

**In-between Spaces: Exploring Alienation and Identity in Cross-Cultural Contexts in Anjum Hasan's *Neti, Neti Not This, Not This*.**

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**Abstract**

Anjum Hasan's perfectly penned novel *Neti Neti: Not This, Not This* is truly an introspective narrative that investigates the fluid notions of identity, complexity, and the theme of alienation in post-globalized urban India. Through the character Sophie Das's external and internal journeys from Shillong, the hills to Bangalore, the hypermodern metropolis in which the novel connects with the existential quandary of a period that finds itself liberated from the tradition but not completely embraced by modernity. This paper explores the theme of dislocated identity as central to the characterization of the protagonist Sophie, utilizing the lens of postcolonial and urban alienation within the spiritual-philosophical framework of the Vedantic idea of *Neti Neti*, meaning neither this nor that. Through a mix of cultural, spatial, and psychological analysis, the study proclaims that Sophie's situation is emblematic of a wider millennial difficulty to articulate selfhood in a neoliberal and fragmented context.

**Keywords:** Anjum Hasan, alienation, dislocation, identity, postcolonial, Bangalore, Sophie Das

**Introduction**

In the often changing socio-cultural view of post-liberalization India, identity has become a site of precipitation. The updated rise of urban centers like Bangalore has caused a generational damage, where youngsters of India have to negotiate between rootedness and mobility, tradition and modernity, social expectations and personal desires constantly. Anjum Hasan's master piece *Neti Neti: Not This, Not This*, which was published in the year 2009, offers a distressing exploration of this displacement through the character of Sophie Das, a young girl of just twenty-five who leaves her homeland of Shillong, the hill, in search of meaning in the straggling anonymity of Bangalore. The very title of the novel is inspired by an ancient Vedantic concept of 'neti neti,' which means 'not this, not this'. In the concept of spiritual philosophy, this phrase is a reflective tool or a mantra for emptying away the illusions to expose the true self. In Hasan's literary reenvisioning, the phrase becomes symptomatic of twenty-five-year-old Sophie's state of being is being caught among worlds that failed to define her through confirmation, and alternatively navigating life through negation and rejection continuously. As a main character of the novel, Sophie withstands

easy categorization. Similar to the title of the novel, she is neither traditionally and culturally rooted in her Shillong's Khasi heritage, nor is she comfortably comprehended into the fastly moving world of the cosmopolitan city. Her life in the novel is sculpted as a narrative of transition in emotional, geographical, and spiritual as well. Anjum Hasan, in her novel, doesn't offer any resolutions; instead, she depicts Sophie's zigzagging journey as one of perpetual search. By creating the novel *Neti Neti*, as a critical text, it is understood that the ways in which fictions of postcolonial Indian urban tussle with the idea of displaced and dislocated identity.

This research paper aims to analyze the ways in which the novel stages the theme of alienation of the self via multiple frameworks, such as physical displacement, that's from Shillong to Bangalore, cultural alienation because of being from the Northeast and moving to mainland India, specially psychological struggles of not belonging to one place and also the philosophical and spiritual dilemmas enrooted in the idea of *neti neti* meaning neither this nor that. Through these layered readings, this research article will insist that Sophie Das' displacement is not just a case of personal crisis where she moves to Bangalore from Shillong for better earnings, but is reflective of a wider cultural anxiety that torments urban youngsters in contemporary India. In this context, Anjum Hasan's novel becomes a remarkable contribution to both sides, that is, Indian English literature and also the global narratives of urban alienation.

### Literature Review

Literature review on Anjum Hasan's work *Neti, Neti: Not This, Not This* mostly examines a study of identical crisis, which includes migration, displacement, memory, alienation, technoculture, and psychological exclusions. On the basis of displacement and memory, northeast Indian identity is been dealt by Himakshi Kalita in her research paper titled "Divided Selves in Anjum Hasan's *Neti, Neti: Not This, Not This*". The paper investigates the existential fragmentation of the protagonist Sophie and also focuses on the ways in which her interiority is pulled by various forces. Sophie's familial roots in her motherland, Shillong, and the personal pressure in Bangalore are two different sources that result in disintegrated memories and alienation. This study of Himakshi Kalita highlights the cultural accuracy of identity crisis among the North Indians, asking for space and psychologically the self of belongingness in their very own land, India. Based on technoculture and Postmodern migration, a study titled "A Post-modern outlook of Anjum Hasan's *Neti, Neti*" by Johnsi Rani, Dr. Y. Vigila Jebaruby in the *International Journal of Food and Nutritional Sciences*. In this article, they make use of postmodern frameworks to investigate how the protagonist Sophie was the living representative of a modern young woman through migration for a luxurious life which has attractive payments, incentives, and unexpected freedom in the so-called cyber age. It also argues that when the focus on the gender is twisted, it has social implications in urban migration, which intensifies the identity dissonance as its key context to articulate. To move further, more specifically into the psychological exclusion in northeast marginalization a research has been done on Sophie's realization through the lens of Indian Writing in English titled, "She was alone from now on. She was her own context". This article was more of a self-defined process in marginalization.

The absence of historical and political narratives in the identities of the northeast makes them to feel like outsiders by realizing their internal feeling of alienation. In the context of urban alienation Ivy SCI interview details Anjum Hasan's awareness on urban poetics. It also confirms that the author has reflected both the cities which are "liberate and imprison", cultural negotiation, alienation and shaping personal history. Moreover, Anjum Hasan has featured in The Hindu as well stating that the author has discusses the location as duel private yet dystopian which enables and constrain the character Sophie's sense of self.

### **From Hill Town to High-Rises: Spatial Displacement**

Displacement and dislocation are one of the main themes of Anjum Hasan's masterpiece *Neti Neti, Not Tis, Not This*. It mainly concerns the physical dislocation from one place to another. Because of this change, the identities of the characters in the novel are being continuously shifted at each time. The protagonist Sophie Das, the eldest and the adopted daughter of the Das family, moves from her native land, Shillong, to the metropolitan city of Bangalore. There in Bangalore, Sophie faces an ample number of difficulties that question her identity in the existence. The motherland land Shillong's landscapes, natural beauty, familial familiarity, and the generational continuity contrast deeply with the metropolitan city Bangalore's malls, call centers, impersonal glass facades, and rapid consumerist rhythms. She experiences different cultures, practices, and traditions in that money-mad city, which is beautifully called as the Garden City of India. The novel's move from hill town to haloed high rise makes a magnificent connection between the character and the space to uncover the truth of spatial displacement in the twentieth-century popular culture. This also brings in the fact that migration is the root cause of all these to take place and also a part of the wider post-liberalization phenomenon, which has professional, filling the existential vertigo of the mentioned technocratic urban spaces. In fact, the physical move or the change triggers the affective rupture because it includes not only physiology but also the psychology. The mind of a continuous change gets hurt very often, even for a little discomfort, because of its emotional weakness. Sophie feels that the calm and silent stillness of her motherland, Shillong in Meghalaya, is irreparably lost when compared to the money-mad metropolitan city of Bangalore, because it often fails to give a sustainable anchorage. On the whole the Anjum Hasan's protagonist Sophie Das becomes a spatially adrift person who is an active and regular participant of the Vedic phrase "neti neti which is the very title of the novel. It's obvious that Sophie's name describes her as what she is actually not, rather than what she simply is.

### **The Voice of the Northeast in the Metropolis: A Cultural Othering**

Although Sophie Das was an adopted daughter of teaching professional Mr. Das and family from Shillong, she considers Shillong as her native and the parents and siblings as their own. Nowhere in the novel has Anjum Hasan portrayed Sophie as someone else's child and not being a family member of the Das family. Sophie is considered as a main member of the family, where her father considers her as an adviser, her mother really feels from her heart that Sophie is her eldest daughter and her personal counselor, and also has her back always. For Sophie's little sister Mukulika, the biological daughter of Mrs & Mr. Das and family, who was born after eight years from adopting Sophie, she is the second mother and the

decision maker of the family. It means that Sophie means a lot even though she is not related by blood to the family. Anjum Hasan has made Sophie much more worthy than Mukulika in her novel. They, as a nuclear family of four, belong to the Khasi, an ethnic community of Meghalaya considered as an 'outsider' even in their motherland, because of their community. So even in Shillong, Sophie roams with the mask on her face in her so-called own motherland. So wearing a mask is not something new to Sophie, to mention this as a barrier to set free in flying colours. Her identity is sharply marked by the background of her tribe, and that is set with the help of her Khasi community from her motherland, Shillong, which gives her the status of an 'outsider'. Not only from her very own land, but also from the entire world, her motherland, Shillong, in the Northeast India, is completely considered as the 'other' according to Gayathri Spivak. Due to their appearance, they are mistaken for Chinese and not recognized as Indians around the world. Northeast people are always related to the Chinese because of their features; some people accept them, but some are scared to go near them. On 12<sup>th</sup> April 2021, *The Hindu* came out with a result by the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) stating that Northeast India seamlessly fits an Indian's imagination of a Chinese. The study found that 78% of people who were interviewed believed that physical appearance is the most important reason for prejudice against them. During COVID-19, they faced an increased number of acts of hate and prejudice against them. About 1200 people, mostly women from the region Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Tiripura, Nagaland, and Meghalaya, were interrogated and boldly said they did face racial discrimination in the metropolitan cities of India. These wider cultural incomprehension, prejudice, and ignorance upon the Northeast people by others exacerbate the sense of non-belongingness for the protagonist Sophie. Sophie of the novel is neither completely from Khasi community nor wholly comprehended within the garden city Bangalore's mainstream urban milieu the author Anjum Hasan weaves the moments as subtly as lunatic isolation which is the lack of dialectal familiarity and micro-aggression, spatial ignorance which is into the protagonist's daily encounters and acceptance of food preferences are not to be missed in the bargain. This persistent timid discordance recognizes Sophie's alienation and transformation towards Bangalore, towards a site of cultural and traditional displacement rather than revitalization.

### **Identity as Negation: The Psychological Alienation**

Generally, psychology plays a vital part in alienation, not only in culture and identity. The author of the novel, Anjum Hasan, has portrayed Sophie Das's alienation as a regular visitor to her soul because of her own community in her motherland. An eight-year-old Sophie at the beginning of the novel started manifesting her future to be in a metropolitan city. In spite of her 'outsider' feeling, which made her feel alienated was a strong defender in the process of her migration. She never had her own true identity anywhere from the start of the novel. Anjum Hasan has displayed her true relationship with other characters to the readers in her previous novel *Lunatic in my Head*, saying that she was the adopted daughter of Mr. Das and family because they did not have a child. So neither the author nor the readers know her true identity. The very word identity itself is a very big negation in the life of Sophie. In a deeper sense, she doesn't actually belong or be one with the people of Shillong because of her tribal self, yet also can't consider herself as one among the people of

Bangalore. She is neither described by her family nor a girl of strong and fully independent. Even though she manifested her future self before getting to know the true colours of her future, the inner self of hers is terribly damaged in the negation and alienation that she faced often in her life psychologically. Not only the culture and tradition, but also the situations at her workplace proves the negation of the protagonist throughout the novel. She wanted to be recruited by a well-reputed company in the IT field, which has a modern way of lifestyle. After immigration, with the great hope of freedom from psychological alienation, Sophie had a downfall again by getting a job in a film dubbing company. Through these disappointments, it's brought to the light that Anjum Hasan uses Sophie as a catalyst to portray the internal and external obstacles when she traveled to Bangalore for better prospects. Psychological alienation can't be limited to the workplace. It can also cross the boundary when it comes to social affairs. For example, it was too difficult for Sophie to get a house in the metropolitan city of Bangalore, just because she was from the Northeast. She felt so suffocated because she was ignorant about her own roots, her identity, her race, and her culture, which was not even known to her. Sophie is somewhere in the middle, which no one can explain in words, neither the author of the novel nor the very character Sophie, if she lives in reality. This internal reasoning reflects Vedantic denial, which is the title of the novel *Neti, Neti Not This, Not This*, which questions the existence of neither this nor that. It's apt not to rise up to transcendence but as a tool of existential paralysis. Textually, Anjum Hasan articulates by the character Sophie's dialogue in conclusion, saying "She was her own context" in the novel. With no roots or clear picture of belongingness, protagonist Sophie's identity becomes self-referential and even precarious, which means a subtle area with no proper or fixed boundaries.

### **Existing Nitpicking on the Daily Grind**

Cultural Hybridity and globalization make the entire culture and tradition to be secondly prioritized. There comes the change of modernity from westernization. Through this, the popular culture has been understood clearly, and it also covers the youngsters of the particular period. To prove that the author Anjum Hasan brings in the situation where all the characters of the novel are involved in drinking alcohol and smoking cigarettes, which are considered to be taboo and not even talked about. Women taking part in it are now being celebrated, and it's proudly called 'women empowerment'. Closing the shutters on the street and drawing the curtains at home has become a vogue of the present generation. To know further more it is more enjoyable when it is a family gathering. Disobeying the parents' words and going for night outs were considered as a casual way of life. Food for hunger and necessity became playful, and taste is to be enjoyed. This is seen at the end of the novel, where Sophie and her boyfriend Swami, friends Anu and Anil, go out to have dinner at 2 AM after Bob Dylan's concert to be slaves to their tongues on failing to serve the stomach. Day outs have become mandatory, whether they have money in hand or not. Credit cards are used as a tool to live a high life, even though there is no money in hand. Tea shops are upgraded to cafes where everyone can spend time talking and relaxing. Malls with food courts, games with entertainment, and theatres for leisure are being under one roof with windows and wall clocks, making them occupied completely without knowing the other side of the window. Fashion improves the lifestyle in the manner of clothes, makeup, and accessories, which

enhances the glow to keep them updated. Salary doesn't matter at any cost to live a high-fi life, and that is meant to be respected. Anjum Hasan's protagonist Sophie, earning the minimal amount, wanted a huge apartment which has "360-degree panoramic view" (Hasan121) of the city in a luxurious area to keep her head high in the society. Status matters more than their affordability, is often shown in the novel, not only in Sophie's life but also through Swami, who would like to buy a luxurious car without any bank balance and just by availing a loan. He initially liked "the Chevy Tavera" (Hasan 8), and then after a week, he says that "no harm drooling over an Audi" (Hasan 8). Anil shows off with a brand-new car, which was his birthday gift from his parents. Maya, a full-fledged personality, would like to be educated abroad without anything in hand and just wishes for the big idea to come true.

With all these entertainments and occupations, Sophie feels alienated, and her loneliness brings all her old memories of Shillong, which she actually heart of hearts considers to be a calm and resting place, and more a solace. By employing all these mundane details of cell-center banter, pub nights, and mall trips to emphasize suburban existence. In the metropolitan and money-mad city of Bangalore's lavish modernity, Sophie always felt sterile. Even at the time of relaxation, she feels ritualized, hollow, and commodified.

The entire novel is vacant of romance at the peak or absolute rebellion; instead, the focal point is on a quiet disintegration, which brings alienation not as a spectacular but as a regular visitor. Sophie Das' emotional slant, more than heading towards the disaster, it is slowly heading towards the emptiness that coils every day, strengthened via micro-moments of uncertainty and stoppage.

### **Nostalgia, Myth, and the Memory of Shillong**

Anjum Hasan has created characters who are high in nostalgic elements. Sophie Das finds solace only in her motherland, Shilong, and says often that it gives her space to breathe and calms her down in any situation with its endless beauty and powerful kindness. Shillong is the place where the entire beauty of the earth lies in equalizing and overcoming the negative energy and spreading a positive aura. When Sophie's friend Ringo committed a blunder, everyone else was scared and upset, but Sophie was the only one who longed for the love of her motherland. She wanted and left Bangalore immediately to heal herself with the help of nature. She considers nature to have her back and believes that in the myth of Shillong, for a genuine cure and relief. As an author of the novel, Anjum Hasan opines that for her carefully and beautifully carved character Sophie, the motherland Shillong has always been a memory myth. She views the very idea of home more than the constructed home with love and care. This is obvious throughout the novel, where Sophie always makes a visit to Shillong to heal her whenever she is high in depression. This shows her craving towards a narrative stable, which is more than enough to ground her. Even though so much happens, the novel *Neti Neti: Not This, Not This* cynically reminds us that the memories of this kind are curative only in the fact of imagination, but not in reality. A scholar named Kalita holds the opinion saying that synthetic nostalgia leads directly towards the "fragmented memory," which is said to be neither cohesive nor redemptive. Throughout the novel, it's important to understand that Sophie had never returned to start her life again, but only to evidence her distant feelings from the past.

## Conclusion

The novel *Neti Neti: Not This, Not This* by Anjum Hasan, which means neither this nor that, appears as a spectacularly nuanced investigation of existential dislocation, urban alienation, and identity in post-liberalized India. At the capital of this literary ground stands the protagonist Sophie Das as neither a hero nor an anti-hero, according to the title of the novel. But rather a frame of modern inactivity dominated by the things which Sophie is not, rather than declared by what Sophie is. Sophie's regular and continuous travel from her motherland, Shillong to the Metropolitan city of Bangalore works on multiple levels, such as philosophical struggle with emptiness, emotional estrangement, cultural exile, and physical migration. Sophie Das of the novels is truly seen that she has not just made a move spatially, but on the other side floats via steps of displacement of which deepens her feeling of loneliness and alienation. She is a woman believed to be completely empowered. But the fact is that Sophie has been fundamentally outdated from her very self, often misunderstood in the earning city by being an outsider in her hometown. The idea of *neti neti*, meaning neither this nor that, truly a way to spiritual liberation via denial, is skillfully revamped by the author Anjum Hasan as a metaphor of postmodernism for the identity crisis. The constant refusal of roles plays a vital part in Sophie's life in changing from a good friend to her friends, best employee at workplace, loyal lover to her boyfriend, and a responsible daughter to her parents, are reflects the strong malaise, which is unable to belong to one narrative. Through the narrative of Anjum Hasan, Sophie's consciousness is that the one that continuously correcting but never transpires and is often involved only in the process of search without gaining the results. Sophie is a context of herself, which is dismissed, confused, and unknown. Significantly, the novel doesn't ask to settle the protagonist Sophie's existential accumulation. It doesn't offer any dramatic epiphany, redemption, or triumphant return. Instead, it introduces dislocation as an experiencing circumstance of life in postcolonial modern India. This is more importantly for migrants, especially for woman like Sophie who has the cultural margins. The novel *Neti Neti: Not This, Not This* by Anjum Hasan gently evaluates the urban neoliberal vision and its oath of revitalization, bringing out the feeling of alienation can also be a result of the option as much as circumstances. Anjum Hasan's works, prose and poetry, are usually combined with gentle irony that permits the readers to encounter the calm pain of the journey of a twenty-five-year-old Sophie Das alongside the loneliness, confusion, and clarity. By centralizing the narrative part, which is surrounded by an enigmatic, uncertain protagonist, the author challenges the presiding frameworks of self-realization and determination in Indian English fiction.

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