

# Food, Food-culture, Colours and Smells in Anjum Hasan's Short Story "Wild Things" from Difficult Pleasures

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## Abstract

Anjum Hasan is a contemporary Meghalaya-born Indian female author from Bangalore. The collection of her short stories *Difficult Pleasures* (2012) brings to light vivid cultural tenets explicating how pleasures are wild, temporal and difficult to attain. In her short story "Wild Things" Hasan very minutely showcases the vividness of food, food culture, colours, tastes, shapes, smells, and displays. The story highlights culture, food habits, beliefs, and disbeliefs through teenagers in school who rebel against the rigidities of school food. Prasad, the focal character is fascinated by a wild dragonfly and its colours. Soon, he absconds the school by discarding the school-served lunch only to enjoy the liberty of urban life temporarily. In his flight, he observes different foods, food-culture, tastes, colours, smells, lights, sizes and shapes. His flight from school is temporal like the dragonfly. The present paper attempts to trace the food, food culture, colours, shapes and smells.

**Keywords:** food, food-culture, colour, smell

## Introduction:

Anjum Hasan is an Indian author and poet who has to her credit two novels, three collections of short stories and poetry amplifying the themes of identity, culture and displacement. Her debut novel, *Lunatic in My Head* (2003) was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers Prize. Her second novel, *Neti, Neti* (2008) was longlisted for The Man Asian Literary Prize. Her other works include the short story collection *Street on the Hill* (2006), *A Day in the Life* (2018) and *Difficult Pleasures* (2012). Her short story collection, *Difficult Pleasures* was shortlisted for The Hindu Literary Prize and The Crossword Book Award. In her short story "Wild Things" from *Difficult Pleasures*, Hasan minutely describes the culture of people from Karnataka and their food habits, eating habits, colours, sizes, shapes, smells and colours. "Wild Things" exhibits the wild behaviour of the middle-schools students who abscond school and explore different spaces where the journey is from unwanted food items to the street food in the city. Hasan narrates the escape of Prasad, the central character from the mid-day school lunch to Bangalore where he explores food, food-culture, smells, shapes, and lights. The present paper attempts to trace the food, food culture, colours, shapes and smells that project the culture of rural and urban culture in Karnataka.

Anjum Hasan's short story "Wild Things" narrates an array of instances of wild things that take place in the story. The narrative deals with Prasad, a middle-school boy from a rural area in Karnataka who disdains the mid-day meal provided by the school. Prasad rebels against every activity and the rigors of the school. His acts of throwing away the food and absconding from the school amplify his resistance. The author traces that food is the easiest means of expressing anger and frustration, especially, the males in the family throw away the food in anger and disagreement. Prasad represents the parochial hegemony by throwing the food provided by the school.

The writer also adds to the psychopathology of Prasad through his wild escape into nature as he observes the colours of the dragonfly. It is customary that during the prayer the vachanas of Basaveshwara are read out loud in school assemblies to preach values to students. But for Prasad, the dragonfly represents a colourful and temporal distraction whereas the school represents the rigors of discipline. Prasad always attempts to escape from the restrictions. The colours of the dragonfly bring multiple colours in the monotonous prayer as he imagines them. The Vachanas taught during assemblies fail to arrest his attention. The dragonfly is not seen every day, so minutely as to observe the colours. It is certainly a wild thing. The dragonfly represents the wild and vibrant nature. The author emphasizes the colours and the movements of the wild thing-the dragonfly, "Prasad swivels his head to watch a dragonfly that is moving too fast to allow him to fix its color in his head. It is dazzling blue, but a moment later, transparent silver." (Hasan 43)

Colours are powerful tools in conveying the mood and psychopathology of a person. Colours are connected with energy points in a person's mind-set.

A colour of one's own choice puffs energy in the mood and movements of a person. Jueying Lyu states that colours can create an energy field and an aura around a person. The colour, in a way, boosts the energy in every act of a person. Jueying Lyu says, "...Colors and emotions are inseparable because they are the same sort of energy. Physically, people's emotions are composed of colors. People who can see the energy field actually perceive emotions as different colors. The colors these people see are actually puffy and little clouds of colors floating in the air around the person's body." (Jueying Web) Prasad is obsessed with the colours of the dragonfly. Even in assembly, when all the students are busy with the common prayers, Prasad is busy thinking of the colours of the dragonfly that he has just seen. "The dragonfly returns and Prasad sees that its wings are really blue. He chases it to the head of his row." (Hasan 44) The fascination for colours is the very feature of teenagers. The obscurities of nature make Prasad crazy. He is unable to concentrate on the Vachanas-the rigors of school, society, religion, and moral values but the changing colours of the dragonfly.

Minor spaces, rural arenas and peripheral geographic locations constitute shapes. "Wild Things" is located in a secondary school of small village in Karnataka. The location of the unnamed village is drawn in an almanac on the wall of the school building. "A map painted on the front wall of the school highlights this village in central Karnataka in large concentric rings, the circles radiating out towards the far borders of the state." (Hasan 43) This almanac showcases the shape of synchronizing the wide geographic and natural space into a small map. The rings and the circles in the map represent the miniatures of wider spaces through the painted shapes. These shapes are painted on the wall in specific colours. Therefore, the shapes and the colours are the attempts of the painter to project the wild things in and around the village. The wild things, in a way, are natural too.

Further, Anjum Hasan refers to the huge shape of the Nandi, the sacred bull on the top of the school building which adds picturesque qualities to the description. The Nandi symbolizes strength and hard work. Also, it symbolizes the dominance of ecology on the school as well as humans as bull helps the villagers in farming and cultivation of land. The Nandi symbolizes the dominance of agriculture, animals and nature on social institutions. In addition to this, the author provides vivid descriptions of the colours and shapes of the caked mud ground and the cement building. These descriptions of caked mud yard and the peach cement school building bring to light not only the colours and shapes of soil and building but they also project the dichotomy of nature and man-made developments. The author states, "The students sing one of Basava's vachanas for the morning assembly, standing on a caked mud yard and facing a peach cement building at whose crown, above the school emblem, sits the sacred bull, Nandi. He is always in profile, always in that restful stone pose regardless of the weather." (Hasan 43)

Gradually, Hasan mischievously comments on the impressions of the teenage students about the dark glasses of the principal. The principal is the authority who is vague. His dark glasses make him more obscure. Darkness is associated with evil and ill. Hasan states, "His dark glasses add to his sinister aspect because outdoors no one knows who or what he's looking at. Indoors he looks at no one. He addresses remarks to walls and windows and ceilings when talking to people." (Hasan 44) The dark glasses provide Hosaralli the scope to hide his eyes, his intentions and emotions. These dark glasses assist him to look and observe the things and happenstances in varied ways. Also, they symbolise that the society cannot understand his real self. Further, Hosaralli, the principal punishes Prasad by whacking as Prasad disobeys the school rules. Whacking indicates the taste of wrong doings imposed by the authority on the disobedient students. "Prasad bends and the principal whacks him on his behind with a thin cane. Once, twice, thrice. Prasad is not sure how many is the correct punishment, for this was a double crime—the crime of not singing compounded by the crime of breaking the line. Once, twice, thrice. Prasad remains bent because he is still not sure." (Hasan 44) Also, it is customary that the student who has received the punishment should chant the Basava Vachanas that he will not repeat the same mistake in future. The chanting of Basava Vachanas can mend the behaviour as it helps to calm down the wildness and facilitate Prasad to concentrate on his studies.

Gradually, Hasan observes the behaviour of the students as how they tease and fight mimics in their benches. Hasan refers to the lecture of History wherein the teacher attempts to explicate to his students some lessons from History related to the leaning tower that symbolizes the leaning of ideas and concepts which are not understood by the learners. Also, the writer talks about the copper bell that rings, but symbolizes a metal that carries electric current quickly. The copper bell conveys quick and clear sound. The sound becomes the marker of change in the subject, class and time. Also, it conveys the school culture that is governed by the copper bell. The writer records, "When the copper bell is rung in the yard by the peon, and the history teacher walks out leaving his leaning tower behind, all the rancour drains away from the faces of the fighting boys as if they were enacting a battle specifically for history while the subject of maths requires completely new tactics." (Hasan 45-46)

Subsequently, the writer also touches upon the food habits and food culture of the students in the middle school. Food separates the girls as they form their commune during lunch. Similarly, the boys come together for lunch. They sit in a circle separately for their lunch. Rice and rasam become the main menu and the regular food. It also projects the white and red colours. Hasan mildly attacks the quality of food, food culture and the male-female culture in the school, "At lunchtime, the students sit in the round and are fed rice and rasam on steel plates along with glasses of watery buttermilk. The nineteen girls sit in a regal huddle, separate from the boys." (Hasan 46) Further, the author pens down the consequent occurrence of malpractices related to food, for instance, Bhagat, the caterer does not give sufficient food to the students. He keeps them starving by catering them limited amount of food, "That rascal Bhagat," says Savitri to Prasad. She masses the watery mix expertly in her cupped palm and eats at great speed. 'He gave me only one and a half cups of rasam. He pretends he's giving two but the second cup is always half empty.'" (Hasan 46) The complaint highlights the redundant quality of food, the malpractices of the staff and the suspicious and

unsatisfied students about the food. Here, the food served in school indicates food culture to establish equality among students. Food becomes a major connector of culture that keeps all the students connected, and, at the same time it proliferates the imageries of food. Food vocalizes multiple aspects of a social class, religion, familial status, culture, gender, relationships as well as group identities. Food is wider symbol, Jennifer Whitt articulates:

Food is naturally rich with symbolism, and has been since ancient times, because of its centrality to life. Foods provide an instant, strong visual image when used in language, and in different cultures, various foods may carry different connotations that create instant mental connections when referenced. Food-related language uses these associations by providing concrete wording to describe experiences, events, people, and emotions, often abstract ideas that seem to be completely unrelated to the food itself. In literature, food may represent many different things, such as power or social status, religion, family or relationships, gender, sexuality, wealth, and group identity. (Jennifer Web)

Gradually, Hasan also showcases the easier way of expressing anger through discarding of food. Males throw away their plates full of food in order to express their anger and frustration. Also, such acts facilitate them to rise above the lot. Prasad throws away the dish of rice and rasam without eating it, though he is hungry. This act highlights Prasad as a rebel who rebels against food, food-culture and the school discipline. The author is microscopic in her observations, "Anger makes Prasad shake the rice from his fingers and, in the same instant, lift the plate with his left hand and fling it into the yard." (Hasan 47) In this instance, the author showcases the rice sticking to the fingers of Prasad as majority of Indians eat their food with fingers. The writer highlights the anger and frustration of poverty and spatial fixities through Prasad who throws away his lunch. Bibhash Choudhary rightly illustrates, "Hasan's brilliant control over her creative resources is evident in the charting of the history behind Prasad's flight from school, that miniscule narrative segment where his throwing of the school-distributed lunch in a show of pride constitutes its own cultural undercurrent, his caning by the wonderfully caricatured Principal, Mr Hosaralli." (Choudhary Web)

The writer also touches upon colours as dominant images in the narrative. Colours contribute tremendously to the culture of a community or society. Colours, ornaments and smells become the major markers of culture. Often times, colours, smells and the wearing of ornaments signals the familial culture. For instance, Savitri's nose ring represents the familial culture of Savitri. The artificial colours are mixed with the wild colours in the mind of Prasad as he remembers all these, "The throwing of the rice, the hunger that remains in the shape of a circle in his stomach, the glint of Savitri's nose ring, all of these are making him think wild things. He is thinking of the dragonfly he couldn't catch." (Hasan 48) These project not only the wild colours of food, nose ring and the dragonfly, but these trigger curiosity in Prasad to abscond the school and see more colours through his wild flight to Bangalore.

Similarly, the writer extends her narration to the shape and colour of the crops through farmers. Even she goes to the extreme of bringing the smell of cut grass to the farmers' homes. She is keen on observing the small gashes from the leaves on the bare arms of the farmers. Also, the narrative inclines towards green documents as it is vivid in portraying ecological minutes wherein the farmers smell of the cut grass. Hasan observes, "His parents are out in the fields; this is the time of the year when they harvest the bajra. They are lost among the tall, lush plants and will come home in the evening smelling of cut grass with small gashes from the leaves all over their bare arms." (Hasan 49)

Further, Prasad runs away from his home by stealing the savings of his mother and joins Natesha, his cousin who is working in Bangalore in a restaurant. Restaurants are also known for spaces for food. The food prepared and served in restaurants contains colours, shapes, sizes, mouth-watering smells and attractive packaging. The writer observes Natesha as a machine, working in packing the snacks into newspapers. Also, the author describes the food items as snacks wrapped in papers:

Natesha wraps up two idlis and a vada in a square of plastic and then does up the parcel in newspaper and ties it with a piece of string from a spool hanging near his head. As soon as he has finished, he starts to wrap up some lemon rice. Then idlis and a vada again. He is a food-wrapping machine. There is a tall, sweaty dosa-making machine in a smoky corner of the kitchen... (Hasan 49)

Subsequently, the author chronicles how the backrooms or storerooms of restaurants become equally important part of such restaurants' food culture. The absconding boys who work in such restaurants have to shelter themselves in such places. The author enlists the shapes, images and space of the objects in the backroom, "They go to the backroom where, among sacks of rice and plastic drums full of urad dal, Natesha changes into a pair of stone-grey jeans. A grimy bouquet is embroidered in red on the right leg of the jeans, enclosing the word 'Miracle'. He spits on to his comb and brushes his hair back, holding a speckled pocket mirror before his face." (Hasan 50) These details highlight the colour and designs of the clothes that Natesha wears. Further, Hasan anticipates Prasad's fetish to observe Natesha who eats chicken as his food three times a day. The bright orange chicken remains a greater attraction for Prasad. The colour and the size of the food hover in his mind. "He eats it morning, noon and night and dreams of bright orange chicken legs hanging on long skewers in the windows of the small eateries in Shivaji Nagar." (Hasan 51)

Consequently, Hasan observes the sophisticated generation of the elite class who is busy with walking routines, exercises and talking on cell phones. The boys observe extremely thin girls with their mobile phones. The writer narrates the size of the girls, the cool air and the busy men. "They go out into the cool night and reach pavements where there are men with ties mumbling into their phones and extremely thin girls in groups of three or four who talk so frantically to each other they have to keep stopping to catch their breaths." (Hasan 51) The description projects how men and women are patterned in urban society. On the other hand, the author also comments

upon the blue uniform of Natesha and his rubber slippers-the regular school uniform-indicating that he has been absconding from school like Prasad.

Gradually, Hasan explicates urban and cosmopolitan culture in the mall through numerous lights from various shops. The novelties in malls, the technological advancements and the multiple lights provide the grandeur of urban life. The author showcases lights, sounds, noises and shapes in urban area, "...the very lights in the enormous mall seem to him to belong in some secret way to Natesha, lights that are reflected a hundred times in shop windows bursting with things, many of which Prasad cannot even find names for. They stand stock still in the middle of this sky-high house of luxuries and laugh out loud. Then they take the escalator up." (Hasan 52) Further, through Prasad's curiosity the writer showcases the variety of shops with necklaces and pens.

Consequently, Hasan illustrates through the eateries on the footpaths of Bangalore where food is cheaper. "This is not that kind of place, Prasad," says Natesha kindly, suddenly the mature elder brother. 'You won't get anything for fifty rupees here. We're going now, okay. We're going to A1 Biryani Point.'" (Hasan 53) The biryani is an amalgamation of several ingredients that projects the Muslim food culture that is adopted easily into Indian culinary practices.

Further, Hasan observes how the boys spend on buying costly deodorant though they are really hungry. Prasad spends all the stolen money from his mother's savings to buy the deodorant. The girl at the counter has painted her lips purple and smiles at the boys. The writer casually narrates the colour of the lipstick, the plastic bag and the bottle of the spray. Food, either it is in the cosmopolitan spaces or rural pockets, hold a mirror to the social scenario and the cultural status of the population it belongs. Food becomes one of the major markers of a society and the culture. Rudiger Kunow rightly pinpoints the significance of food in projecting the socio-cultural scenario of a specific social class. He states, "Food has, of course, always functioned as representation: ethnographers and cultural studies specialists have long been demonstrating how food not only feeds but also organizes us, how the making, taking, and disposing of aliments are socially and culturally inflected". (Kunow Web)

Food becomes one of the prominent markers that becomes a qualifier of a subject in literary narratives. Food images provide realistic visual images that the readers can anticipate what the writer desires to convey. Similarly, food can convey the economic and social class of the character. According to Jennifer Whitt food conveys the ethnicity, status, gender as well as cultural and personal identities of the characters in a literary discourse:

"...the usage of food is more than just a literary detail that provides readers with a realistic visual image. By questioning what, how, and how much a character eats, as well as how food is prepared, shared, served, avoided, or even bottled and preserved, literary scholars can gain a deeper perspective into a character's ethnicity, status, gender, and all parts of their cultural and personal identity." (Jennifer Web)

Subsequently, the writer portrays the vividness of city life on the pavements of Bangalore city. This picturesque quality of the narration not only amplifies the cultural hybridity, but also traces the inevitable canon of Indian culture of food available on footpaths, as she writes, "Amid the pavement sellers of suitcases and bus timetables and wilting fruit, an old woman is frying bhajjis on a blue pushcart in the light of a hurricane lantern." (Hasan 56) Hasan is keen to narrate the colours, lights and food on the pavements. She also explicates the varieties of bhajjis sold on the pavement. This scenario is very common in the Indian stations where one can get Indian local snacks in varieties, "They stand by the cart and wolf down egg bhajjis. Then they eat baigan bhajjis and chilli bhajjis. After they have used up their money, the woman gives them one just-fried, too-hot-to-hold onion bhajji apiece." (Hasan 56)

Food is an inevitable ingredient of identity, family, social class membership and national ethnicity. It does not remain a means to satisfy hunger as it signifies broader meanings Rudiger Kunow, a scholar from psychology and food culture states, "Recent psychoanalytic theory suggests that eating practices are essential to self-identity and are instrumental in defining family, class, and even ethnic identity. Although food and related imagery have long been part of literature, psychological theories have led to the examination of food and eating as a universal experience." (Kunow Web) Further, food and food-culture cross the domain of family and envelop belief systems, religion and rituals of a community. Writers narrate the communities through food-culture as inadvertent canon of a specific community. Food is wider thing, Jennifer Whit traces, "Food can serve to signify the belief systems, religious rules, and complex ideologies of a particular person or character, or that of an entire community or culture, that may not be explained explicitly in a text." (Jennifer Web)

The story concludes with Prasad returning home by bus. While returning home, he uncaps the can of the deodorant and sprays it on his face. The writer states that the backside of the bus, where Prasad was sitting, smells of it all the way home. The story projects two instances of wild things-firstly, the wild dragonfly that visits the school premise of Prasad, spreading its colours; and secondly, the flight of Prasad who wildly absconds his premise and visits Bangalore. Both represent wild things that they break their comfort zones and temporally tour other spaces investigating and exhibiting colours, smells, shapes, foods and sizes.

### **Conclusion:**

Anjum Hasan portrays the temporal heroism of Prasad and his wild trip to Bangalore that draws a parallelism between his flight and the flight of the dragonfly-both are wild and colourful. The story brings to light colours, shapes, sizes, food, taste, smell and food culture. The author portrays the minute details documenting the culture and food of a remote village in the central Karnataka and that of Bangalore city. Also, she draws a parallelism between the rural disciplined colourful life and the urban sophisticated as well as peripheral instances.



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The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper

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