

Article

Divided Selves in Anjum Hasan's *Neti, Neti: Not This, Not This* (2009)

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Abstract: Alienation of the self and haunting memories of the past is not new to literary world. But when it comes to Northeast India, the question of the self, identity and memory take a different turn. The Northeast region of India, comprising eight states—Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura—is known for its rich cultural diversity, complex history and unique geographical location. The concept of the self and identity is central to much of the literature emerging from Northeast India. The present paper attempts to analyze the divided selves and fragmented memories in Anjum Hasan's *Neti, Neti: Not This, Not This* (2009). The present novel selected for the study offers insights into the struggles of the female protagonist Sophie Das as she navigates her sense of the self within her community and the outer world. The other characters in the novel surrounding Sophie Das in the novel also grapple with the struggle for self-determination as their lives are pulled by different forces at the same time. The novel is pre-occupied with identity crisis, displacement, overwhelming memories, conflict, alienation, isolation, intergenerational relationships and many more. The process of self-discovery is often catalyzed by encounters with unfamiliar situations, people or ideas that challenge the characters' preconceived notions about themselves and their surroundings. As a result, their selves are split into many and their minds are impacted by disjointed memories. The present study will supplement the thematic arguments with theoretical framework as well as explications from the text itself.

Keywords: Self; Identity; Memory; Shillong; Bangalore

Introduction

A great number of fiction writers and poets from Northeast India tend to seem to engage in the literary depiction of the identity experience and the sense of belonging and rootedness posited as a revisionist politico-literary discourse which distinguish them as socially and politically rooted writers and poets. Anjum Hasan, the Shillong based poet and novelist from Northeast India, is no exception to this. Hasan's writings seem to personalize the larger socio-political realities of Northeast India. The present paper attempts to explore how individuals respond to identity and transformation of the self in a multicultural context in the selected text for the present study. The hybridized selves can best be understood to have been placed between conflicts of the binary between the 'self' and the 'other' in in-betweenness. The words *neti, neti* appears to be derived from the Sanskrit for "neither this, nor that," capturing a state of in-betweenness as well as an essence of uncertainty. The novel *Neti, Neti: Not This, Not This* (2009) is read as a sequel to her first novel *Lunatic in My Head* (2007). Sophie Das comes to the city of Bangalore from Shillong to live her dream life. Sophie cannot be at ease with the city of Bangalore. She minutely observes the happenings of the city from the balcony behind her rented apartment. Sophie is a hidden spectator to the customs of the city and though the human love of custom appeals to her, the memory of Shillong creeps to her mind. When in the month of January, she sits outdoors for a while every morning, soaking in the Bangalore sun before it gets too hot, a "throwback to all the winter mornings she had spent turning brown in the gentler sun of her hometown, Shillong" (Hasan, 10) comes to her mind. Sophie's self is divided between two cities, Bangalore and Shillong, and memory and daydreaming act as negotiating tools between these two places. Sophie wanted to go to America with the help of a scholarship but she never got that scholarship. In her Bangalore room, she pulls out the glossy brochures of American universities that she had accumulated in Shillong and she felt that "those pictures—arcaded buildings, neat classrooms, groups of students sitting on sunlit lawns—were another lost world" (Hasan, 30). If seen from outside, Sophie's life seems to be appreciable. Sophie works in a company called Star Titles, which had its headquarters in Los Angeles and many of her colleagues are earning fat money from this job. Though Sophie has mastered the system of her job, still she is not interested in promotion and she has totally given up her dream of going to America. She feels stuck in her life and a kind of existential crisis pervades her existence. She feels like a torn and divided person. The reference to Swami Vivekananda teaching about the self and the soul of an individual throughout the novel heightens the effect of crisis of the self: "The human being is, as it were, a centre, and is attracting all the powers of the universe towards oneself, and in this centre is fusing them all, and again sending them off in a big current. Such a centre is the real person—the almighty, the omniscient—and the whole universe is drawn towards this person" (Hasan, 29). Even after intensely reading Swami Vivekananda, Sophie cannot derive any contentedness and her crisis of the self continues.

Sophie feels like an alien in every city she visits, whether it is Bangalore or Shillong, and she is never pleased with the choices available. Sophie seemed to be unsure about where she truly belongs. Sophie cannot even find at ease in the company

of her boyfriend Swami in Bangalore who works in a call centre. Sometimes she feels that Swami is similar with the Bangalore crowd and she is unable to distinguish him from that crowd in her mind. Identity is a crucial signifier in the creation of the self and the process of asserting the authenticity of one's identity is often quite complex. Rather than being primordial, identity "is constructed, and its construction is strongly influenced by politico-historical and sociocultural conditions....Depending on the context, an individual invokes different identities at different times" (Jayaram, 56). Sophie, along with Swami, seems to spend fun time with her friend circle consisting of Ringo Saar, Rukshana, Anu, Shiva and Mia in Bangalore. But the pang of loneliness often mars her existence. Images from Shillong haunt her. Sophie thinks why she "left that town where everything was so wonderfully fixed in its place" (Hasan, 12). She remembers her encounter with Killer Queen, the local mad woman from Shillong. Sophie and Killer Queen "started transfixed at each other and a terror took root in Sophie that would banish her to Bangalore" (Hasan, 13). One constantly seeks validation from other sources to assert a particular identity. Even more importantly, the self "is projected in the first place in order to answer the glance of the other. Consequently, identity is not merely differentiated from alterity, the other, by singing itself out from a multiplicity of others; it is itself constituted in a dialectic process that interacts with the other" (Fludernik, 261). Sophie's landlord Mr. Bhatt is always cynical of her. Mr. Bhatt displays a perpetual problem with the life style of Sophie and her friend circle. The attitudes of Mr. Bhatt and Cinappa, the Secretary of the Residents' Welfare Association of the apartmental building where Sophie resided towards Sophie represent the perception of mainstream India towards North easterners. As far as India's neo-colonial attitude is concerned towards the Northeast, Nayar notes that the marginalization of the Northeast represents a "collapse of the post-colonial project of creating a unified India" (102). Both Mr. Bhatt and Cinappa aspire to civilize Sophie as they think that her manners are not fit for a civilized society. Sophie felt that "they felt responsible for her in some way. Even though Mr. Bhatt made inspection visits to each of the flats...the scolding she got always had a moral edge to it....in her case it implied a shocking looseness of character" (Hasan, 19). This kind of attitude clearly reflects that the discourse of nationalism is one that is "predicted on exclusion" (Munasinghe, 155). This perception based on total ostracism is sensed by Sophie very often. Shiva, her friend, says indifferently, "I hear you're from the Northeast. What a tragic place" (Hasan, 124). On Shiva's question, Sophie said nothing, "never quite sure how to live out this role as someone from the tragic Northeast—that amorphous, eternally misty region whose people apparently spent their lives either fighting each other or resisting the bullying arm of the Indian state" (Hasan, 124).

Sophie's self is divided between the two cities of Bangalore and Shillong. Sophie harbours a secret feeling for Ribor, the local Khasi boy who owns a music shop in Shillong. Sophie's feelings for Ribor become intertwined with her love for Shillong, the city of her birth. Sophie frequently sees an illusionary picture of Ribor on the streets of Bangalore and "her amazement at seeing Ribor in Bangalore, the man she could not picture anywhere but in his small, smoky music shop high above a Shillong Street overrode everything else" (Hasan, 32). The images of Shillong make a way to Sophie's

mind at the slightest possible. Sophie misses Shillong and its beauty. She is obsessed over the white gushing of Elephant Falls or the green expanse of Umiam Lake. According to Sophie, a morning spent in Shillong around the milky mist, the sleeping houses on the hill cannot be compared to an ordinary morning spent in any other cities other than Shillong. For Sophie, Bangalore possesses “a great zest for ugliness. Everyone just wanted to obscure the view, blot out the sky, erase the gaps. The city not just proliferated but kept reproducing itself. And so, you never arrived anywhere in Bangalore (Hasan, 36). Sophie has never experienced a moment of epiphany in the city of Bangalore. In Bangalore, Sophie has learnt to content herself with the minor things. Sophie desperately tries to fill the vacuum in her divided self with the minor things that she comes across in her day-to-day ordinary life: “the smell of flowers coming from pushcarts late in the evening, the view of a palm tree from an open window, the corners of certain pubs, the pleasures of seeing one’s things neatly arranged in a room” (Hasan, 36). The memory of Shillong and Ribor haunt her all the time.

The chaos in the city of Bangalore is completely contrasted with the fixity in the city of Shillong. Sophie thinks of her parents living in the same small town, buying their vegetables from the same vendor “getting their shoes fixed by the same cobbler, bought the same brand of biscuits to go with their tea, known about the family affairs of their tailor, become close friends with their dentist and added not one extra word to their stock of half-a-dozen phrases in Shillong’s local language, Khasi—phrases they threaded into their conversations with maid-servants and taxi-drivers” (Hasan, 11). However, this fixity is allusive as the many conflicts and discrepancies in Sophie’s family as well as in Shillong are revealed bit by bit throughout the novel. The perfect image of Shillong exists only in Sophie’s memory and the very nature of memory is slippery and fragmentary.

The Bangalore city and the lives of people are highlighted in the novel. The conflict between Sophie’s senior colleagues, Maya and Naomi, Maya’s jealousy over the bond of Shanthi and Naomi, Maya’s unnatural attraction towards Sophie, all are described in minutest details. Naomi is described as fantastic and energetic. According to Sophie, she is “the living, breathing embodiment of all the films that Sophie had to watch day after day” (Hasan, 39). Sophie’s passivity and indifference towards her job are contrasted with the enthusiasm of Naomi and Sophie “felt the little energy she possessed being sucked out of her with the whooshing sound souls made when they were sucked out of bodies in horror movies” (Hasan, 43) whenever Naomi crossed her path. Naomi finds cheerfulness in the company of Shanthi who works in the office. Compared to Naomi, Shanthi is unassuming, down-to-earth and even rustic. The friendship between Naomi and Shanthi stand for the fact that how two people, totally opposite in nature, can find fulfilment of their selves through a shared bond based on trust and good will. Sophie, on the other hand, was devoid of establishing a bond of warmth with the people surrounding her. She is not sure whether she loves Swami or not and she feels awkward at times when the memory of Ribor comes to her mind sometimes even against her will.

Maya, the senior colleague in Sophie's office, undergoes a traumatic past that creates a disturbance in her psyche and as a result, she feels that her life is divided. Apparently Maya lives a glamorous life in a large apartment in a gated community that has its own golf course and spa and multiplex. Sophie describes that in Maya's world "you took your holidays in Rome and Maldives. You had plans to 'redo' your kitchen" (Hasan, 47). But Sophie is dumbstruck when Maya reveals the amount of agony that she secretly carries in her heart. Maya reveals how her mother was brutally tortured by her father in front of her kids for having an extra-marital affair with another man. Sophie looked at Maya's face and considered the contradiction between the plastic perfection of Maya's outer world and the secret at its core. The split in Maya's psyche and self is apparent when she says, "I pretend I'm someone else. No, I'm not Maya Singh, I say, and run away" (Hasan, 180). Sophie feels that due to her bitter past, Maya has turned into a lesbian and Sophie feels a kind of uneasiness when Maya embraces her tightly. Sophie feels an existential anguish and she feels that "we're all damned. I'm starting to believe I took a wrong turn somewhere. I thought moving here would make it all different but here I meet people equally lost" (Hasan, 174). Caught between her divided selves and labyrinth of memories, Sophie thinks that "we're all trying to reach some kind of understanding with ourselves. That's what's important —being okay with ourselves. Liking the story of our lives. Finding the story of our lives to begin with" (Hasan, 175). Sophie feels overburdened in the city of Bangalore. She feels suffocated. Even the freedom that she enjoys cannot make her happy. In the city of Bangalore, she felt that she was free for the first time in her life. She possessed everything in her apartment, "the view from the window, the tiny flat and every particle of air in it. She could cook what she liked, smoke to her heart's content, put every object exactly where she wanted it to be and know it would not move unless she moved it" (Hasan, 30). But still Sophie felt claustrophobic in her mind very often. The music concert by Shillong Blues Band and the song performed by Shillong's best singer Uncle Rock made Sophie realize that she "was taken out of her body and suspended in the clear fluid of memory" (Hasan, 112). The very song "that had once seemed like a promise of future riches had turned upside down and become a remembrance of past pleasures" (Hasan, 113).

Sophie flees to Shillong and Ribor unable to cope with the fast speed of life and twists and turns of life in the city of Bangalore. Huddart opines that "the power of a national narrative seems entirely confident of its consistency and coherence, but is all the while undermined by its inability to really fix the identity of the people, which would be to limit their identity to a single overpowering nationality" (111). This is exemplified in Sophie's inability to assimilate whole heartedly with the city of Bangalore and its crowd. However, the subtle explorations of the ethnic fault-lines that divide tribals from the non-tribals in the hill state of Meghalaya are quite visible in this novel. Anjum Hasan in her novel cleverly portrays the insider-outsider dichotomy regarding the Khasi and the non-Khasi in Shillong. The "conflicts in Meghalaya over the past four decades stem from the politicized division between tribal and non-tribal communities, with non-tribals perceived as infiltrators whose unfamiliarity threatens social order and stability" (Matta, 52). The novel attempts to define the existence of conflictual elements in the beautiful land of Shillong. The novel highlights the emergence of Shillong with the

schools, the churches, the bungalows, the lake, the polo grounds, the golf course, the offices, the winding road down to the plains and the spirit of accommodating people who speak a dozen languages and do not understand each other. The novel speaks about how Shillong starts trying to throw off the spirit of accommodation and attempts to “become the pure thing it had possibly never been —a place where one people of one blood lived” (Hasan, 58). Sophie claims that “all through her life this had continued to be the town’s defining characteristic—its search for purity and aloofness” (Hasan, 58). The novel calls attention to the fact that the native Khasi people are always in search of perpetual identity of their own.

Even when in Shillong, Sophie feels a kind of restlessness in her and disjointed memories often creep to her mind. Sophie starts to be disillusioned with the allure of Shillong too. She begins to be keenly aware of the conflictual elements that lie beneath the serene beauty of the land and apparently calm demeanour of her own home. Shillong’s political situation is no longer the same. Corruption and political gains have obliterated the people’s innocence and simplicity. Sophie does not feel homely in Shillong. The critic Avtar Brah poses some important questions: “When does a location become home? What is the difference between ‘feeling at home’ and stalking claim to a place as one’s own? It is quite possible to feel at home and, yet the experience of social exclusions may inhibit public proclamations of the place as home” (193). Sophie’s idea of home is liberal. While standing at Calcutta airport, Sophie thinks that “this is what she had always understood as home—a place where everyone is a different ethnicity from you and where your ethnicity defines who you are” (Hasan, 185). But the place of Shillong is not inclusive of all ethnicities and identities. She feels that the city of Shillong does not accept her whole heartedly as she is from a Bangali origin. She remembers Ribor’s saying, “even if you’re a dkhar; even if my people have always wanted your people out, even if blood has been shed, you have the right to stay” (Hasan, 58). Sophie always remains a ‘dkhar’ or an outsider for Shillong and its people. Even Sophie’s own family is on the verge of disintegration. While her father decides to relocate to Shantiniketan to pursue his lifelong dream of translating *Hamlet* into Bengali, her mother intends to spend the rest of her life in Benares. Her sister Mukulika has turned out to be a rebellious girl who does not seem to have any attachment to Sophie and her parents. Sophie misses those times when Mukulika was a small kid and both the sisters shared a friendly and affectionate bond. But now that bond is gone and it remains only in Sophie’s memory. Though Sophie loved Ribor deeply but she was unable to attain that fulfilment of the self in the company of Ribor. Shilling begins to lose its previous charm in the eyes of Sophie and when Ribor confesses that he wants to leave Shillong because this place makes one lazy and fails to instil a competitive spirit in the young, Sophie feels completely disappointed. Sophie feels that in Bangalore, the crowded city will intrude upon the love of Sophie and Ribor and she is afraid that “Ribor’s magic would not be able to hold it at bay” (Hasan, 227). Finally, Sophie decides to leave Shillong and goes back to Bangalore and accepts a monotonous job and chooses Swami over Ribor. Sophie Das’s acceptance of a cosmopolitan identity towards the end of the novel justifies that the validation of the self does not necessarily involve a blind negation of the other; instead, it involves a keen awareness that accepts, disputes and re-creates

the imposed sense of identity. She is aware of her 'otherness' but still allows this 'otherness' to mould her own sense of the 'self.'

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