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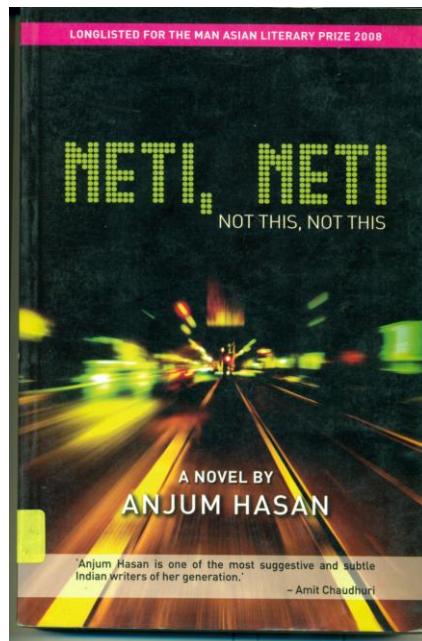
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## Affinity and Alienation - The Predicament of the Internal Migrant in Anjum Hasan's *Neti Neti*.

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## Migration within India

In an era of large-scale shifts of people, information, objects, and images across continents, the internal migration of individuals and groups within a nation are often overlooked. Such migrations are largely the result of uneven development in the aftermath of colonization and are seen most starkly in the northeastern states of India. Siddhartha Deb, writing about this region, notes that,

The modern secular nation state adopted as a political model for India demands a certain flattening out of differences and the imposition of a structure that does not consider small or anomalous groups of people... If nations have to be imagined into being, the people of the north-east represent the most remarkable failure of the imagination in regard to India (88).

This region has been beset with many problems, underdevelopment, militancy, cross-border refugee and smuggling problems, that have led to widespread disaffection among its inhabitants. This has resulted in the phenomenon of widespread migration of the people of the northeast to the metropolitan cities, New Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata and Bangalore. It is the consequences of such a move that are focused on in Anjum Hasan's second novel, *Neti, Neti* (2009).

## Anjum and Her Character Sophie

Poet and novelist Anjum Hasan carries across Sophie Das from her first novel *Lunatic in My Head* (2007), and allows her full rein to explore the internal and external complications that crop up as a result of her move from Shillong to Bangalore.

There are many similarities between Anjum Hasan and Sophie, not the least that both moved to Bangalore in their twenty- fifth year. But Hasan, in an interview with Nisha Susan, asserts that this is the only similarity between her and Sophie besides the fact that they both felt alienated in Bangalore. However, a cursory glance at Hasan's life reveals that like Sophie, Hasan was the offspring of a union between parents hailing from different states of India. In a manner very similar to Hasan's own parents, Sophie's Bengali academic father and unassuming Punjabi mother might have settled in Shillong to escape the social ostracism that their marriage generated.

## Paradoxical Attractions

In her lyrical yet restrained prose, Hasan gently probes the sense of alienation and paradoxical attraction Sophie feels for Bangalore, a city that is constant in its inability to feed the imagination. Moving from the sylvan beauty, camaraderie and solitude of Shillong, Sophie struggles to cope with the anonymity, callousness and confusion she

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finds at every turn in Bangalore. Twenty five years of life in the northeast have left her ill prepared for the onslaught of everyday life in a modern Indian metropolis.

### **Strange Surroundings and Strange Experiences**

The plot is episodic, detailing Sophie's journey from relative innocence to self-knowledge. Each chapter title reflects Sophie's state of mind, not without irony.

The novel opens with Sophie's move to Bangalore from Shillong. At first glance, she seems to have a perfect life, with a job, a flat, and a boyfriend, but the cracks soon become apparent. Her disenchantment is engendered partly by the chaos and ugliness of Bangalore:

The traffic sounded different from the way it did on a bus...it became a powerful, inchoate din as overwhelming as the images that flashed past: the driver of a stalled bus yelling at a tempo-truck wallah, a fat woman balanced sideways on the pillion of a crazily speeding scooter, snatches of music emanating from a car painted with orange flames, a pair of girls dressed identically in black suits and pumps sailing elegantly through the traffic on two scooters and keeping an animated conversation going between them. There was an unmistakably insane tinge to the melee. (NN36)

This cacophony Sophie contrasts with the assumed stasis and peace of Shillong and it represents the fundamental conundrum she faces in her life.

### **Sophie's Social Circle**

Sophie's social circle in Bangalore includes her landlord, Mr. Bhatt and his wife and baby grandson, as well as her boyfriend Swami. It is through them that she has an insight into middle-class Bangalore life.

The Bhatt's are on a relentless quest to acquire more real estate and through it greater wealth. Mr. Bhatt attempts to buy property through credit card loans, an act that brings him in conflict with Ringo, a collection agent for these credit card companies. Ringo is also Sophie's friend and she entreats him to go easy on the defaulting Mr. Bhatt lest he evict her in retaliation. The Bhatt's are devout followers of Sampige Baba, a local godman. Sophie tries to enchant their baby grandson Mani, both to ingratiate herself to them and to fill the void she increasingly perceives in her life as a cog in the wheel of the outsourcing industry.

### **Nostalgia**

As a migrant from Shillong, Sophie is filled with nostalgia every time she encounters a reminder of her town, Shillong. At a rock concert she attends, the finale is provided by a Shillong band whose lead singer she knew. This increases her yearning for the beauty and order of Shillong. In her childhood Sophie “had formed the idea that India was an exact feeling, a fixed series of things in contrast to everything else in her environment which was simply what it was and had no relation to India” (*Neti, Neti* 125).

In keeping with Siddhartha Deb’s assertion regarding the failure of the Indian State in relation to the northeast, Sophie feels that the only legacy of having lived in Shillong was the sense that India was far away.

### **A Picture of Hard-edged City**

In a typical narrative twist, Hasan narrates the events leading up to a horrific incident in the chapter titled “Garden City”. She subverts the reader’s expectations of idyllic charm of Bangalore by presenting them with evidence of a hard-edged city. To Sophie, the simplicity of the Bhatt’s life is in ironic counterpoint to the excessive lifestyle she perceives at a party thrown by an acquaintance, the *nouveau riche* Anil,

the birthday boy was wearing slacks in a camouflage print and Gucci shades; his hair was dyed blond and sculpted into a frenzy of vertical shapes. Sophie couldn’t understand how he saw anything through the shades or why he wore them....It was hard, now, not to be impressed by the vast apartment rooftop with its spiky haired DJ in one corner ... its sparkling bar in another corner, its strobe light lit dance floor in a third and its loaded food tables in a fourth, complete with pasta counter and salad counter and barbeque. (*Neti, Neti* 119-120)

Intensely uncomfortable with the sheer opulence around them, Sophie and Swami resort to smoking marijuana in a corner. In the wee hours of the morning, when the party is finally winding down and most of the guests have left, the obsequious Anil is berated by the stoned Swami for not providing enough food. He obligingly drives them around in search of an open restaurant, when they are stopped by the police. The police inform them that the corpse of a female call centre employee had just been found by the Ulsoor Lake. When Sophie’s friend, Anu calls the apartment Anu shares with a few girls, they realize that the victim is Anu’s roommate Rukshana, who had been murdered by Sophie’s boyfriend, Ringo. This murder brings home to Sophie the seamy underside of the glamorous Bangalore and the tensions arising due to its sudden, explosive growth, with devastating force.

Suffused with nostalgia for ‘home’, Sophie decides to go to Shillong for a week. Into her yearning for a place to truly belong to, she weaves a fantasy of unrequited love for Ribor,

a Shillong music store owner. Exhausted by Bangalore's excesses, she longs for the isolation and peace of the northeast. She buys a plane ticket back home, but her journey to the airport is fraught with violence. The auto-rickshaw she is traveling in becomes involved in a minor accident and, as a result, she misses her flight. Back at the office she is forced by her boss to spy on Shanthi, a colleague and Naomi Picks, their American Supervisor, on their jaunt through the streets of old town.

### **Shiny Façade**

The gritty reality behind the shiny façade of people, places and things is a theme that is continually explored in the novel. On their trip through the old city, Shanthi reveals her decidedly humble origins as a food vendor outside the market. After her father had died, her mother and she had sold *ragi* balls and *sambar* to make ends meet. On being confronted with the gold and cash her brother had brought back from his job in Dubai, her mother had slowly become insane. This theme is further delineated in the episode at a glitzy mall where Sophie and Swami had gone to shop for her trip to Shillong.

Initially, Sophie is entranced by the variety and abundance of the merchandise on display. With her highly sensitive social radar she is soon able to detect the emptiness behind the gloss. Looking down on the crowds from the highest floor she "saw how, from that height, people appeared to be driven by a mechanical impulse: swarming into the atrium, thronging the escalators, spilling out of stores" (*Neti, Neti* 71). Her boyfriend Swami, unable to fathom her mood, keeps exhorting her to buy something.

The frenzy of acquisitiveness she sees around her leaves her with a strong sense of distaste and as if in tune with her disenchantment, a sudden scream echoes through the mall as a child falls to his death from three floors above. In a tragically apt manner in this citadel of illusions, the child had crashed on to the bonnet of a shiny Mercedes Benz sedan that was on display.

It is a testament to Hasan's restrained narrative style that she refrains from elaborating on the inherent irony of the manner of the child's death. In an moment of epiphany, Sophie realizes that, "nothing in this mall had any connection with her life" (*Neti, Neti* 74). The truth dawns on her that happiness does not lie in things, but in one's anticipation of them.

### **Receding into One's Own Mind**

All through the novel, the author alternates incidents with an exploration of Sophie's thoughts. As Pragya Tiwari observes in her review of the novel, "she recedes into her own mind which is always well-lit but comfortable". Anjum Hasan reveals with remarkable insight, her characters' communication with their inner voices. This contemplative ability sets Sophie apart from all her extremely liberated, yet somehow lost friends.

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## Cultural Isolation in Indian Experience

Sophie takes flight from Bangalore, both literally and metaphorically. She experiences a sense of all the complications of her life becoming completely inconsequential. Significantly, she asserts silently to herself that she would never go back to India again and falls into a deep, restful sleep, her insomnia instantaneously cured. On the plane Sophie finds herself sitting next to Uncle Rock, who shows her a newspaper with headlines about American pop icon Bob Dylan's impending visit to a rock concert in Shillong. Uncle Rock's conclusions about Bangalore serve to underscore the cultural distinctiveness and isolation of the northeast:

Something about the feel of the place - it's not right ... No one really has the time to have a conversation. And whether you are from Shillong or Assam or Nagaland. ... The whole damn Northeast - it's all the same to them. They can't handle us - our strange names, our strange languages, our strange accents. (*Neti*, *Neti* 183)

## Dawn of Reality, Ultimate Recognition of Illusion

Such is Uncle Rock's cultural angst that he neglects to mention the upcoming elections in the state. The episode of the rock concert has the potential for great humour, but with typical authorial restraint Hasan moves the action offstage. The Dylan appearance never materializes and is revealed to be an elaborate hoax by a major political party, as a ploy to raise funds. The reader is clued in to the happenings through the reactions of Uncle Rock, Ribor, the focus of her unrequited love, and Mama Jo, a local hot dog vendor. Sophie comes to realize that her dream of Shillong as a place of pristine beauty and impenetrable calm is an illusion.

She comes to the realization that her nostalgic image of a close knit family is also illusory. Nisha Susan notes that her depiction of a small, nuclear family is a deliberate departure from the three-generational sagas generally associated with Indian novels in English (Susan).

On her return, Sophie initially finds the beauty and tranquility of her childhood home seductive. But the cracks beneath the surface soon become apparent as she sees that her family is drifting irrevocably apart. Her father plans on moving to Shantiniketan to pursue his dream of translating Shakespeare's *Hamlet* into Bengali. Her mother has become very religious and wants to go to Benaras, to wash away the bad karma of marrying outside her community and her sister Mukulika wants to go away to Delhi to be with her boyfriend who was soon moving there.

## **Strenuous Effort to Develop a Sense of Belonging**

In a last ditch attempt to forge a sense of belonging, Sophie has an affair with Ribor. However, despite her best efforts, she is unable to fulfill her fantasies of togetherness with him. She realizes the truth of her father's words "Whatever happens, you're not coming back here, Sophie. You've moved on" (*Neti, Neti* 234). It dawns on Sophie that one can never go back 'home'. This awareness of the flimsiness of her dreams of return, affects her relationship with Ribor as well.

The society of the northeastern states is organized along the lines of a tribal hierarchy and the joint family system is the norm. As a *dkhar* or settler Sophie could never truly 'belong', and this is further emphasized in the aftermath of the rock concert. She realizes that she is only a passing interest in Ribor's life; she could never be happy with his aimlessness or be privy to the intrigues in his life: "She was going to walk till it hurt, till she was as far away from all of them physically as she was in every other sense- from Ribor, Mama Jo...Uncle Rock. They lived in a different town from the one she had lain awake dreaming of a life without history," (*Neti, Neti* 255).

## **An Unavoidable New Phase in Life**

Mukulika's pregnancy and subsequent abortion serve both to end her phase of adolescent rebellion and to reinforce Sophie's decision to leave. But an uncomplicated return to Bangalore eludes her.

## **Baba's Ashram**

Her two friends Anu and Shiva, who had been staying in her flat when she was away, had seriously offended Mr. Bhatt. In an attempt to mollify him they offered to arrange for him to meet Baba Sampige, a local godman whom he revered. The godman had been Shiva's childhood friend, and his cousin helped in the administration of his ashram. Shiva remembers the Baba as Raghavan, who used to lend small sums of cash at exorbitant rates of interest. The meeting with the Baba ends in a melee as Shiva tries to goad and taunt him, leading to the others attacking him. This is a humorous narrative aside, which is typical of Anjum Hasan's style.

Before they go to the Baba's ashram, Shiva traces the route on a map of the city. To Sophie, for whom Bangalore had always been an enigma, she could never understand, but the map is revelatory: "she looked at her enormous, churning city made humble by a picture and for the first time something like love for it." (*Neti, Neti* 265)

## **Identities of Self in Multiple Cultures and Hasan's Creativity**



As in Diasporic literature, the novel explores identities forged in multiple cultures and cities. Anjum Hasan traces the negotiations between hybrid cultural identities and national concerns which are often conflictual and contestatory (Nayar 217).

By avoiding any exploration of binaries such as small town vs. metropolitan life, east vs. west, global vs. local culture, Anjum manages to steer clear of any novelistic clichés. Her usual technique is to juxtapose lyrical, intricate portraits of Bangalore and Shillong, allowing the readers to interpret them without any authorial intervention.

The delineation of the secondary characters also reveals Hasan's lightness of touch. Sophie's friends and acquaintances in Bangalore are influenced by the frenetic pace of life in the city. The characters belong to two distinct classes, the upwardly mobile call centre employees and newly wealthy social climbers, and the decidedly middle class traditional, god-fearing families that inhabit the same locality as Sophie.

These two sets of characters illustrate the class disparities that are a feature of Bangalore life.

The common feature between these sets of people is their ceaseless striving to get ahead in pursuit of their dreams. Hasan portrays the characters in Shillong, on the other hand, as unable to move forward. Hasan assumes that they seem mired in the stasis that allegedly characterizes their region, and their dreams remain unfulfilled. A closer look, however, would reveal that such comparison is rather facile. Incidents such as Killer Queen, a deranged woman roaming the streets of Shillong may not be really typical one city in any region of India. While the external strategies to get ahead each other may differ from what is practiced in Shillong, the spirit behind such contests and the fundamental features of such processes seem to be same in every region.

### **Omniscient Third Person Narrative with Interior Monologues**

The narrative is packed with incidents, interspersed with an exploration of Sophie's life of the mind. Though the novel is written in an omniscient third person narrative, the passages that delve into Sophie's mind have the immediacy of an interior monologue. Sophie's quest shunts her between two poles of the country, as she attempts to find 'home'.

The title of the novel is particularly appropriate, the Sanskrit words *Neti, Neti*, carrying a connotation much deeper than the literal translation of 'not this, not this'. The phrase conveys a sense of the emptiness Sophie perceives at the core of urban life, which manifests itself as a profound disaffection with the illusory dream of escape nurtured by the other characters. Such a dream, she finds out, does not fit in with her world view. She concludes that there are no easy solutions to her search, and decides to submerge herself



in the flow of events. At the end of the novel, Sophie sits in Swami's swanky new car, calmly contemplating the vast vistas of the future.

In the final analysis, Anjum Hasan seems to suggest that affinity and alienation are fluid states, constantly changing in this era of large-scale migrations.

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