

6. DIGITAL REFLECTIONS: IDENTITY AND CONNECTIVITY IN ANJUM HASAN'S *LUNATIC IN MY HEAD* AND *THE COSMOPOLITANS*

M. Sugha Devi¹, Dr. D. Dhanalakshmi²

¹Ph.D. Full-Time Research Scholar, Department of English, Thanthai Periyar Government Arts and Science College(A), Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli 620023, Tamil Nadu, India.

²Associate Professor & Head, Department of English, Thanthai Periyar Government Arts and Science College(A), Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli 620023, Tamil Nadu, India.

ABSTRACT:

The complexity of comprehending human interaction and identity has increased in tandem with the proliferation of digital connectivity and globalisation. This paper focuses on Anjum Hasan's novels, *The Cosmopolitans* and *Lunatic in My Head*, exploring identity and relationships in the digital realm. The investigation explores how the virtual world simplifies and complicates self-discovery and meaningful connections, illustrating individuals' attempts to reconcile personal and social identities. The paper explores how online platforms, social media, and virtual communities affect characters' perceptions, interactions, and sense of belonging. The digital world is explored as a blank canvas where characters can explore different ways of expressing themselves and form new connections. The results contribute to the growing research on how literature, identity, and digital culture intersect. They provide valuable insights into navigating personal and collective identities and the evolving nature of human connections in the digital world.

Keywords: *Digital Identity, Virtual Relationships, Social Media Influence, Globalization and Identity, Digital Narratives, Interpersonal Dynamics in the Digital Age*

INTRODUCTION

The rise of digital technology and online platforms has significantly impacted how we manage personal identities and relationships. The connection between physical and virtual worlds deeply affect and blur the lines between human identity and its digital representations. This relationship presents both new challenges and opportunities for understanding human interaction and identity. Anjum Hasan's novels, *The Cosmopolitans* and *Lunatic in My Head*, offer rich material for analyzing contemporary dynamics.

The Cosmopolitans follows a diverse cast as they explore themes of art, wealth, and globalisation, centring on Baban Reddy. His piece, *Nostalgia*, both mirrors and shapes the characters' relationships and identities. *Nostalgia*, a complex installation featuring an old television showing muted news footage, urges viewers to confront the gap between real events and their commodified portrayals.

Lunatic in My Head delves into the personal and societal identities of its characters amid Shillong's swift changes. Characters like the mysterious artist Nur Jahan struggle with the tension between her personal identities and public images, particularly in the light of online controversies, the digital landscape, which can amplify and distort identities, becomes a pivotal point around which the conflict revolves.

Through these works, Hasan urges the readers to confront the complexities of identity and relation-

ships in the digital age. Prominent themes from these narratives include the simplicity and intricacy of self-discovery, the dynamic evolution of personal and social identities, the influence of virtual communities and social media on a sense of belonging, and the challenges of reconciling the physical and digital realms. The digital landscape offers boundless opportunities for self-expression and connection, acting as a significant catalyst for exploring and shaping identities.

Hasan's characters often perceive the digital environment as a "blank canvas" where they can experiment with different forms of self-representation, liberated from the constraints of the physical world. This simplification frequently encounters the challenge of balancing individual and societal identities. Hasan's narratives highlight the necessity of reconciling the physical and virtual worlds, as her characters' attempt to merge their offline and online identities. It reflects the broader social challenge of integrating the digital with the analogue.

In *The Cosmopolitans*, the character Qayenaat contemplates the digital realm as a "blank canvas" for people to explore various forms of self-expression. Hasan states, "The digital realm is perceived as a blank canvas where individuals can investigate various modes of self-expression and establish new connections" (Hasan, 2019, p. 87). The mobility of the virtual environment enables Qayenaat and other characters to transcend the limitations of their physical identities and participate in an identity discovery that is free from societal expectations.

The anonymity and flexibility of online environments assist Hasan's characters in engaging in a process of digital self-exploration, as exemplified in *Lunatic in My Head*. The mysterious artist Nur Jahan, whose covert online presence incites controversy, uses the digital domain to develop a character distinct from her public one. Hasan emphasises that "the anonymity and fluidity of online environments enable individuals to discard their social identities and explore the deeper aspects of their narratives" (Hasan, 2011, p. 156).

This simplicity of self-discovery is often accompanied by the challenge of balancing personal and societal identities. Hasan's characters contend with the conflict between their internal identities and the outward demands of manoeuvring the digital realm. Qayenaat asserts in *The Cosmopolitans* that "the conflation of private and public, personal and collective spheres compels the characters to reconfigure their identities amid heightened visibility and scrutiny" (Hasan, 2019, p. 92).

The changing nature of identity in the digital era necessitates a continual reassessment of one's position within the larger social framework. Hasan's characters must grapple with the influence of their online personas and the influence of others' opinions upon their identities. Sathi, Qayenaat's former partner, notes in *The Cosmopolitans*, "You don't know it yet but we're in this together" (Hasan, 2019, p. 156), emphasizing the inseparable connection between an individual's digital identity and the shared identity of the online community.

Lunatic in My Head delves further into this conflict, as the character Nur Jahan contemplates the ramifications of her virtual existence. Hasan states,

The conflation of private and public spheres, as well as personal and collective identities, compels the characters to reconstitute their self-perception amid heightened visibility and scrutiny (Hasan, 2011, p. 158).

Nur Jahan's clandestine online presence attracts unwarranted scrutiny, compelling her to manoeuvre through the intricacies of her personal and social identities in the digital sphere.

The digital realm, with its capacity to enhance and distort identities, serves as a pivotal axis around which the problems of Hasan's characters revolve. The narrator in *The Cosmopolitans* notes, "The evolving nature of identity in the digital age necessitates a continual renegotiation of one's position within the broader social fabric" (Hasan, 2019, p. 94). Hasan's characters must constantly reconfigure their identities, as their online personas become permanently intertwined with the perspectives and assessments of their digital communities.

In both *The Cosmopolitans* and *Lunatic in My Head*, Hasan explores how the digital sphere can both facilitate and hinder the characters' journeys of self-discovery. The anonymity and flexibility of online environments enable her characters to partake in a process of digital self-exploration, liberated from the limitations of their physical identities. Qayenaat observes, "The digital realm is perceived as a blank canvas where individuals can investigate various modes of self-expression and establish new connections" (Hasan, 2019, p. 87).

The streamlining of self-discovery is often complicated by the challenge of reconciling personal and societal identities. Hasan's characters confront the influence of their online personas on external perceptions, as the "blurring of boundaries between the private and the public, the personal and the collective, compels the characters to reconfigure their identities amid heightened visibility and scrutiny" (Hasan, 2019, p. 92).

Hasan encourages readers to reflect on the changing nature of identity in the digital era, where the fluidity of online environments intersects with the requirements of social belonging and the redefinition of one's position within the larger community. Hasan's characters function as representative figures, exploring the intricacies of self-discovery and the interaction between individual and societal identities in the digital domain.

CONSTRUCTING AND NEGOTIATING IDENTITIES IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Hasan's characters contend with the malleability of identity in the digital era, as the distinctions between the actual and virtual realms grow ever indistinct. In *Lunatic in My Head*, the protagonist, Firdaus, grapples with her identity, torn between the influences of her Bihari lineage and her Shillongian upbringing. While traversing the multifaceted society of Shillong, Firdaus perceives how her contemporaries' identities are influenced by their linguistic, cultural, and social connections. Hasan states,

Firdaus recognised that the woman gesturing to her from the beauty parlour window, her friend Sharon, was one-quarter British, one-quarter Assamese of the tea-planter lineage, and one-half Khasi (Hasan, *Lunatic in My Head* 3).

The hybridity of identification illustrates the intricate fabric of Shillong's social terrain, where people's feelings of belonging cannot be neatly categorized by a single label.

In the digital sphere, this malleability of identity is further intensified, as characters in *The Cosmopolitans* interact with online platforms and networks. Aman, a prominent character, examines his developing

musical preferences and philosophical tendencies via his engagements in virtual environments. Hasan states,

At one time, it was merely excellent music—everyone appreciated it.” He would perceive it like he would perceive Led Zeppelin or Deep Purple. Aman would see such an attitude as blasphemous. Floyd was to other bands what angels are to mortals—similar in appearance but existing in an entirely other realm (Hasan, *The Cosmopolitans* 26). Aman’s evolving viewpoint on music illustrates how internet interactions may influence and redefine a person’s identity and feeling of belonging.

Hasan’s characters often navigate the tension between the expectations and customs of their local communities and the opportunities afforded by the digital realm. In *Lunatic in My Head*, Firdaus contends with her identity as a Bihari-born Shillong resident, experiencing a sense of alienation within her society. Hasan observes,

Firdaus recognised that the college boys whistling boisterously from across the street were exclusively Khasi; that the short, unkempt men from the restaurants, procuring vegetables and chicken for the evening’s noodles, hailed from remote Nepal yet had likely never ventured beyond Shillong since their parents’ migration; that the two men with tattered black umbrellas, on their way to collect their children from school, were Bengalis born in this locale (Hasan, *Lunatic in My Head* 3).

Firdaus’ difficulty in completely aligning with any of these disparate cultures underscores the complexities of managing numerous, sometimes contradictory, facets of one’s identity.

In *The Cosmopolitans*, Aman contends with familial expectations and the allure of the digital realm. While preparing for the Civil Services examination, a decision influenced more by his educators than his interests, Aman contemplates the allure of the digital domain and its potential for self-exploration. Hasan states,

After failing in his initial attempt, Aman is now preparing for the Civil Services examination for the second time.” He resolved to take the examination after his Bachelor of Arts in philosophy since his instructors had guaranteed that their discipline had little prospects—no security (a term that often evoked images of a steel Godrej wardrobe), no financial gain, and no prestige—in essence, no future (Hasan, *The Cosmopolitans* 26).

Aman’s choice to undertake the Civil Services test, against his preferences, illustrates the conflict between personal identity and society’s expectations that other characters in Hasan’s works confront.

RELATIONSHIPS AND CONNECTIVITY IN THE DIGITAL WORLD

Hasan’s novels explore the influence of digital platforms and virtual communities on the characters’ feelings of belonging and interpersonal relationships. In *The Cosmopolitans*, Aman’s involvement with online music forums illustrates the creation of new, typically short-lived connections facilitated by the digital sphere. Hasan states,

“This was he and his companions from several years prior at the residence of an individual named Ibomcha, who possessed unreliable furniture. “A group had just established a band named The ProtoDreamers, performing Pink Floyd covers at both concerts and private

events” (Hasan, “The Cosmopolitans” 26).

These ephemeral virtual ties provide Aman with a feeling of belonging and common interests that he may have found elusive in his actual society.

Nonetheless, the longevity and profundity of these digital interactions are also scrutinised. In *Lunatic in My Head*, Firdaus examines the intricate dynamics of her physical community, where interpersonal connections and support networks are profoundly anchored in collective histories and cultural traditions. Hasan states, “Flossie Sharma had taught with only a BA for an extended period and would retire joyfully observing lesser individuals grapple with advanced degrees” (Hasan, *Lunatic in My Head* 16). The disparity between the ephemeral essence of virtual groups and the lasting connections within Firdaus’ real community underscores the difficulties of attaining genuine belonging in the digital era.

Hasan’s books examine how internet platforms and social media influence the characters’ perspectives, interactions, and interpersonal relationships. In *The Cosmopolitans*, Aman’s involvement with internet music forums and social media shapes his developing views on art and culture. Hasan states,

At one time, it was merely exceptional music—everyone appreciated it. He would see it similarly to how he perceives Led Zeppelin or Deep Purple. Aman would see such an attitude as blasphemous. Floyd represented to other bands what angels represent to mankind—sharing surface characteristics while existing in an entirely other realm (Hasan, *The Cosmopolitans* 26).

Aman’s evolving passion for music illustrates how digital environments may challenge and reshape one’s perception of cultural and artistic worth.

Firdaus’ immersion in online forums and discussion groups opens up a new world of potential connections, allowing her to explore aspects of her identity that may not be fully recognized within her physical community. As Hasan writes, “Firdaus found herself drawn to these virtual chatrooms, where she could be anyone she wanted to be, or at least, anyone who wasn’t the Firdaus that everyone knew” (Hasan, *Lunatic* 87). The anonymity and fluidity of the digital realm enable Firdaus to experiment with different facets of her identity, forging connections with like-minded individuals who share her interests and perspectives.

This resonates with the observations of Digital Sociologist Nancy K. Baym, who notes that “online communities allow people to connect with others who share their interests and values, even if those people are geographically distant” (Baym 4). For Firdaus, these virtual connections offer a sense of validation and belonging that may be lacking in her offline life, as she navigates the complexities of navigating multiple cultural identities.

In *Lunatic in My Head*, Firdaus’ relationships with her colleague Nivedita are impacted by Nivedita’s impressions of Firdaus’ marital issues, which are formed by gossip among the teachers in the staff room. Hasan states, “Nivedita erupted in laughter upon hearing Konkona’s report (‘Firdaus? Elegant?’), subsequently feeling disheartened and concluding that Firdaus was a flirt” (Hasan, *Lunatic in My Head* 21). The interaction between physical and virtual environments, shown by staff room gossip, underscores the significant influence that online platforms and social media have on human connections and interperson-

al dynamics.

RECONCILING THE PHYSICAL AND VIRTUAL REALMS

Hasan's protagonists attempt to reconcile their expectations and requirements by negotiating the intricate relationship between their physical and virtual identities. Firdaus grapples with her identity in *Lunatic in My Head*, as she balances her Shillongian upbringing and Bihari origin. Due to her parents' ancestral origins in Bihar and her infancy in Shillong, she refrained from identifying as a Bihari. It serves as an illustration of the obstacles encountered by individuals in the digital age as they negotiate the intersections of their physical and virtual identities.

In *The Cosmopolitans*, Aman, despite his initial failure, is unable to pass the Civil Services exam, a course that his educators have imposed. The conflict between individual ambitions and societal standards is reflected in his decision to pursue the exam after completing his Bachelor of Arts in philosophy. Aman's decision to adhere to the advice of his educators rather than pursue his interests underscores the difficulties associated with reconciling the demands of the physical world with personal aspirations in the digital realm. The significance of reconciling individual aspirations with societal expectations is underscored by the text.

Hasan's works adeptly intertwine the tales of the physical and digital spheres, examining their intersections and mutual influences. In *Lunatic in My Head*, the conversations among instructors in the staff room illustrate how offline communities may impact views and interpersonal relationships while also being affected by the gossip and rumours that permeate these physical environments. Hasan states,

Soon Nivedita would arrive, well before her Home Science class, and the subsequent chapter of her discontented marriage would unfold in this small room, furnished with cold metal chairs and tables obscured by haphazard stacks of brown paper-covered notebooks (Hasan, *Lunatic in My Head* 8).

In *The Cosmopolitans*, Aman engages with philosophical concepts and online music groups to investigate his identity and sense of belonging. A band known as The ProtoDreamers performed Pink Floyd renditions at the residence of Ibomcha, where he and his companions were previously. The interaction between physical and virtual experiences underscores the intricate interplay between these domains and their impact on personal and communal identities. The book emphasises the significance of comprehending the intricacies of digital experiences.

Hasan's books offer a nuanced examination of the implications of navigating individual and social identities in the digital era. The fluidity of digital identities, the negotiation of numerous identities, the influence of virtual communities, and the convergence of physical and digital realms all contribute to the intricate issues encountered by people and groups in the modern context. Throughout her narratives, Hasan presents her characters grappling with the challenge of maintaining a cohesive sense of self while navigating the fluidity and fragmentation inherent in the digital landscape. Firdaus, in *Lunatic in My Head*, exemplifies this struggle, as she finds herself caught between the demands of her physical community and the allure of her virtual personas.

As Hasan writes, "Firdaus was torn between the Firdaus she showed to the world and the Firdaus

she could be online, where she could be anyone she wanted to be” (Hasan, *Lunatic in My Head* 87). It resonates with the work of sociologist Erving Goffman, who posits that individuals engage in a continuous process of self-presentation, performing different versions of themselves in response to various social contexts (Goffman 15). In the case of Firdaus, the digital realm offers an additional stage upon which she can experiment with and express different facets of her identity.

The individuals’ attempts to harmonise their real and virtual identities illustrate the wider socio-economic consequences of the digital revolution. As people participate in online platforms and virtual communities, the conventional limits of identification and belonging are contested, requiring innovative approaches to navigate personal and communal identities. Hasan’s books emphasise the significance of recognising the linkages between the physical and digital domains, as well as the need for sophisticated strategies to properly tackle the developing intricacies of identity and connectedness in the 21st century.

In *Lunatic in My Head* and *The Cosmopolitans*, Hasan prompts readers to contemplate how the digital era has altered the fundamental aspects of identity and community. Through the interconnection of her characters’ narratives, she elucidates the universal challenges and opportunities present in the interaction between the physical and virtual realms, ultimately fostering a profound comprehension of the evolving essence of human identity and the quest for significant belonging in the digital era.

CONCLUSION

Lunatic in My Head and *The Cosmopolitans* by Anjum Hasan offer a nuanced examination of the intricate relationship between identity and connectivity in the digital era. Hasan’s multi-layered narratives demonstrate the profound impact of virtual communities and online platforms on interpersonal relationships and collective belonging, as well as the challenges of negotiating multiple aspects of the self. Additionally, she highlights the fluidity of digital identities.

Firdaus, the protagonist of *Lunatic in My Head*, is confronted with the challenge of establishing her identity as a Shillongian of Bihari descent. The film underscores the tensions that arise when the physical and virtual worlds intersect. The perceptions and expectations of her peers, as well as the diverse social tapestry of Shillong, form her sense of belonging. The character Aman in *The Cosmopolitans* exemplifies the broader challenges that individuals encounter in reconciling their digital and offline identities as he navigates the draw of the digital world and the demands of the physical domain.

Additionally, Hasan’s novels investigate the degree to which virtual communities and online platforms influence the characters’ interpersonal relationships and sense of belonging. The complexities of establishing a sense of belonging in the digital era are illuminated by the enduring relationships within physical communities and the ephemeral nature of digital connections. How the digital world can transform personal and collective dynamics is further emphasised by the impact of social media and online hearsay on the characters’ perceptions and interactions.

The novels of Hasan are a substantial contribution to the fields of literature, identity, and digital culture. Hasan’s study of the experiences of her characters is a compelling case study that illustrates how individuals negotiate the fluidity of digital identities and the multiple aspects of the self. She explores the profound psychological and sociological implications of the digital age in her narratives, which go

beyond the ordinary representation of technological changes. The methodology is consistent with the evolving interdisciplinary field of digital humanities, which aims to reconcile the humanities with the swiftly changing digital landscape.

Hasan's investigation of the influence of virtual communities and online platforms on collective belonging and interpersonal relationships is a valuable addition to the ongoing scholarly discussions regarding the transformation of cultural practices and social dynamics by digital technologies. Through her novels, readers are provided with a distinctive literary perspective that enables them to examine the intricate interplay between the physical and virtual realms, as well as the obstacles that arise when these two domains intersect.

At the intersection of literature, identity, and digital culture, Hasan's novels present a plethora of opportunities for future research. Further research could investigate the extent to which Hasan's narratives contribute to the expanding corpus of literature that investigates the intersections of digital identity, ethnicity, and race. An additional valuable avenue of investigation could involve exploring how Hasan's novels interact with the concept of "digital communities" and their influence on conventional concepts of social cohesion and belonging.

Moreover, Hasan's works could be positioned within the expanding corpus of research on the function of literature in elucidating the human experience in the context of technological change. Scholars have the potential to further the ongoing conversation regarding the significance of the humanities in the formation of our comprehension of the digital era by utilising the insights obtained from her character-driven narratives.

Works Cited

- [1] Baym, Nancy K. *Personal Connections in the Digital Age*. Polity Press, 2015.
- [2] Baym, Nancy K., and danah boyd. *Socially Mediated Publicness: An Introduction*. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, vol. 56, no. 3, 2012, pp. 320-329.
- [3] Brubaker, Rogers, and Frederick Cooper. *Beyond Identity. Theory and Society*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2000, pp. 1-47.
- [4] Castells, Manuel. *The Power of Identity*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.
- [5] Castells, Manuel. *The Rise of the Network Society*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.
- [6] Chun, Wendy Hui Kyong. *Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fibre Optics*. MIT Press, 2006.
- [7] Dawson, Michael, and John Bellamy Foster. *The Tendency of the Surplus to Rise (1857-1863)*. *Monthly Review*, vol. 56, no. 5, 2004.
- [8] Floridi, Luciano. *The Fourth Revolution: How the Infosphere is Reshaping Human Reality*. Oxford University Press, 2014.
- [9] Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Anchor, 1959.
- [10] Hasan, Anjum. *Lunatic in My Head*. Penguin Books India, 2007.
- [11] Hasan, Anjum. *The Cosmopolitans*. Penguin Books India, 2015.
- [12] Lopes, Ana, and Paulo Teixeira. *Digital Identities: A Theoretical and Empirical Exploration*. *Computers in Human Behaviour*, vol. 35, 2014, pp. 1-11.
- [13] Papacharissi, Zizi. *A Networked Self: Identity, Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites*. Routledge, 2010.
- [14] Rheingold, Howard. *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*. MIT Press, 2000.

-
- [15] Schultze, Ulrike, and Wanda J. Orlikowski. *Research Commentary: Virtual Worlds: A Performative Perspective on Globally Distributed, Immersive Work*. Information Systems Research, vol. 21, no. 4, 2010, pp. 810-821.
- [16] Turkle, Sherry. *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. Basic Books, 2011.