



## CULTURAL CONFLUENCE AND MULTIPLE FEMININITIES IN ANJUM HASAN'S "NUR" FROM A DAY IN THE LIFE

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### Abstract:

Anjum Hassan, story "Nur" from *A Day in the Life* proliferates the feminine struggles and multiple femininities wherein Nur, the focal figure sojourns variant places meets and various persons to trace her absconding husband, Salim. The story narrates an array of cultural and religious contours. Anjum highlights the cultural rigidities and flexibilities of the Muslim culture, and religious beliefs. It also shows that how men are important for women to live in parochial society. Nur is a married working Muslim woman who is in search of her husband, Salim with her childhood friend and neighbour Rebeka who is a Christian girl. Salim absconds by taking all her savings every time although, he returns after all the cash spent, but, this time he is missing for long. The story "Nur" is all about the ups and downs of a day which has been spent by Nur and Rebeka in search of Salim. The story presents the account of a day in the life of Nur and Rebeka. The present research paper attempts to examine multiple femininities and multiple cultures projected in "Nur".

**Keywords:** Culture, Religion, Multiculturalism, Femininity, Patriarchy

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### Introduction:

Anjum Hasan, an alpine female writer, born in Shillong, is the author of three novels and two short story collections that are shortlisted for the Sahitya Akademi Award, the Hindu Best Fiction Award and the Crossword Fiction Award. Anjum was longlisted for the Man Asia Literary Prize and the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature. She received Homi Bhabha Fellowship, in 2021. She was recently hailed by First Post magazine as a 'genius... one of the finest Indian writers'. In 2018 she published the short story collection *A Day in the Life* which won the Valley of Words Award in 2019. Jacaranda Agency in the early pages of the book *A Day in the Life* comments aptly on daily life experiences that Anjum Hasan narrates through her characters, "Like her

poetry, Anjum Hasan's new book *A Day in the Life* gives us an insight into the world through a new prism. Her characters are diverse and the stories are about their daily lives. The 14 stories give us a sense of the world that resides inside us, within the confines of the skull." (Hasan Early Pages)

**Anjum Hasan's collection of short stories presents the album of Indian marginal lives. Every short story projects the inner realities and ironies of modern times. Living in the peripheries with limited resources becomes an everyday challenge. The stories are realistic as every story exhibits different subjects, themes and settings. The review published in the daily New Indian Express throws light upon the collection of short stories, "This collection shows a range of subjects, settings and characters, always with**



an eye on the inner truth and the stumbling ironies of modern life. Writing fiction with craft is an endangered skill today. Hasan cares about getting it just right. There aren't enough like her around". (Hasan Early Pages)

**Illustration:** Hasan's short story "Nur" proliferates a snippet from the life of a Muslim woman whose husband is always absconding, stealing money from her savings. Nur, the focal figure in the short story is in a black burka throughout the story that represents her staunch belief in her religion and her cultural rigidities. "Nur has been in a burka since she was twelve. But she goes out to work and so does her mother and all the women in the community, all of them covered." (Anjum 181) This highlights the religious and cultural rigors of the Muslims that a girl is made to follow the religious discipline as she attains puberty and also she has to follow the grown up women in the community. The Muslim women in Shillong establish a bridge between modernity and tradition. They are traditional as they wear burka and remain covered; and at the same time, they are modern as they get out of their houses to earn their living. They are the preservers of culture, religious rigors and familial traditions; and at the same time, they are modern as they are financially independent.

Nur is a postmodern young woman who establishes friendship with Rebeka, a Christian female friend. In this nexus, the writer underlines the cultural and religious hybridity that exists in India with two femininities. Indian multi-culti becomes the major thread to develop the feminine companionship among two women of different religions—East and West brought together. Both the friends believe in the Mazar of Mastani Amma religiously and respect the religiosity. This instance underlines the mutual understanding of the females of two different religions to respect the religion, questioning their communal beliefs. In addition to this, the author being a female is

much conscious in her culinary observations. She amplifies the food habits, eating habits, culinary practices, dress and language of the people.

Being a sensible female from Islamic ghetto, Anjum observes how Islamic communities form annual congregation of the Tablighi Jamaat—a group of people that goes from one place to another to propagate Islam as a religion—its culture and beliefs. A group of young boys visit different places to preach Islam. Anjum writes, "They'd wanted serious souls, boys who would dress themselves in beards and kurta-pyjamas, and go into the Muslim colonies to tell the women to stay at home in purdah and the men to desist from drinking and follow the pieties. They want to improve the state of the nation of Islam." (Anjum 181) The young preachers represent the young and vibrant men who propagate Islam in the Muslim colonies. They spread the messages from the Holy Qur'an.

Subsequently, the author unfolds the cultural traditions in the eastern Indian society and the feminine identities wherein the daughters remain closely connected to their parental homes even after their marriages. Often they visit their maternal homes and enjoy being the kid of their respective families. Even they follow the advices of their mothers. They never cut off from their childhood fancies, food and beliefs. The author showcases that initial feminine identity is permanent. For instance, the writer narrates, "So Nur is married but also a child in her mother's home, still longing for Sultana's beef curry and anda mussalam, still listening to her stories about the Sufi she-saint Mastani Amma who died sixty years ago and whose grave is now a dargah on Tannery Road." (Anjum 182) Nur is a staunch believer and follower of Islam. She does not compromise with her religious practices. For instance, she compromises with no food as she has a very little money. Social and cultural rigours are more important than food. She pays more attention to her hijab and sandals but not towards her hunger. Anjum minutely

captures, “Nur breathes out a plea to God, washes her face, puts on her black gown, pins a bead-lined hijab into place over her head, slips into her nice sandals and skips breakfast.” (Anjum 183-184).

Anjum Hasan is a keen observer of human nature and social interactions. She makes her reader visualise whatever she narrates. Her observations are so microscopic and casual at the same time that the readers are convinced with whatever she articulates. For instance, the working class people and their culture of eating biscuits from the glass jar on the counter of a tea stall and making of dough for parathas amplify the lens of the author in enunciating the culture. She narrates:

The leisurely men in skullcaps are already sitting in the tea centres, eating biscuits from the glass jars on the counter. The working boys sandpaper the wooden frames of sofas in the furniture shops or make dough for parathas in the small, open-faced eateries or haul marquees and plastic chairs into tempo trucks to rent for weddings. (Anjum 184)

The writer observes the culture of Bangalore through the itineraries of Nur and Rebeka. The two women in the narrative represent the confluence of cultures. They observe the social, cultural and religious set up of Bangalore where religious institutes train the school going boys with the religious rigors. Nur observes, “The madrasas attached to the mosques are silent—the children go there early in the mornings to learn the qaida, or after school in the evenings.” (Anjum 184) Religious preaching is inseparably connected with education.

Being an orthodox Muslim female from Shillong, the writer is well aware about the prejudiced parochial society in the eastern part of India wherein women are labeled easily by the society about their character. Even in the twenty-first century when Kalpana Chawala has landed on Moon successfully, women are looked down upon in India. Anjum is cautious about the slow walking women who are considered cheap, who are

waiting for customers. Even the women in the story are aware about the lables that are assigned to slow walking women. Anjum remarks, “Rebeka and Nur walk very fast. Slow-walking women are considered wanton, they have learnt.” (Anjum 184)

Subsequently, Anjum Hasan chronicles the prevailing law and order in India. Mistaken identities play a pivotal role in dismantling the psychology of Salim as he is taken into police custody by the police considering him to the culprit. He is tortured in the police custody for three days for no reason. This exploitation of the innocent Salim makes him angry even on trivial things. The writer amplifies the facts, “He spent three days in the lock-up and when he came back he wouldn't tell Nur what those three days had been like. He spoke less than before and got angry quicker.” (Anjum 185) This instance throws light upon the socio-cultural nuances of India wherein the police picks up randomly any person with similar name without making proper inquiries. As a result, the innocent not only suffers the physical pangs, but also undergoes the agonies of the blot throughout his life.

Subsequently, Anjum Hasan showcases the confluence of cultures through two femininities-Rebeka and Nur-both follow foreign religions in India as both the women visit the mazar of Mastani. In this instance, the author projects Rebeka as more open minded who is religious at heart and she does not discriminate between Christianity and Islam as she goes into the dargah with Nur. On the contrary, Nur represents the orthodox Muslim culture as she does not enter the church with her friend. Rebeka supports Nur in her difficult times by supporting her and her religiosity. This feminine companionship showcases that women support women in their hard times. “When they get to the dargah, Rebeka bows her head, touches the grass-green satin in which the humped mazar of Mastani Amma is draped and then brings her fingers to each of her closed eyes. She does the same when she goes to church, reaching



out for the feet of the crucifix and the Madonna, the way her mother does. Nur doesn't go to church with her but Rebeka has been coming to this place for years". (Anjum 185) This also showcases the faith of the women in the mazar, the superstition and the faith provide them the energy to fight in the world. The author presents multiple femininities through Nur, Rebeka, Mastani Amma and Madonna. In this happenstance, Mastani Amma and Madonna, the diseased femininities become the source of optimism for Nur and Rebeka.

Gradually, the writer uncovers the history of the mystic mother, Mastani Amma. The word 'Mastani' represents a beautiful Muslim female whereas 'Amma' represents mother. Mastani Amma who was a tannery worker that represents the most stinking job that Mastani Amma used to do when she was alive. Such a marginal female rises to the status of sainthood after her death. Anjum vocalizes the psychopathology of Indians who declare a subaltern woman a saint posthumously. The mystic figure holds the central position where people visit and bow in front of her tomb-the dargah. Anjum Hasan brings to light the culture of Bangalore that worships the marginalized female after her death:

She could be Mastani Amma herself; she looks a bit like the wizened woman in the black-and-white photo on the wall, the mystic mother who became a saint because she could, according to Nur's mother, make people abandon all desires except the one to get close to God. Before she saw the light, the saint was a tannery worker too—salting the hides of animals and then sending them to the leather-making factories up the road. (Anjum 186)

Further, the writer is skillful in explicating the religious practices being observed in the dargah. Anjum is keen in narrating the socio-cultural practices in religious spaces. Nur lights the incense sticks which is a typical Islamic religious practice. The writer also writes about

the Arabic calligraphy which is dense and unintelligible. Furthermore, the writer talks about the Muharram procession. Finally, she also states how Nur prays the Almighty for bringing Salim back to her, not for her companionship, but for a child she wants from him. This highlights that a woman is incomplete if she does not conceive and beget children. Anjum pens down the religious culture and the prayer of Nur, a typical female who prays at the mazar:

Nur pulls out a couple of the incense sticks, lights them and sticks them into the candelabra of burning oil-lamps. They settle down before a filigree-edged flag propped on a stand in one corner, topped with a replica in brass of a human hand inscribed with dense Arabic calligraphy, which is taken out only once a year during the Muharram procession. 'Ya Allah, send Salim back so I can have a baby,' says Nur out loud because there is no one there to listen... (Anjum 186)

Anjum brings the polarities of science and belief as Nur as a child experiences the deficiency of vitamin D. According to the doctor she should be open and exposed to the sun so that this deficiency can be treated naturally. On the contrary her father who is an auto driver prefers Nur to wear the burka as a religious discipline. He discards the advice of the doctor and forces his daughter to consume eggs and meat. Anjum also projects two generations-Nur's father and Nur- the earlier believes in religion whereas the younger generation believes in science and medicines. The writer showcases how young girls who enter puberty are forced to wear burka and ate them same time they are forced into the stereotypical females:

The doctor said she had a vitamin D deficiency. "You didn't let her play outdoors when she was a child,' she said accusingly to Sultana...'You kept her covered since puberty,' said the doctor. 'Get her out of this burka, she needs sunlight.' Sultana reported the matter to Nur's father who said 'Thoo!' in response to the doctor woman's blasphemy and declared that what Nur



needed was more meat and eggs. Then nothing happened—father kept drinking and driving his rickshaw, meat and to be eaten no more than once a week and sunlight didn't get a continued chance to come anywhere near Nur. She took the doctor's pills and didn't faint again but sometimes, walking about, felt quite ready to. (Anjum 187)

Gradually, the writer tries to highlight the mentality of the people belonging to different religions, especially, during rituals. For instance, Rebeka prefers to have a Christian photographer during her marriage because being a Christian he can understand the ceremony well. In India such ghettoism is evident in every religious minority. Rebea states, "He made us look much shinier than we actually are. He'll do you when you get married," says Nur, to which Rebeka says, "But my parents will want the Christian photographer." (Anjum 189) The females know how to highlight themselves in photographs.

Indian narratives cannot overlook the multiculturalism that the Indian society projects. Almost every narrative gets its shape from the intricate lives of Indian subjects who undergo the varied experiences of different cultures, religions, languages and geographical spaces. Anjum Hasan's "Nur" showcases multiple cultures through Nur and Rebeka who belong to Islam and Christianity respectively. Similarly, Anjum Hasan also presents multiple femininities as these women are at the dargah of Mastani Amma, a deity whom people worship. These three femininities prove to be powerful as the entire narrative moves around them. On the other hand, the males in the story are in the peripheries. The writer intertwines cultures to enhance the story. The writer highlights the culture of Indian parochial dominance wherein women are given secondary status by the men. Parochial culture predominates in the working class. Women have no right to question the males in the family. Consequently, the males are more privileged who enjoy their liberty. Nur amplifies the

patriarchal culture, "There are no man in my house to turn to,' explains Nur, all calms again though still wet-eyed. 'My elder brother is too busy, he doesn't even answer when his wife calls him. My younger brother...' But she leaves it unsaid, that he is usually lying in a drunken stupor somewhere." (Anjum 189) Similarly, Nur adds stating that Salim, though absconding, controls the rights of the head of the family. This exhibits the subaltern status of women. Nur states, "He is a man in control of everything that's going on in the area. Just in case anything out of the ordinary has happened to Salim, he'll be the first to know." (Anjum 189) Further, Anjum Hasan throws light upon the religious diversities and differences within the same religion. The people of a specific sub-caste follow religious practices and visit specific mosques only. They do not enter the mosque of other sub-castes. The writer is minute in observing the religious practices and the cultural intricacies as Nur says, "My people don't go to their mosque, the Tablighi Jamaat mosque." (Anjum 190)

The author is keen in projecting Nur's financial status and social well-being as she has a self contend house. On the other hand, Salim is from the lower class- slum. In addition to this the writer also illuminates the culture of groom coming to bride's house after marriage. The women discuss the culture of Nur's family and socio-financial status the both-Nur and Salim as they discuss, "Never mind, I'll use one of the wedding pictures, though Salim looks too happy in all of those.' 'Of course,' says Nur, smiling now. 'He was happy because he was coming to stay in my house where you don't have to queue up outside the communal toilet every morning,' and Fairoz looks sheepish, then grows serious." (Anjum 190)

Subsequently, the author narrates how Nur thinks about the prevailing condition of women outside the mosque. These are old women who have assembled together not only project the poverty but it also vocalizes the



pathetic condition of old women who are left on the road side for begging. In addition to this, Nur thinks about her future doubtfully whether it will push her towards begging and dying pathetically like a wretched dog on the road side. This instance also brings to light poverty as a part of Indian culture. Consequently, the writer touches upon the psychology of the old women who know where to gather and beg. The writer observes:

They pass the Bismillah Mosque, a collection of sad-faced old women sitting on their haunches outside, and Nur realizes it's Friday. She wonders how it is that all mosques have old women outside, where they come from and where they would go a-begging if there were no mosques. She might end up there too when she's past a certain age and Salim is gone, but Salim may already be gone, in which case what is to be her fate? A young woman can't be outside a mosque, scrabbling in the dust with these grandmothers. (Anjum 191).

Anjum Hasan draws a parallel between the rich and the poor. As Nur and Rebeka visit Mushtak's residence, they are much surprised by the amenities Mushtak has. The writer takes the opportunity to exhibit the luxuries in the upper class. This narration is of the culture of upper class reviewed through the lens of lower class:

They are shown to the largest sofas they have ever seen in their lives and settle, awkwardly squeaking, into the plush black leather; a girl who could be a servant but has cleaner feet than theirs and long, painted fingernails brings them glasses of the iciest water they have ever drunk. On the wall is a TV so large that Nur cannot focus on the picture, her eyes keep darting all over the screen trying to find it. 'This must be paradise, Rebeka,' she says in high-pitched awe without caring that she might be heard by the man who is making a call about their case to someone, and whose name she now remembers is Bilal. (Anjum 193)

In addition to this, the writer never leaves a stone unturned as she exhibits the culture of the underworld

through the character of don to whom Nur approaches to know the whereabouts of Salim. The luxuries and amenities of mobile phones and several rings in the fingers exhibit the financial well-being of the don. The writer narrates the culture of the don, though peripheral, it is rich. Nur observes, "The don is shorter than his hangers-on and dressed unlike these jean-clad youth in a simple kurta-pyjama but he has an array of rings on his fingers, mobile phones in each hand and a piercing gaze above the bruised pouches below his eyes." (Anjum 194) Similarly, Anjum touches upon the culture of savings by the lower class women who hide their savings from their husbands. In such cases, the undergarments become the safer places for hiding money as they know that the husbands do not have strong bosses. In this instance, the writer narrates how men and their bosses are weak. On the contrary, women try to be safe financially, "...never have to hide money from their husbands in their underwear or be fired from their two-bit jobs over the phone by gutless bosses." (Anjum 195)

Subsequently, the writer takes the opportunity to explicate the philosophy illustrated in Koran. The old man with a long gray beard states how the holy book narrates the mysteries of universe and the human life. The writer enunciates, "It is all in the Koran," he says. Much before this science of the Western world there was a science in the Koran. How a child is formed in its mother's womb, how the earth revolves around the sun, the ways of wind and fire and water- everything can be gleaned from there if only one knows how to read. One surah is worth the knowledge in a hundred books." (Anjum 195-196) Further, Anjum states how the Muslims believe in the preaching of the Koran and how every child must get the education from the Koran. The elderly woman tells the old man that she will make her children visit him to learn from the holy text. This highlights the culture of the Muslims in India, "This summer when the children are back, I will bring them

to you,' says Aunty. They need this education too.” (Anjum 196)

On the contrary, the religious practitioners who are men, have staunch belief in the parochial normative hegemony. For instance, the maulana is a religious practitioner and an interpreter of the holy text who subjugates women. The conversation between two aged persons of opposite gender brings to light the juxtaposing approaches and the approach of the old and the new that shifts the cultural parameters:

‘We don't approve of women earning their own living,’ says the maulana.

'Accha,' says Aunty. 'But...'

'The Koran is very clear on this. For a woman to earn and for her husband or parents or in-laws to be in any way dependent on her is against Allah's wishes."

‘Aren't these somewhat old-fashioned views? In this day and age ... ’

'It's Allah Mian's word. What does it have to do with us mortals?' says the man, sounding almost puzzled. (Anjum 196)

Besides this, the author projects Nur as a character standing between science and religion- modernity and orthodox. Nur represents a modern woman who believes the Almighty but at the same time she is tired to get up early in the morning for the namaz. The writer projects Nur as the postmodern woman who is religious at heart:

Nur herself can feel it sometimes when she's woken by the dawn azan and lies in bed thinking of a God she is too tired to get up and worship-human concerns don't count for that delay much when one thinks of the almighty, world-bending strength of His will. It's another matter that she cannot abide by that will always-must head to work every morning and provide for Salim too, (Anjum 197)

Subsequently, the writer chronicles the nexus of the religious faith and the worry of Nur. On the one hand, she is worried about her absconding husband, and, on

the other hand, she has faith in the grace of Allah. This also shows the cultural mindset of a young woman representing Islamic identity. Anjum enlists, “Ya Allah, thinks Nur and starts to not so much pray as float away to God, feel time become puny and her own worries microscopic. She knows Salim is somewhere or the other, well within the sight of God, and the thought comforts her. She tries to recall the line in the God-affirming verse the watchman at the Eidgah was reciting to himself. ‘Nur-e-haq shamme ilahi....,” (Anjum 197) Nur represents a strong femininity who struggles incessantly to bring back her absconding and non-heroic husband.

Gradually, the writer amplifies the poverty of Nur and Rebeka. Both the friends do not have money to buy some food to eat. They do not have money to pay the bus fare. As a result they wish to go to the dargah for getting the free food distributed as charity. This also explicates the culture of charity for the poor and a privilege for the needy. Anjum is keen in observing the socio-cultural setup of Indian margins:

'Let's go to the Jayamahar Road dargah,' she suggests. "They sometimes hand out food there.'

'Where's the money?' asks Rebeka. 'We don't even have enough for a bus.' (Anjum 198)

The writer traverses through various cultural intricacies that Nur follows. For instance, Nur visits the graveyard of her father and her sister. Nur prefers to pray on the tomb of her father but she has no respect for her dead sister who had put herself ablaze alive. Nur does not develop any intimacy with her dead sister. For her, committing suicide is accepting the defeat in life. This act showcases Nur as a staunch femininity who fights against all odds. In addition to this, the writer projects Rebeka as another strong female figure in the story as she supports Nur through all her sojourn of oddities. Consequently, Anjum shows Nur as the culturally and religiously confined female whereas Rebeka is an open minded modern female who follows her friend in her



hard times. The following excerpt projects three different femininities-Nur, Rebeka and Nur's deceased sister. Anjum writes:

Nur takes Rebeka's hand and they head into the adjoining graveyard first, searching for her father's grave. It is a modest headstone among the tall ones with cusped arches, elaborate lettering and marble crypts strewn with fresh rose petals. She lights a couple of incense sticks for him, puts her head to the bare, cold rectangle and mumbles a prayer. Her sister is around here too, the one who died burnt such a raw pink she looked like one of those plastic dolls with golden hair that rich children play with. But Nur doesn't go to her graveside. Who asked her to set herself on fire and abandon her two girls, lovable as they are, for Nur and her mother to handle?

(Anjum 199)

Similarly, the author takes her readers across international space in order to unveil the culture of the Indian labourers in Dubai. The workers are sent by the Indian agents to different countries. Salim is one of them who is sent to Dubai as a labourer who is shepherded with eight people in a small room with a leaking bathroom. Also, he is forced to work for fourteen hours daily. This exploitation makes him to leave the job but as his passport is confiscated by the employer, he cannot move anywhere. Anjum brings forward the multiculturalism between the lower classes of two different nations. Salim represents a Diaspora identity that undergoes two cultural spaces. The telephonic conversation between Salim and Nur wherein Salim tells Nur his dislike for the cultural space in Dubai, “‘But I don't like it here much,’ he says... ‘Eight people to a room and a bathroom that leaks shit. Above all it's too hot and they're getting us to work fourteen hours a day. I ran away from the construction site today. I can't take it any more.’”

(Anjum 199-200)

Similarly, Anjum Hasan portrays the dargah as a public

space where people from different cultures visit. For instance, the dargah is a place that accommodates the destitutes. The lepers and old beggar women represent doubly marginalized people. Similarly, the boy in snowy-white clothes represents upper class that visits the dargah for making charity. On the other hand, Nur does not have energy to stand and get the food. In an attempt to get the food, Nur swoons down. Anjum is minute in her observations of the cultural spaces at religious zone:

Nur crumples to her knees, finding herself among the leprous men and destitute women who line the entrance to the dargah, who hang around there all day, who must practically live there, only needing some hole to sleep in every night. She is still staring into space when a boy in snowy-white clothes comes up to them and starts handing out small plastic packets of sweet boondi to all supplicants, including Nur and Rebeka. Nur looks at the packet in her hand, looks at Rebeka, sighs softly and faints. (Anjum200-201)

**Conclusion:** Anjum Hasan projects multiple femininities in “Nur” who struggle in the parochial society for their existence. The men in the story are dormant but they still dominate indirectly whereas the women struggle directly. Nur's quest for Salim is a journey towards her personal making and shaping of her identity. Nur fights with all odds for Salim just to have a child from him. On the other hand, Rebeka stands with Nur throughout the narration as a strong partner. Pankaj Mishra rightly comments, “Skilfully interweaving India's many separate and rapidly changing worlds, Anjum Hasan brings an ironic and subtle intelligence to a great novelistic theme: superfluous men and women lurching out of a decayed old order, exposed to the conflicts and tensions of an endless transition”. (Anjum Early Pages) Thus, Anjum portrays the struggle of women from margins to establish their identities.





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