

# The Lost Touch and Memories in Anjum Hasan's “The History of Touch” in *Difficult Pleasures*

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**Abstract:** Anjum Hasan, an alpine female writer who brings to light the minute details of human psyche through her narratives. Feminine sensibilities become the major concern for Anjum's writings. In her short story “The History of Touch” from her collection of short stories *Difficult Pleasures* the writer portrays the nostalgia of the female protagonist for the basic sense of touch which she is losing due to leprosy. Dweepa is detached from her husband and children and she finds herself into a hospital being treated for her disease where she is exiled from the society. Her longing for the family, familial love and care are apparent things which she longs for desperately. But beneath the veneer Dweepa is longing for the touch. The history of touch, the love and caress that she gave, received and shared, torture her through memories. The present paper attempts to trace the trauma of a woman suffering from leprosy and her longing for the pleasures in the past.

**Key words:** Past, touch, love, memory, trauma, leprosy,

**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 prestigious 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. Further, she is the recipient of Homi Bhabha Fellowship, in 2021. Recently, she is hailed by First Post magazine as a ‘genius...one of the finest Indian writers’. Her short story collection, *Difficult Pleasures* (2012) was shortlisted for The Hindu Literary Prize and the Crossword Book Award. Hasan's short story “The History of Touch” delves deep into the trauma of a married woman who is suffering from leprosy and who is longing for the pleasures of touch in the past. The present research paper attempts to investigate the trauma of belonging and the nostalgic past. Hasan's short story collection, *Difficult Pleasures* exhibit how human pleasures are difficult to attain and maintain. The collection portrays a mosaic of human emotions, interactions and trauma. “*Difficult Pleasures* is a collection of stories about the need to escape and the longing to belong. Accomplished, ambitious and full of surprises, this is a masterful collection - and it confirms Anjum Hasan's reputation as one of India's most gifted young writers.” (Hasan Cover Page)

'The History of Touch' is a short story of a young female teacher. "Dweepa was a teacher and had lived here for twelve years." (Anjum 207) This amplifies that Dweepa is social figure, always circumambulated by young students in school. Such a teacher who has been in the profession of teaching for twelve years is, all of a sudden, detected with leprosy, and, is pushed into social peripheries. The trauma of Dweepa is very poignant because she is exiled from society due to the disease in her body. Being isolated in a cold room of an isolated hospital for leprosy patients, Dweepa is always in the terrains of memories of touch, love and care. Touch has a greater social and individual significance. Touch is connected with warmth of love, affection and intimacy. Field and others define, "Touch communicates warmth, caring, and support, and is an essential part of the enjoyment we gain from our social interactions with close others. (Field et al., 1997; Kelter, 2009) 'The History of Touch' amplifies the agonies of Dweepa who is suffering from leprosy in a hospital where she is secluded with other lepers. The story brings to light the trauma of a young female distanced from her husband and children because of the disease. Dweepa, the focal figure is craving for touch of Shyam, her husband, Tia and Nitin, her daughter and son. Saloni, her closest friend visits her often in the hospital.

'Dweepa' means 'an island'. In reality, Dweepa is separated from her family and friends and she is placed among the lepers in isolation. She feels dislocated, alienated and exiled from her 'land', the land of warmth and love. This unaccustomed place forces her to escape into her past wherein she relishes the memories of intimacy and touch of her loved ones. For Dweepa the present is torturous and the past is golden. Hence, she is always in the memories of touch. Being a leper accidentally, the pleasures of touch in past become the most difficult pleasures to attain again. Leprosy is a disease that deforms a human being slowly by attacking the skin, fingers, toes, eyes and limbs of the patients. In a way, it pushes the patient into isolation, like the social outcasts.

The story begins with Dweepa as a leper in an isolated hospital for lepers. Naturally, the trauma of isolation and exile torments her. Gradually, the memories of touch in past haunt her which conveys her trauma that is long-lasting and difficult to overcome. Dweepa struggles with self-doubt, low self-esteem, fear of rejection, and craving for touch. People with leprosy often feel isolated and lonely, and crave physical contact with others. Women, being so close to every family member use touch more often. Similarly, when they are exiled the same touches become a store of memories and they crave for the same which turns to be difficult pleasures.

**Illustration:** 'The History of Touch' opens with Dweepa getting up from her bed in a shock by looking at her sleeping husband, Shyam whom she considers a stranger. Shyam is sleeping by keeping some distance from Dweepa. Anjum Hasan rightly pinpoints the distance a wife feels from her husband wherein Dweepa revisits her memories of past, "Dweepa wakes up one morning in shock. Who is this stranger in my bed? In my room, sleeping inches away from me?" (Anjum 203) Further, Dweepa is aimless in her past where she remembers how she considers her husband as a stranger. This instance highlights the distance between the husband and wife. Hasan narrates, "When Shyam opens his eyes and sees her standing there, aimlessly, she turns away and looks at her own face in the dressing-table mirror. 'What do you want for breakfast?' she ask her reflection and from the man in the

bed, the stranger, comes the sleepy-voiced reply.” (Anjum 204) This also hints at the promiscuity of Dweepa where she considers Shyam as a stranger.

Anjum Hasan presents a nucleus family of Shyam, Dweepa and their young children-Tia and Nitin. The protagonist is closely connected with her children. Dweepa strokes her daughter’s toes to wake her up. The memories of touch of the tiny toes pushes her into the past. Hasan writes, “She sits on her daughter's bed and strokes the small toes poking out from under the blanket. Tia is ten years old, the same age that Dweepa was when she fell in love with Mahatma Gandhi.”(Anjum 204) Further, the author enunciates the increasing coldness in the relationship between Dweepa and Tia. It is the disease that distances the mother and the daughter. Anjum narrates, “Dweepa had been aghast at the coldness in her daughter’s voice...she would no longer be placated by a mere hug.” (Anjum 204) Subsequently, the narrator compares Dweepa’s connectivity with her daughter and her fetish for Mahatma Gandhi-both seem distant, “but how will this girl cope with the certainty of not being loved enough, the fundamental scarcity of human warmth? Dweepa sits there holding Tia’s feet, waiting for her daughter to wake up, and thinking of Mahatma Gandhi.” (Anjum 204-205)

The author projects instances from history of Indian Freedom Fighting Movement wherein she showcases how Indian freedom fighters suffer willingly at the hands of the British officers. Dweepa observes Attenborough’s film on Mahatma Gandhi where the Indians are beaten brutally, who, in turn, bleed without protest as if they have lost sensation. These Indians in the film laugh and chat with their friends in spite of their wounds and pain. These instances make Dweepa to correlate her trauma with the sufferers on the screen. The screening of the film makes Dweepa to revisit the past and at the same time it makes her to take part in their pain. Hasan writes, “Later in the film, the white-clothed Indian men were beaten with truncheons by English officers. They didn't resist at all; they went down without protest. Dweepa started to cry. She wanted to embrace the small man who laughed and chatted with friends despite bandage on his head. In the after the beating, he was already laughing.”(Anjum 205)The suffering of the actors on the screen is not real, but it makes Dweepa to cry throughout the movie. This instance also develops a correlation between the oppressor on screen and the oppressor (Leprosy) within her. Both are foreigners who attack the natives. The author, on the contrary, articulates that Saloni, her friend mocks Dweepa and pinches her. The relationship between Dweepa and Saloni exhibits close relations and intimacy through touch. “Saloni continued pinching her through the film as if in the hope that this would get Dweepa to hold back her tears and save them both from embarrassment.” (Anjum 205) This intimacy continues even after Dweepa lands in the hospital. Hasan projects that the blood relations get weakened whereas non-blood relations give comfort in the time of testing. Dweepa is starving for touch. Starvation for touch is very significant and poignant in multiple ways because she is away from them as a leper, isolated with skin deterioration. Benisek Alexandra defines starvation for touch as:

When you don’t get enough physical touch, you can become stressed, anxious, or depressed. As a response to stress, your body makes a hormone called cortisol. This can cause your heart rate, blood pressure, muscle tension, and breathing rate to go up, with bad effects for your immune and digestive systems. These things can lead to worse



quality of sleep and a higher risk of infections. Other medical conditions, including diabetes, asthma, and high blood pressure, may get worse. Long-term touch starvation could even trigger post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). (Web)

Further, Anjum Hasan develops a bridge between the present and the past-the nexus between Dweepa and Saloni in present, and between Gandhi, Nehru, Sardar Patel and Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan-the leading political leaders of Pre-Independent India. The relations between the leaders project the intimacy in them which, ultimately, hints at the similarities in their thinking, ideas and goals. The writer pens down:

She saw him leaning against bolsters, Jawaharlal Nehru on one side of him and Sardar Patel on the other. They were discussing the future of the nation, all sitting terribly close together; they could almost be touching. In another painting, Gandhi had his arm linked with the handsome Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan's. They were walking like that, the small man holding on to the big one. She wished she could walk with them, cling to the Mahatma's other arm. (Anjum 205-206)

Anjum Hasan pin points the psychopathology of Dweepa as Dweepa sinks into herself. Being a leper, it is very embarrassing for her in her own home where she hides herself behind the newspaper. Here, the newspaper symbolizes media in physical and hard form that has reached her private space-home. Leprosy has encroached into her body, life, mind and relationships. It pushes her into isolation within her comfort zone-home, society, family and her body. Dweepa's trauma is evident as the writer pens down, "Dweepa camouflages herself behind a newspaper. Something is growing inside her that she doesn't know where to hide...Alone in the bathroom, even the spurt of the warm shower on her shoulder is painful." (Anjum 206) It seems very difficult for a married woman to escape from her world. There is no space for to escape or hide. The hide of the focal character is withering away from her in two different symbolic ways-firstly, the hide is her home, and secondly, her skin. Even the bathroom where one is all alone, she feels alienated. Even the warm shower fails to comfort her skin and mind. Every comfort turns painful.

Gradually, the writer unearths the past wherein the protagonist remembers her intimate relationship with her female friend, Saloni. The pleasure of touch between them and the revisiting of the past, now becomes the difficult pleasure. The gentleness of the touch in their school days in the bench in the class or in the school bus, are now turned into memories. The disease in the body makes her more restless and urging for the difficult pleasures past. The past contradicts with the dim dispensary. The past memories of the school days are bright whereas the present showcases dim and dull atmosphere where there is insufficient light-the hope for the future. The pleasures of touch and intimacy of teenage life between the girls become the difficult pleasure. Similarly, both the females help each other in healing from the wounds. Anjum narrates:

She stroked her friend's bare arm. After a while, she demanded that Saloni stroke hers. In that dimly lit dispensary, they discovered the pleasure of gently running their fingernails on the smooth skins of each other's inner arms. They did it to each other till they were sleepy with pleasure and Nurse returned from lunch. Then they went back to class

and continued to do it behind their desks. Long after Saloni's knee had healed, they would, sitting on the school bus or alone together in the chapel, smile and stretch out their arms to each other. (Anjum 207)

Further, the writer also hints at the promiscuity of Dweepa, who, in past, had developed intimacy with Akvir. The author keeps some part of her narration darker in case of Dweepa and Akvir relationship. The memories with Akvir-the memories of touch, love and intimacy haunt her. Similarly, the writer draws a parallelism between past and present-Akvir and Shyam as warm and cold respectively. Shyam's act of sleeping by her side does not comfort her. He seems a stranger who is lying in her bed calmly his eyes closed. Similarly, the writer also highlights the cultural and familial constraints that Dweepa cannot even think of Akvir as she is married. But, she has the liberty to escape in dreams of Akvir and imagine the past memories that she has with him. "She cannot think of Akvir in front of her family, no matter that she has started to dream of him with Shyam sleeping by her side." (Anjum 207) Further, the author narrates the psychodynamic of Dweepa who wishes that her close friend should have been there who would bring her back to her normal through pinch. "She wishes Saloni were here so she could pinch Dweepa hard and bring her to her senses." (Anjum 208) Pinch is the touch in the most intimate relationships used.

The author shifts her focus to religion, religious beliefs and Christianity. Saloni is a Catholic Christian who like the Christian Missionaries maintains her companionship with Dweepa even when she knows that Dweepa is diagnosed of leprosy. The physical intimacy between the two friends continue. The companions observe the statue of Jesus and revisit his suffering, imagining how Christ might have suffered as he was nailed by the public. The vivid description of Christ, his wide open mouth, his bare arms burnt brown in the scorching sun exhibit the sensibility and sufferings of Christ being reciprocated by Dweepa. The author criticizes the people as blind with the sunlight who sentence Christ to death. Anjum narrates very keenly:

...the Catholic Saloni holding the non-Catholic Dweepa's hand. They were soon watching open-mouthed the suffering of Christ. What impressed Dweepa most was the heat. The sweat dripping from his brow as he carried his cross up. His bare limbs burnt brown. The dust raised by people who pressed in from all sides to see him. Sunlight blinding the eyes of the men who sentenced him to death. As soon as the first nails was struck, Saloni lolled forward and then fell sideways into the aisle. (Anjum 208-209)

Anjum Hasan develops the theme further by exhibiting the sensitivity of humans towards nature. The sun is too hot to bear. The nurses and sisters (nuns) who are working in the hospital of the lepers also suffer from heat. The nun in the hospital is trying to provide comfort to a leprosy patient. As she says, 'It's too hot in there,' said Sister Joy, fanning the limp girl.' (Anjum 209)

Further, Anjum narrates the trauma of the protagonist as she experiences alienation from her family. In her small room where she is all alone, she feels dejected from the society. The single clothesline, the single shelf of books highlight her limited world. Dweepa is isolated like an island with very limited access to the world and with limited resources. The writer mediates Dweepa's revisiting the past and remembering the books she had read. These books

showcase her sojourn and stages in her earlier life. There is a strong parallelism that the writer draws between the present and the past-the present is full of loneliness and cold as it is denoted by the iron cot with a single mattress that has no warmth whereas the past is full of warmth of love and happiness. These memories keep her alive like for the refugee on an island memories become the foundation and food for survival:

Dweepa sits in her small room on the cot with its too-thin mattress. There's a sagging clothesline for the rainy days and a single shelf of books, though the ones she used to read at a single shelf of books, though the ones she used to read at home are missing. *I'll Never Be Young Again. My Michael. The End of the Affair*. Six months have passed since that crazy Sunday and she has no connection left with the woman who sat behind a weekend supplement trying not to think of what it would be like to turn a corner and run into him. (Anjum 209-210)

The narrator explicates the past of Dweepa as Dweepa revisits the past, especially, the history of touch and love. Touch signifies the love and affection that she has received in the past from the man/men she had loved. She remembers every minute detail of the male touch while love making, in past. These memories of touch and taste haunt her as she remembers, "Yet she still rehearses it sometimes: the history of touch. It starts with someone touching you, Dweepa says to herself. Someone brushing their arm against yours, pressing their nose into your neck, kissing you for certain, your tongue tasting of their tongue, their tongue tasting of cigarettes and honey." (Anjum 210) Further, the writer provides the snippet of peripheral touches that Dweepa receives in the hospital. For instance, the warden in the hospital holds Dweepa by the elbow- where the flesh is thin and there is less possibility of infection. The writer states, "Dweepa', says Parvati, the warden, taking her elbow, urging her forward." (Anjum 210)

Gradually, Anjum Hasan unfolds the peak of trauma of the focal character as she confronts several limbless and deformed lepers. The deformed figures around her create a hell like situation wherein she observes her deformed fingers. She pinches herself angrily in order to check whether she is awake or in a nightmare. Prof Robin Dunbar, an evolutionary psychologist at the University of Oxford rightly pin points the importance of touch in human lives. He says, "Touch has a huge impact on our psychological and physical wellbeing, says "With our close friends and family, we touch each other more than we realize." (Web) The hospital for the lepers is the most peripheral in the human society as the commons never establish any contacts with them. These are forsaken by their near and dear ones. The cold building, cold cots, thin mattresses, deformed bodies and hollow nurses bring the notion of hell. It is leprosy that attacks the skin and the parts of body, turning ultimately a human being into a senseless lump of flesh and bones that shrinks every day. Hasan writes how the disease encroaches human bodies, triggering trauma of the present situation, and the nostalgia for the touch of the past, "The disease has eaten into the noses of some of the others while many are legless or armless. Despite the doctor's repeated assurances, Dweepa is haunted by the thought of paralysis. She wakes up repeatedly every night and angrily pinches her deformed fingers, trying to get them to yield some little feeling, force from them the memory of touch." (Anjum 210-211)



The writer portrays that Saloni is the only character in the story who can anticipate the agonies of the protagonist. The gradual deterioration of body parts when one is alive is really very horrible. Both the friend imagine the slow death encroaching towards Dweepa, “It's only Saloni she can share her horror with. ‘You stop feeling anything,’ she tells her friend repeatedly. ‘This is bad enough and then it gets worse: you can't move. First the nerves go, then the muscles. My fingers can't feel you and one day I might not be able to raise my hand to touch you either.’” (Anjum 211) As Dweepa is losing her fingers and the sensibility of the same, she has to eat by using a spoon. The spoon symbolizes the cool instrument for feeding oneself wherein the person has no capacity of eating on her own using her fingers. Similarly, it also symbolizes that the spoon can help her to prevent the direct contact of her infected fingers with the food, morsels and the mouth. “Now she holds a spoon in her left hand and slowly eats her beans and rice.” (Anjum 211)

Further, Anjum Hasan vocalizes how these lepers are treated as social outcasts. They are never allowed to move in the public domains. The basic amenities are not for them. It is the supervisor of the hospital who has sought permission from the local municipality that the public garden be made available for the lepers after it is closed for the common civilians. The writer portrays the deformed and disfigured lepers in the park who relish sometime as children. In a way, they revisit their childhood. Anjum observes, “Parvati has permission from the municipality; once a month she takes them to a nearby park after it has been closed to the public. Disfigured and crippled men and women will hop on one leg, ride the see-saw, play at the swings. They'll look like giant children belatedly discovering childhood.” (Anjum 211)

The author observes the rules for the visitors in the hospital as the relatives and friends who visit the patients, they need to keep some safe distance. These rules are meant for controlling the contamination from the diseased. But, Saloni never follows these rules. She hugs Dweepa whenever she meets her. The hug of Saloni is a comforting touch that keeps Dweepa alive with a hope that she is still a part of this world. The companionship between Dweepa and Saloni crosses the borders of the rules for visitors in the hospital. The public space of the hospital wherein Dweepa experiences alienated, it is Saloni who gives her the comfort and warmth of touch and affection through hug. Anjum Hasan narrates, “There are signs all over telling visitors what they can and cannot do but Saloni still comes around the table and hugs her friend.” (Anjum 212) On the other hand, her family members-Tia and Nitin, and Shyam, her husband greet her with a distance. They visit her in her room but, they keep a safe distance from her. They prefer to walk barefoot on the hospital ground, but they never hug her tightly. Even Shyam, her partner, holds her for some time and leaves the hospital. Here, the author is keen in showing how Dweepa is desperate to get the touch and intimacy of her family but, they perform their formalities of greeting her mechanically. The warmth in the relationship is lost. Anjum pens down, “She doesn't allow herself to touch them when they visit. They sit at the table and talk for an hour. They walk in the grounds. They give her the gifts they've brought her-the books, the snacks, the various ingenious devices she must work with to strengthen her fingers. Shyam, his eyes averted, holds her for a second, and then they all leave.” (Anjum 212)

Further, the writer pin points the moment when the seed of leprosy is transferred into Dweepa. It was a gesture of charity when Dweepa was dropping a coin into the bowl of the beggar on the street, and at the same moment the beggar sneezed severely. The beggar was so close to her that the germs of leprosy automatically transferred to the donor. Here, the writer presents the reciprocal instance wherein both act as the donors and the donees. Dweepa is a donor of coin, a tiny form of cash and the beggar is the donee; similarly, the beggar is the recipient of the coin and the donor of leprosy germs. This incident, though seems minor, turns into a major accident in the life of Dweepa. Dweepa remembers the painful incident of the past:

Dweepa is sure she got the disease years ago from a sick beggar in town who'd sneezed into her face. She dropped a coin she was giving him; they both went down together on the pavement and suddenly there was this face close to hers. Something about his eyes made her think that the man, despite the matted hair and dirty bandages, had lived a wholly different life once; he looked like he was about to say something to reveal this older self but instead he'd just sneezed. (Anjum 212-213)

The writer puts forward the controversial opinions of two females-Dweepa and Saloni-the bosom friends who think differently about the disease being transferred to Dweepa. For instance, Dweepa thinks it from the street beggar who transferred it while she was putting a coin in his bowl; whereas, Saloni thinks it is transferred by the promiscuous relationship of Dweepa with Akvir. Here again the author takes her subjects into past, revisiting the moments of intimacy, love, touch, pleasure of touch and pain of not having it now. The author chronicles the craving for touch, "Saloni is not convinced; she thinks Dweepa might have got it from Akvir. ... The only thing running through her life, binding all the crazy fragments together, has been her hunger for touch. But Saloni can't see that. They thought and felt alike as children but now Saloni's pulling in a different direction, she's thinking about right and wrong, pleasure and pain." (Anjum 213)

Further, the author contradicts the mythical beliefs from the holy texts like *The Bible* with the real life. The Holy texts have imaginary ideas and ideals wherein the sinners are punished; and those who are naughty, they are punished temporally and cured by the angels. These stories are good to read from *The Bible*. Dweepa realizes the fact that she is not in the fairy tale. She has bear the reality of life-the fact that she is a leper. She says, "This is not that kind of story, where you're naughty and God sends down his angels to fix you. We're not in the Bible." (Anjum 213)

The writer traces another secret of Dweepa as she goes to see Akvir for a week. Before leaving, she tells Shyam, her husband that she is going to see her cousin. But, she goes to see Akvir and spends a week with him. Now, she remembers the touches of Akvir were wild that caused her pain and bruises. Now, these memories become painful for her as if she is put into hell or jail for her lie. She remembers, "Her enduring memory of that week with Akvir is being out of breath—from talking, from making love, from laughing. But most of all from closeness, from being embraced so hard her chest felt bruised." (Anjum 213)



**Conclusion:** Anjum Hasan’s “The History of Touch” brings to light the trauma of alienated Dweepa, a leper patient who escapes into her past. Being a leper, she is losing her skin, sensation by touch, and fingers as a result the memories of touch, caresses, love, affection, intimacies and sex haunt her. In addition to these, the writer makes Dweepa’s trauma more intense by shifting her from school, as a teacher into an alienated room in a leprosy hospital who revisits her past, especially, the history of touch. Hasan is successful in portraying the multiple layers of trauma of female leper.

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