lefebvre experimented with the Marxist notion of alienation in *Critique of Everyday Life* and showed how bourgeois ideology is constantly in operation to

produce an artificial and alienated existence of modernity. By drawing on Marx's notion of "fetishism of commodities", he explained how the relations between people could be masked by objects, under conditions of alienation. People act out their lives according to capitalist norms and values without being aware of the whole process. This "estrangement" of people from themselves can be described theoretically by the categories of psychological and moral forms of alienation, along the Marxist line. With the evolution of complex capitalist structures, the concept of alienation has also broadened to include social relations. By grounding on the lack of authenticity in an alienated mode of living, Lefebvre discovers the positive potential of everyday life. Trebitsch's evaluation of Lefebvre's concept of everyday life seems important in this regard:

> [Everyday life] is not simply a residuum . . . it is both a parody of lost plenitude, harmony and unity and the last remaining vestige of that plenitude . . . [The] critique of everyday life is a dual reading, at once a rejection of the inauthentic and the alienated, and an unearthing of the human which still lies buried therein (qtd. in Butler 26).

In the anthology, Hasan tries to portray a lost time and a space that she has left behind in the course of her busy life. The town she portrays in the poems is not a mere geographical locale that came into existence directly from the heads of bureaucrats and engineers, but it is an entity that is inseparably linked with the lives of the people who inhabit it. Hasan beautifully describes the process through which a town, a physical location develops a character of its own by focusing on the lives of the people, their aspirations, their habits, their frustrations and their happiness. In the poem "Time of My Childhood," Hasan tries to recreate her childhood days of the late 1970s and '80s through some vivid spatial images like "monkey trainer,/ with his two hungry monkeys in skirts all the time", men running sweet shops in faded black ties and the women who led "wordless lives." (Hasan 10) The characters mentioned here have their distinct

spatial entity but together they portray a long-lost time. Hasan, with sheer dexterity, uses some spatial signifiers to recreate the idea of that past time, the signified. In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre reflects on the inseparable relationship between the spatial and the temporal by saying "time is known and actualized in space, becoming a social reality by virtue of spatial practice. Similarly, space is known only in and through time" (Lefebvre 219).He developed a more comprehensive approach to space and its implications for social analysis. In this volume, Lefebvre dealt with multiple dimensions of space and rescued it from its monochromatic definition as a geographical or physical location or as a commodity. He defined "space" as a "political instrument, part of the relations of production and property ownership, and a means of creative and aesthetic expression" (Butler 37).

Lefebvre established a conceptual triad that expresses the complex interaction and dialectical unity between the mental, physical and social dimensions of space. The typology consists of three elements: "representations of space", "spaces of representation" and "spatial practices". "Representations of space" refers to conceptualized space that is connected to formal and institutional apparatuses of power. It refers to forms of abstract knowledge which lie in the head of planners, bureaucrats, social engineers and cartographers. Being the dominant space of society, ideology, power and knowledge lurk within its representation. On the other hand, "Spaces of representation" are directly lived spaces, the spaces of everyday experience. They embrace the clandestine sides of life which elude systematic conceptualization. They could have been potential sites of resistance and counter-discourses that have either escaped the purview of bureaucratic power or refused to acknowledge its authority. According to Lefebvre, "spatial practices" are the physical practices manifested through everyday ordinariness, networks and pathways. As a means to reproduce the totality of social life, "spatial practices" involve both

individual and collective participation in social life. They structure lived reality by taking into its fold social rhythms and routes and networks that connect places with people, images with reality, and work with leisure. "Spatial practices", says Lefebvre, intend to ensure societal cohesion and continuity by embracing production and reproduction, conception and execution, the conceived as well as the lived. Yet, he insists, this cohesiveness does not imply coherence. Therefore, it is observed that the distinguishing line between conceived, perceived and lived spaces is blurred as far as the praxis of spatial experience is concerned. Lefebvre notes how lived experience invariably gets annihilated by the conceived, how a conceived abstract space is gradually overpowering the concrete, the realm of the lived. Hasan's debut poetry collection *Street on the Hill* is full of images collected from clandestine sides of life. With her lyrical expression of the ordinary, Hasan seems to embrace the loci of passion, action and lived reality. In the first poem of the anthology, "June Night in a Middle-class Home", Hasan portrays stories which would otherwise remain elusive in the grand narrative of cities. She brings into the scene the stale and prosaic picture of a middle-class home in the deep hour of the night.

. . .the girls who strewn in the darkness

don't dream of the grand things anymore,

no more kisses in the hollows of their throats

from the wordless mouth of the Future (Hasan8).

The shattering of dreams and curbing of the passion of a middle-class girl are only images portraying the disruptions in the social routines of modernity. Hasan continues to portray the unsaid stories of the children who turn fifteen in the night, and their diaries burning with "dread and impatience" as they cannot break through the shackles of their routined lives. She metaphorically describes the constraints of life in a small town in the following lines:

The only thing like life is pushing

Under the skin of the still potato,

Inside the zinnia's tight bud (8).

The poem "Ordinary Days" also describes "the everyday" in a small town, where life moves slowly and does not offer much excitement and novelty.

We are the sum of our ordinary days
we feel boredom like rage but without
its bright burning pleasure
we lookout at the patch of lawn, the empty clothesline.
we know books are like maps that show you
but don't take you there
we know drink and fortitude and other people like us
who feel they are growing through the roof of this town. (20)

Nothing can make them free of this boredom, not even the imagination which is momentary in nature. Hence, she writes that books and maps can show one faraway places, but cannot make him or her experience or inhabit them. Although the drudgery of daily life offers no hope for emancipation for the people inhabiting it, the children still expect a Captain Nemo[1] in their dreary lives, who would help them sail through the crisis called life. The urban space, Hasan portrays through various poems of this collection, cannot be restricted to the boundary of either "conceived space" or the "perceived space" but extends the scope and limit of them both. Shillong, the manifested urban space of most of the poems of this collection, is neither only a real space nor only an imagined space but both and beyond at the same time. The city is not only about the concrete manifestation of the spatial structures but also about its abstractions, dreams and aspirations, anxieties and the disappointments of the people living in it. The dull and humdrum life of a small hill town is also reflected in the poem "Mister Language":

in the evening the smells were those

of stale frying and there were

typewriters jangling and crows

to darken the diamond blues of dusk. (11)

The fragmented images are very familiar manifestations of an uneventful everyday life. In most cases, they go unnoticed and evade critical reception. But each image, very significantly, contributes to the making of the city. In short, all these humdrum happenings are the spatial manifestation of the monotony embedded in mundane urban existence. The city is also produced through the unconscious, the unknown and the unimaginable. Hasan beautifully captures the essence of it in the following lines:

That is how I grew:

jumping on evenings to make them stay longer

in my hill-fortified city of cars, and waiting,

face pressed between bars, for something nameless,

forgotten, remembered from the womb (11).

Dream, imagination, art and companionship can offer a momentary escape from the confinement and restriction of the city but cannot offer a permanent refuge. Quite diligently, Hasan separates distinct moments from the ambiguity of everyday life. In the poems, Hasan seems to manifest “the moments" that intensify everyday life, its performance, communication, and enjoyment. The pleasure of moments can only overcome stale binaries of levity and seriousness by making “festivals” of everyday monotony. In the concluding chapter of volume 2 of the *Critique of Everyday Life*, Lefebvre defines "moments" as vehicles for recuperating the discontinuity of social life. "Moments" are disruptions in the alienated existence of social life. Therefore, in that

sense, it can be understood in terms of its opposition to alienation: while "alienation" refers to an absence of human connection, moments fully signify vibrant human presence. Daily life is repetitive in its essence. It is filled with monotony yet, simultaneously, it changes imperceptively thanks to planned obsolescence and unplanned interaction. The poem “Neighbourhood" bears witness to it:

> On the narrow steps leading
> to our gate, the pakoriwallah from Bihar is often found
> kissing an anonymous women at night. (14)

Through an “amazing act” of kissing, the pakoriwallah defamiliarizes his familiar surroundings. The space, temporarily appropriated by the pakoriwallah, serves as a haven for their brief rendezvous. Pakoriwallah’s amorous act with an anonymous girl creates a rupture, a disruption in the orderly discourse of city life. The inhabitants of the cities are trying to roll back the hyper-commodification of urban life by promoting alternative, radically democratic, socially just, emancipatory and sustainable forms of urban life. That is why they “speak in stories:/raconteurs, mimics, chroniclers all,/ with vast memories and no name-plates (17). Lefebvre believes, it is only through re-enlivening collective memories and stories that a community can hope of sustaining itself, by claiming the city as their own. One should take everyday life as a continuing creative process whereby people produce themselves as humans along with their conditions of life. Everyday life, in that sense, is pregnant with possibilities for changing the situation:

> There are determined biological, historical, economic, and sociological conditions (which are taken over and modified by their creative praxis), which constitute the "real" in its accepted sense. There are processes, which contain the evolution and forward movement of the real. These conditions and processes point towards possibilities (Lefebvre 110-11).

In the poem “My Folks”, Hasan is in search of that emancipatory possibility that lies hidden in the everyday ordinariness:

> We look through an open window
> and like the predictable movies,
> the leaves and sky melt and signal
> that we’re making a blurry journey
> to another place and time (17).

The everyday banality, therefore, is coming up as a site of a disalienating return to symbolic values, which remains repressed in the society of bureaucratically controlled consumption. The mechanism of dreams may be a wonderful medium to give release to desires pent up during the long periods of everyday work and drudgery. The poem “Boats” echoes the same ideas:

> You will dream me clear out
> Of wrinkles and worries.//
> This is how we imagine it:
> faraway houses turned to huge boats by our love,
> sailing, with all the lights of hopefulness,
> down the dusty rivers of the streets. (23)

The collective imagination of the people recompenses the tedium of daily life. Through the colour of imagination, inflexible streets are paired as flowing rivers and unchanging houses into sailing boats. In the first volume of the *Critique of Everyday Life*, Lefebvre focuses in detail on the role of festivals as an escape route from the banality and repetition of everyday life. He shows how social bonds were traditionally strengthened by communal participation in sport, dance, feasts, music and masquerades:“In celebrating, each member of the community went

beyond himself. . . and in one fell swoop drew on all that was energetic, pleasurable and possible from nature, food, social life and his own body and mind" (Lefebvre 135). In the poem "Where I Now Live", the speaker's earnest longing to be part of the "sweat and sunshine,/ the vinegar and blood of people together anywhere", "the music and mercury,/ the cut and thrust of people together anywhere", testifies the same impulse (35).By participating in the festivals, the subjects are symbolically sacrificing themselves to the power of nature, the Dionysiac spirit of life. By referring to the theory of moments, Lefebvre describes, "the material and spiritual grounds for the festive lie within everyday life and spring forth in an intense and magnified form through particular moments" (Butler 34).

Urban Experience, Gaze and Gender Intervention

Any discussion on urban space would remain incomplete without an adequate dose of gender interventions in it. Gender remains a neglected focus for theory and practice in shaping cities. The gendered dimension of the urban spatial discourse reveals a more complex urban arena in which rights are negotiated or practised. In her poetic universe, Hasan is found to develop the feminist critique of an urban theory which was developed in 1970. She tries to develop how women can access the city. Throughout the anthology, she seems to put much emphasis on a greater engagement with everyday spatial practices, which she thinks, provides critical insights into how claims to urban space and the exercise of rights are inherently gendered. The urban experience of every woman was homogenized by patriarchy and the diversified gendered realities of class, race, age, ethnicity, and sexuality were vastly ignored. In reality, their responses to the patriarchal urban existence have always been variegated. Some accepted their imposed inferiority to the men folk as something "normal" and remained confined in the "private space" of domesticity; some were afraid of participating in the changing "public

space"; some grabbed this opportunity to be independent in the city and some challenged the narrow stereotyped lives they were previously constrained to. Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* offers a framework to understand how the production of space is accomplished through the gender-assigned everyday practices of city dwellers. For him, the physical act of "walking" creates a spatial text in the same way the act of speaking and writing creates a narrative. The act of walking unconsciously plays a vital part in writing about the city. This act of "walking" is also a gendered spatial practice and its implications differ from men to women. While a pedestrian male has the privilege of moving unseen, unnoticed and anonymously in the crowd and at the same time being the spectator of the streets; a female pedestrian is never the spectator but becomes the spectacle herself. She never possesses the privilege to move unseen and be acommon streetwalker. A woman's presence in the public space has always been a kind of trespassing or transgression on her part. Her perpetual struggle is to escape the status of being the corporeal "other" and the subject of the ubiquitous "male gaze".

The poem "The Pregnant Women" bears witness to how the spatial practices of a woman are restricted in the city space. The pregnant woman in the poem seems to subscribe to the age-old dogma that a woman is safe in the public space as long as she is with her male companion.

Earlier there was a man and it was different.

They would make accidents happen

to each other's bodies, even on the street.

Now she's alone and doesn't care.

She doesn't want to know if the boys,

the really young ones, are staring hard

at the whiteness of her face

in the clouded evening.

But the salesmen still look at her.

They always look, the salesmen. (26)

Thus the pregnant woman becomes the subject of the gaze of the salesmen in the poem. The mechanical city life is so confining for women that there is hardly any room for them to exercise the free flow of their imaginations, dreams and aspirations. The rigidity of urban capitalist norms is a hindrance not only to the physical movement of the women around the city but also to their mental movement, and their daring adventures in dreams. The poem "June Night in a Middle-class Home" features the same facts:

But the girls who lie strewn in the darkness

don't dream of grand things anymore,

no more kisses in the hollows of their throats

from the wordless mouth of the future (8).

But despite this rigid wall of confinement, there are occasional releases of those pent-up desires, dreams and aspirations. In the poem "Coming of Age in a Convent School", the girls "walk(ing) around school with moles/ carefully drawn above their lips in blue ballpoint ink", desiring to imitate Madonna[2], the queen of pop, in fashion and lifestyle, gives vent to their repressed desires (12). In the dreary desert of the gendered urban space where women are always discriminated against, a beauty parlour appears to be an oasis where a sorority is established.

but here in this small salon where the sunlit dust

enhances the drowsy hum of distant traffic,

where jealousy, men and untruthful mirrors

are denied entrance,

is genuine sisterhood established. (27)

It is the space where the women celebrate their buried vulgar desires. While the gendered urban space always tries to binarize female identity, the beauty parlour celebrates the ensemble of all kinds of women:

A good place to grow old in
the radio crackling in the corner,
the whores coming in the red nails
on Saturday morning, and later:
school teachers, mothers with young sons
who take in everything with the detachment of artists,
sales-girls, girls with hungry eyes. . .(27)

By disclosing their "buried vulgar desire" beauty parlours offer them an opportunity to give an outlet for their imprisoned desire. For those women, the parlours come out as a liberating space in an otherwise colonized urban spatial discourse. All women ensemble inside the beauty parlour is potential enough to disturb the smooth, capitalist, urban discourse of the modern world, though there is no denial of the fact that the beauty parlour itself is a patriarchal, capitalist institution. Therefore, it may be inferred that a close study of the quotidian urban everyday can very well be a potential counter-discursive apparatus in face of mainstream spatial studies colonized by capitalism and consumerism.

Conclusion

“The subject often chooses the writer, instead of the other way around. And the most important subject for a writer, in that sense, is their environment – the place where he or she grew up.” (Khanna 111) Nothing can define AnjumHasan’s temperament as a writer better than these previously quoted lines. The small and specific world AnjumHasan portrays in her debut

poetry collection is the land of her childhood experiences. Therefore, a ride to the poetic world of Hasan is sure to make the readers crippled with nostalgia. Now a question may arise: why does she choose to write about a shadowy way of life in such a small hill town? The answer may be traced in one of her writings itself. In the essay "In Search of AnjumHasan", one can find a restless soul gradually moving towards the periphery but struggling hard to find a centre, to recuperate one's own identity. The poet may have lost herself amid the transformation that her beloved Shillong has undergone over a couple of decades. Therefore, through the verbal kaleidoscope of her poems, the poet is attempting to retreat to the past to find out the meaning of her hollow existence. Be it a back alley or an obscure locality, Hasan seems to feel close to her childhood town with its warts and all, as it is enmeshed with her being, her growing up in a small hill town called Shillong. Therefore, Hasan's attempt to portray the repressed and the clandestine sides of life is another way of rescuing her own identity from the vicious process of dilution.

Notes

1. Captain Nemo was a fictional character created by French novelist Jules Verne. Nemo appears in two of Verne's science fiction, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas* (1870) and *The Mysterious Island* (1875). A scientific visionary, Captain Nemo roams around the seas in his submarine, the Nautilus. The captain is consumed by a hunger for vengeance and hatred of imperialism. The British empire was ultimately revealed as his main antagonist.
2. An American pop legend of the 80s. Apart from her singing talent, she was immensely popular among the youth for her attitude, clothing and controversial lifestyle. Her legacy goes beyond music and has been studied by sociologists, historians and other social

scientists. From a woman of flesh and blood, Madonna turns into a semiotic image which has been diversified in a wide-ranging theoretical stripe from feminism to queer studies.

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Bionote:
Nabanita Paul is currently pursuing her PhD at Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta (CSSSC). Her interest broadly includes Partition Studies, Posthumanism, Urban Studies, Cultural Studies and Postcolonialism. She is also an avid reader of Bengali literature and culture. At present, she is a full time (SACT-I) faculty member of the Department of English, Chakdaha College. She can be reached at nabaneetaa1993@gmail.com

ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8409-6155

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