



# Rewriting the History of Minority: A Study of Anjum Hasan's *History's Angel*

**Author: M. Johnsi Rani,**

Ph.D Scholar (Full- time), Register number: 21111174012007, Research Department of English, Rani Anna Government College for Women, Gandhi Nagar, Tirunelveli (Affiliated to Manonmanium Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli- 627012), Tamilnadu, India. E-mail: johnsi.rani19@gmail.com

**Co-author: Dr. Y. Vigila Jebaruby,**

Research Supervisor, Associate Professor of English, Research Department of English, Rani Anna Government College for Women, Gandhi Nagar, Tirunelveli (Affiliated to Manonmanium Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli- 627012), Tamilnadu, India.

## Abstract

Anjum Hasan's *History's Angel* is about a passionate and dedicated history school teacher working at a school in Delhi. Many dream of Delhi as a capital city and the heart of India. The novel *History's Angel* gives significant importance to the glories of Mughal rulers and the lives of Muslims by comparing both the past and present scenarios. Unfortunate consequences occur when Alif, a history school tutor boxes the ear of a small boy for his misbehaviour. It poses threats to his job and then eventually he is exterminated from job. Alif's wife, Tahira, dreams of leading a posh life, but the shortcomings of Alif become a threat to his family as well as to his job. Hasan's deep insight into History, his applause of the progress that happened in India due to Mughals, and the aftermath of historical changes are reflected in the novel *History's Angel*.

**Key Words:** Islam people, Residence, History and Contemporary India

**DOI Number:** 10.48047/nq.2022.20.19.nq99469

**NeuroQuantology 2022;20(19):5061-5065**

5061

Anjum Hasan is a short story writer, poet, and novelist. She was born in Shillong, Meghalaya in 1972. Her alma mater is North Eastern Hill University in the discipline of Philosophy. She is a book editor for *The Caravan Magazine*, Bangalore, Karnataka. Her poetic work is *Street on the Hill* ((2006), for which she received the Sahitya Akademi Award. Her oeuvre include *Lunatic in My Head*(2007), *Neti, Neti* (2009), *Difficult Pleasures* (2012), *The Cosmopolitans*(2016), *A Day in the Life*(2018), and *History's Angel* (2023).

The hard-driving wife of Alif is Tahira, a Muslim woman careful with her hijab. She exhibits revolutionary spirit and tries to upscore her M.B.A exams by concentrating on her occupation as a store manager at a Karol Bagh supermarket. With her dynamic personality, Tahira dreams of a house that has no connection with matchbox-style houses with small streets.

Her efforts to rise up in the family line are tremendously sublime. Through the character Tahira, Hasan portrays Muslim women with wings of fire and determined in their decisions. Hasan comments about Tahira thus, Tahira dislikes the assumption that because she is Muslim and a woman, she must be a great cook. Her colleagues at the supermarket treat her, whenever Eid comes around, as a source of biryani and kababs, an expectation that raises her hackles sky high. 'Is this all we are? She asks Alif.' Bawarchis? Poetry-spouting fools with minced mutton coming out of our ears, thinking only of Allah and pining only for bahisht between mouthfuls of Zafran pulao? (HA 118)

The idea of visualizing Muslims as skilled cooks in the kitchen makes Tahira intolerant, and she also questions the perception of people when they view Muslim people as only a medium of providing tasty food like minced mutton, Biryani,



and Pulao. Irrespective of food, they can excel in many other fields by which others can identify the Muslim community. Hasan asserts her idea by providing an apt reference to historical Mughal heroes like Humayun, Bairam Khan and Akbar, a sixteenth-century emperor in Hindustan. A critic Max Weber states, "The concept ideal or pure type is a useful one. But we must bear in mind its limitations. It depicts an average derived over time, which reflects combinations, mixtures, and modifications. It is only an approximation of, not a substitute for, reality" (4). Muslim people in contemporary India cannot be judged based on the characteristics of the ancestors of the Mughals, who are primarily from Iran, Mongols, and Iran. According to Webster, no human race comes under the ideal or pure type concept. As they have been to Delhi and have ruled most of it, a definite mixture of people breaks the idea of perfect and pure culture or race.

Through the character Alif, Hasan tries to throw light on Urdu poets, Sufis, and autobiographers who penned fiery writing that records the life of Muslims and the power of the past rulers of Delhi. In the glorious past, Muslims were celebrated and often occupied higher posts in politics; they were always the ruling party of Delhi. Alif says thus, Akbar, thinks Alif, addressing the sixteenth-century emperor, son of Humayun, you and your mother made sure we would, even if only for a moment, even despite ourselves, blink before this grandiosity and acknowledge your unremarkable father's existence, this domed extravagance of sandstone and marble, there for no purpose other than to describe beauty. And here again that ancient mix- Central Asian and Indian. (HA 24)

Alif described to his students about grandiosity and the beauty of Mughals in India. He even accompanied them by making a small field trip among his students. He teaches Hindu rulers like Prithviraj Chauhan, and Rani Laxshmibai of Jhansi. He is a teacher who has a great thirst for feeding young minds with the richness and culture of Delhi. Especially he makes the students look towards the timeline of each milieu of India. One such particular interest in History made him plan a short trip to Humayun's Tomb and the name of the Tomb is utterly misunderstood by Ankit, a boy for whom Alif

teaches History. Ankit confuses Humayun with Hanuman and addresses Alif, saying, "Are you a dirty Musalla?" (HA 31). This remark made Alif box Ankit's ears. Hasan points out that it is the society that teaches its children to create prejudices towards other minority religion like Muslims. So, each person who follows a particular religion has rich tradition. People do not appreciate tolerance towards other communities. That is the prime reason for all kinds of rifts and rafts among each community with different practices and lifestyles. The principal, Mrs. Rawat, and the fellow staff except Mrs. Molloy find fault with Alif, and he gets terminated from job. Indeed, he should not have lost his temper, but Alif feels compelled to speak up in the situations because of Ankit's bad remarks about his religion. Hasan describes, Alif sits back astounded. Then he leans forward and says, 'You see, the thing is that he called me a Muslim. Muslim? Asks Jha. What's wrong with that? What are you if not...' He looks at Rawat and titters. He accused me, says Alif, but can't bring himself to repeat what the boy said. And he insisted on confusing Humayun with Hanuman. Mrs. Rawat purses her lips to even out her lipstick, sighs with displeasure and says, Your suspension is already underway so if you could kindly now leave. (HA 115)

Mrs. Rawat and the school committee have dilapidated the harassment done by the students to the teacher Alif. Instead, it focuses only on the consequences of Alif's reaction. The school does injustice to the teacher as their primary need is only keeping their honour intact so that they can stay in the field of education. And respect for teachers is decreasing in modern school premises. Hasan says, Alif is sitting too far to be able to tell, just from the shots of the weeping women, the poker-faced police officer making his statement to the camera, the mugshot of the dead man, and the screaming reporter, whether an untouchable has been murdered for being an untouchable, a Muslim lynched for being a Muslim, a Naxalite, a Kashmiri liquidated for being a Kashmiri, a journalist assassinated for asking questions or a farmer dead from suicidal despair. Doubtless one or another of these. (HA 74)

The existence of Muslims in contemporary Delhi is always questioned. Hasan

states that the questions posed to a specific community for their belief in a particular religion are senseless. Hasan comments, Alif slides self-consciously into Farouk's chair and watches those tightly knotted huddles of Muslim women again, demanding that the government take them seriously, see them for the staunch patriots and good citizens they are, stop calling them anti-national because they are, waving flags and holding up banners, reclaiming the nation. There follows a debate and the same thing all over again: *Muslims should, Muslims can, Muslim needs to, Muslims are...*(HA 272)

The government questions Muslim people despite having rich historical records of Humayun, Akbar, and Jahangir, and the people have stayed in India for several years that street like Bairam Khan is named after the influential figures of great ruler Akbar. Zafar Mahal in Mehruli is the summer palace constructed by the Mughals. The construction of such palaces shows the rich heritage of Muslim people. According to Satish Chandra,

The traditions in architecture, painting, literature, and music created during this period set a norm and profoundly influenced the succeeding generations. In this sense, the Mughal period can be called a second classical age following the Gupta age in northern India. In this cultural development, Indian traditions were amalgamated with the Turko-Iranian culture brought to the country by the Mughals. (HA 317)

Alif also gives significant importance in highlighting the Mughal palaces and Tombs in his arguments in stating that, like Prithviraj Chauhan and the Guptas, Mughals too deserve to be celebrated in History. The Muslim people hold a genuine history of ruling in Delhi that there are tremendous evidences like monuments The Humayun Tomb, the Taj Mahal, and many places in Fatehpur Sikiri prove that Muslim people have settled in Delhi for so many years and now they are the residents of India. Hasan pleads never to address Muslim people as antinational. Hasan describes, "You won't even blink if you're told that all Muslims hide bombs under their burqas and breed terrorists in their wombs" (HA 214). The society views the Muslim people with suspicion. They are under constant surveillance, and people question their Burkha, the sacred head covers. People often misunderstand Muslim

people as terrorists for wearing black Hijabs. Hasan shoots her viewpoint with her fiery bullet words that Muslim women do not give birth to terrorists from their wombs. Such powerful words create a significant impact in proving the perception that society and the government should treat the Muslim people like they treat any other citizens of India. The constant suspicious arrows of the community scorn the hearts of Muslim people, and they wonder for freedom. Alif wonders thus,

Freedom, says Salim, grinning. Why is he named Salim, wonders Alif. Because Salim is my favourite Mughal. But the emperor also became feckless halfway through his career. He handed over the running of his kingdom to Nur Jahan and just hung around drinking and commissioning paintings of whatever caught his fancy. And yet, which Mughal loved beauty as much as Salim? Freedom, exclaims Alif. You're already free. (HA 137)

Alif names his son 'Salim' because he is Alif's favourite Mughal ruler. He is worried for his son Salim, who is taking a similar path to Akbar's son Salim, as he starts to become less ambitious after being a good ruler. Salim's steps of discontinuing education shocks Alif. He thinks about oppression of muslims in modern Delhi where, by denying their freedom. Despite having recorded History. He feels the threat of other people when they question their past glories. The Muslim children, too, get disciplined at home like any other children. Reading the Quran and studying the Urdu language is one such thing. Alif is in worried as he hears his son Salim describe this, "Like, you know, Madhav Sir, in our school. He scares us. He can't beat but makes fun of everyone in front of everyone else. Me, he calls a hairy caterpillar- because of my eyebrows. Sometimes it's creepy Caterpillar. Sometimes it's just Creepy." (HA 140). Hasan shows the mockery done to Muslim children in schools because of their distinct eyebrows. Teachers mocking students or vice versa is a serious issue in Indian society. This issue has left bad impact upon the formative years of the child and can later turn him into a rebel. Hasan brings out that such a notion should not be encouraged. It can instigate a pessimistic impact upon young children that can lead to communal riots and break the peace and unity of India. Talware says, "Islam is an

Arabic word meaning both 'Submission to God' and 'peace.' The followers of Islam who are called Muslims are found all over the world. There are over 100 crores (over one billion -1,147,494.000 source: The World Almanac, 1999) of Muslims all over the world and out of this around on earth live in India alone" (94).

Islam people follow their religious text, the Quran. In the novel, *History's Angel* Alif points out the Islamic values and the importance of reading the Quran and Ramzan. Hasan states that not all Muslims are in rebels, but most are well-disciplined and follow the culture. Alif finds his son Salim being brushed by the contemporary Delhi life, which makes him less religious. Hasan emphasizes the need of religious tolerance. She also says this.

In recent years, Alif has had to eat his Biryani, always anxious that his wife and his father might approach rudeness over that burning topic, the only one they ever discuss- Muslims. It's always Muslims they talk about – people who are them but also not them, a body of sufferers out there regarding whose suffering these two have come up with completely different diagnosis (HA 8).

Hasan points out the existence of hatred towards fellow human beings in the current scenario, thereby leading the people to assert the residence of each other by blaming only a particular community for holding its power in Delhi. Hasan believes that the issue of calling out Muslim people as anti-nationals is due to the partition that occurred in 1947. Hasan says, "How does it matter? Can't you see? We separated to not kill each other, and we then started killing each other in earnest. Or one side wants to decimate the other. It's come to that now. One side wants to finish off the other" (HA 127). So partition also created the concept of 'Us' and 'Them' in the minds of people belonging to two different countries. Alif's wife, Tahira, sets on a quest for a new house in a busy metro part of Delhi.

A meeting between the landlord, Mr. Singh, and his friends Pandey, Alif, and Tahira happens. Instead of talking about the leasing house, Mr. Singh and Pandey rise to mock Alif and begin to complain about the History of the Mughals by finding fault with the demolition of Hindu temples and the construction of Muslim mosques with those same stones. Hasan says, "Mister

History Professor Sir. Mohammad Sir. Is this the History you are teaching your children? That it was a good thing they stayed. You stayed? His voice is hardening, and it is Pandey who laughs now at Singh's ridiculous appeals- ha,ha, ha" (HA213). The above words show the taunting anger of Mr. Singh and Pandey upon Tahira and Alif. Hasan points out that it is difficult to be a Muslim person in Delhi as they are always yelled at for their ancestral History.

Hasan records the feelings of Muslim people thus, "The madness of the centuries, thinks Alif with despair. Nietzsche again. Not only the wisdom of centuries – also their madness breaketh out in us. Dangerous is it to be an heir" (HA 213). The identity of the Muslim community is put to the test; their patience is always taken with light-heartedness. Houses are not easily rented without questioning due to their food habits. The black hijab of the Muslim people is often viewed mysteriously with a lot of prejudiced ideas. Hasan drives home the message that it is high time that people from different communities possess their rich heritage. So Indian people have to develop religious tolerance. Hasan says, She reminds him of Muslim anxieties, of Muslim pain. She is an expert on this – historical suffering – and has in her possession a battery of one-line explanations for how they came to find themselves underdogs, theories passed around for generations in her family, drawn from the subcontinent's politics- the tragic mistreatment of the last Mughal emperor by the British... (HA 128)

Hasan highlights the issue of Muslim people's pain, and they live the life of an underdog in the contemporary world, but once in the glorious past, they were the rulers and addressed with great respect and even the roads of Delhi and most of the places around in Delhi are named by them. Magnificent Historical monuments echo the existence of Muslim people in Delhi, India, for so many years. Since they are the residents of Delhi with rich historical records that stand unbreakable before the eyes of the government, their status of residence in Delhi is unquestionable. Like Delhi belongs to any other citizens of India, the heart of India, Delhi also belongs to Muslim citizens of India. According to Brodov,

Guarding the heritage means moving ahead along the path of social progress. Of great significance are the words of Jawaharlal Nehru: Indian philosophy must descend from the heights of supernatural and metaphysical speculation to the earth, from a firm alliance with science, and serve the interests of men's practical life. "We have to get rid of narrowing religious outlook [ he wrote], that obsession with the supernatural and metaphysical speculations, that loosening of the mind's discipline in religious ceremonial and mystical emotionalism, which come in the way of our understanding ourselves and the world. (360,361)

Even though, Hasan points out Nehru's partition negotiation to be the inner cause of the bone of contention in opinion among the people of Delhi. But the novelist also encourages the idea of Nehru that one's point of view should not be obsessed. Instead, one should understand the contemporary world and avoid prejudiced ideas toward certain regions, cultures or people.

#### **Works cited**

##### **Primary Source:**

Hasan, Anjum. *History's Angel*. New Delhi: Bloomsbury Publishing India Pvt.Ltd,2023, Print.

##### **Secondary Source:**

Brodov,v. *Indian Philosophy in Modern Times*. Indian Soviet Socialist Republics: Progress Publishers, 1984, Print.

Chandra, Satish. *History of Meidieval India*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan Pvt.Ltd, 2007, Print.

Talware, Mahendra Kumar. *History of Indian Culture*. Delhi: Mangalam Publications: Delhi, 2014, Print.

Vaid, Dr.S.K. *History of Muslim Society*. New Delhi: Alps Books, 2014, Print.