

Fragmentation as freedom: A psychogeographical study of Anjum Hasan's *Neti, Neti: Not This, Not This*

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Abstract: Literature is a boon for the ever-evolving society and Indian writing in English often explores themes of identity, belonging, cultural conflict and emotional dislocation, which helps readers process their emotional catharsis and provides self-reflection. Anjum Hasan's *Neti, Neti: Not This, Not This* (2016) portrays the "middle-class youth of the brave new India" (2009 Outlook News Desk), and examines the intersection of space, memory and identity in the quest for meaning. Set against the backdrop of two contrasting cities—Shillong, which symbolises cultural exclusion and family pressure and Bangalore, which embodies consumerism, emotional detachment, and urban loneliness—the novel chronicles the life of Sophie Das, a young Bengali woman from Shillong who struggles with feelings of alienation and disconnection. Her journey from escaping a confining hometown to negotiating the overwhelming chaos of a metropolis is a transformative one, reflecting her evolving sense of dissatisfaction with her surroundings, relationships and self. This article applies Guy Debord's theory of psychogeography to analyse how Sophie's physical and emotional movements illustrate the *dérive* or urban drift. As Sophie moves through different environments, this study explores how space impacts her psyche, behaviour and self-perception. Sophie returns to Shillong hoping to find peace, but instead encounters further disintegration. This article is an attempt to study how, at the end of the novel, Sophie accepts a fragmented identity shaped by loss and survival, and returns to Bangalore, which highlights how *Neti, Neti: Not This, Not This* is an influential tool, emphasising the importance of living in the present and moving forward. Hasan does not provide a solution, as she believes that fragmentation may be a sign of liberation, a rejection of rigid notions of belonging, home and self.

Keywords: alienation, cosmopolitanism, displacement, identity, psychogeography

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Introduction

Anjum Hasan is an Indian writer whose works, encompassing novels, short stories, and poetry, explore the lives of ordinary people, urban spaces, questions of identity, and the evolving roles of women in contemporary India. Born in Shillong, Meghalaya, in 1972, she completed her studies in philosophy at North-Eastern Hill University. Despite migrating to Bangalore in her twenties, “the influence of Shillong is all pervasive in her writing. Evidently, Shillong is her Muse which inspires her imagination” (Divya 2014, 22). Her narratives often center on introspective, displaced characters who navigate between tradition and modernity. Hasan frequently portrays the socio-political realities of Northeast India through personal narratives, making her a significant voice in contemporary Indian literature. Her fiction often features women who are independent and determined to shape their lives, especially in rapidly changing urban spaces. While many critics approach her work through a feminist lens, Hasan offers a more nuanced perspective. In an interview with Sumana Roy, Anjum Hasan remarks:

I do write about female characters but never without a certain wariness... I'm also aware that we're living through a revolution where women are concerned — at no time before this have so many women been out of the home, working, visible, audible, self-contained... Yet the fact that one can write about a woman being liberated in this way is possibly revolutionary in the Indian context. (Hasan 2015, par. 24)

The novel's title, *Neti, Neti*, is derived from a Sanskrit phrase meaning ‘not this, not this’, a Vedantic method of negation used in the search for ultimate truth. This concept firmly believes that every man in this world has a search for the meaning and purpose of life. One is constantly on the move to find something that can make oneself content. Hasan uses this concept as a metaphor to show her protagonist's restless search for identity, belonging and purpose. The article highlights the protagonist's journey between the two locations, Shillong and Bangalore and examines how she navigates her dissatisfaction, liminality, and rootlessness.

Guy Debord's psychogeography theory

In his influential book *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), Guy Debord – the French revolutionary, filmmaker and theorist who strongly criticised modern society and founded the Situationist

International (SI) - explains how media and visual culture dominate people's everyday lives, reducing authentic human experience and leading to emotional alienation.

This article applies Debord's psychogeography theory, which he defines as "the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, whether consciously organised or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals" (Debord 1955, quoted in Bauder and Mauro 2008, 23). It also combines psychology and geography to examine how urban spaces influence human emotions, thoughts and behaviours.

A central technique within psychogeography is the *dérive*, a French term meaning 'drift', which Debord (1958) describes as a "technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances" that involves "playful-constructive behavior". The *dérive* encourages "an unplanned urban journey guided by environmental cues" (Fiveable 2024) and enables individuals to wander without fixed routes, allowing the city to shape their state of mind. The *dérive* is not simply aimless wandering; it is a method of understanding and experiencing the city in a new way, helping the individual to break free from the constraints of everyday life and discover new perspectives and meanings within the urban environment. As Anjum Hasan's *Neti, Neti* closely engages with urban spaces such as Shillong and Bangalore and their effect on the protagonist Sophie's life, the theory of psychogeography is a powerful tool to analyse the impact of spatial mobility. Debord's theory helps reveal how cityscapes influence the inner lives of individuals.

Shillong: The alien homeland

Hasan's *Neti, Neti: Not This, Not This* is an earnest attempt to make humanity understand that one should live in the present with contentment. Sometimes people do not aspire to a grand life, but they cannot endure the one imposed on them. People often try to go somewhere, to become someone else. Through this novel, Hasan brings out the nature of many individuals who are unsure of what they want, constantly saying 'not this' to whatever life offers.

The novel's central character, Sophie Das, is a twenty-five-year-old Bengali woman residing with her family in the hill town of Shillong. Her father, Mr. Das, a Bengali from West Bengal, is a strict and idealistic English teacher with unfulfilled dreams, and her mother, Mrs. Das, a Hindi-speaking North Indian, is a successful history teacher who remains emotionally distant. Although both parents are

educated, they constantly “spend much of their time blaming others, apportioning responsibility amongst themselves and the rest of the world” (Hasan 2016, 54), which leads Sophie to refer to them as a “hide-and-seek family” (Ibid, 55). Her younger sister, Mukulika, frequently hurts herself and shows disturbing behaviour because she feels unloved and emotionally neglected. Sophie and Mukulika are profoundly affected by the broken ancestral ties in their family. Sophie reflects:

They never went away to visit an extended family, like the rest of their settler or *dkhar* classmates. Their father’s parents were dead and he considered his other relatives a waste of time. Their mother’s relatives had cut her off for marrying their father. (Hasan 2016, 196)

This absence of extended family roots intensifies Sophie’s sense of cultural isolation. Although Sophie grows up in Shillong, her Bengali identity makes her feel alienated within a tribal majority region. Shillong itself, once a “tiny tribal settlement” later transformed by the British into a colonial administrative town with “schools, churches, the lake, the polo grounds” (Hasan 2016, 57), gradually becomes home to “Bengalis bearing the message of Brahmo Samaj and Vivekananda,” alongside traders, doctors, and civil servants (Ibid, 58). However, Sophie is born into a time when the city begins to “throw off this crazy past and become the pure thing it had possibly never been” (Ibidem), as if trying to erase its mixed heritage and reclaim a more narrowly defined identity. As a result of this transformation, Sophie becomes increasingly estranged from her environment.

Sophie’s growing unhappiness with her life deepens after an emotional disappointment with Ribor, a Khasi music shop owner. She loves Ribor, who remains distant, which makes her feel alienated in Shillong. Sophie is forced to face the agonising realisation that she has been clinging to a fantasy rather than love when she witnesses him with another woman. She feels humiliated, abandoned, and completely out of place in that moment, not only in Ribor’s store but across the entire town. When she tells him she is leaving Shillong, Ribor asks, “Why? Have you got a job or something?” She simply replies, “I need to find out what lies on the other side of the mountains as they always say in fairy tales” (Hasan 2016, 57), which reflects her inner state of mind.

Sophie’s urgency to leave intensifies when she encounters the local madwoman known as Killer Queen, who walks confidently down the

street, dressed in “musty black velvet and dark glasses” and wearing a “cobwebby-looking hairnet” (Hasan 2016, 13), suddenly shouts at Sophie, “What are you staring at? Haven’t you seen a good-looking woman before?” (Ibidem). This encounter leaves Sophie deeply shaken, as it makes her aware of her inner fear and she questions, What if she never escapes this life? What if she grows old in the same town, walks the same streets, and becomes a madwoman like Killer Queen? Fear takes “root in Sophie that would banish her to Bangalore” (Ibidem). In that moment, she confronts the frightening realisation that her life may never change and she might remain trapped in the same place without a future. This fear ultimately drives her to leave Shillong and move to Bangalore, where she wants to be “out of reach, never to be found again ... escape” (Ibidem). She feels unsettled by Shillong’s changing landscape and the emotional dissonance it evokes. Shillong no longer gives her a sense of belonging; instead, it repels her, making her feel rootless and invisible. Leaving Shillong is not simply a matter of personal choice; it becomes a necessary response to a place that no longer feels like home.

Bangalore: Freedom and disillusionment

In Bangalore, Sophie’s lifestyle begins to transform and she struggles to meet the expectations of urban life. She enters a life of urban modernity, characterised by emotional detachment and consumerist distractions. She has a relationship with Swami, a man obsessed with property, loans and financial success, who believes “Land is gold” (Hasan 2016, 65). However, Sophie finds his materialism empty and emotionally exhausting. She confesses, “Words like love have lost meaning for me” (Ibid, 68). Although she finds moments of fun with her friends, including Ringo Saar, Anu, Shiva, and Mia, she still feels a deep sense of loneliness inside. Their lifestyle reflects Westernised Bangalore, where alcohol and drugs are a regular part of life. Hasan portrays this metropolitan atmosphere as

people drinking their beer, passing around joints, guffawing not with the intention of breeding envy in the hearts of the Residents Welfare Association office-bearers but simply because life looked at from the perspective of a chilled Kingfisher on a Saturday night was funny”. (Hasan 2016, 17)

Despite the freedom the city offers, which she once longed for, Sophie still feels restless. When her mother wishes to send her sister Muku to live with her, hoping it might change Muku’s rebellious behaviour,

Sophie panics at the thought that “if her sister moved here, Sophie’s secret would be out: the fact that she does not work in a publishing house, like she had told her family, but a BPO company” (Hasan 2016, 28). She feels trapped once more between her disenchantment with life and her family’s demands.

From a psychogeographical perspective, Sophie’s experiences in Bangalore demonstrate how the city shapes her emotions and perception of identity. Her small flat becomes claustrophobic and Chinnappa, her conservative neighbour, along with others, constantly judges her for being a single and independent woman. She cannot experience a sense of belonging, even inside her home, as Mr. Bhatt, her landlord, frequently monitors her actions and passes moral judgments. Even her act of drying her underwear on the balcony brings shame and scrutiny. When she reads about Bangalore’s wealthy partygoers, she feels excluded from that urban hierarchy. As Hasan writes:

She shook out the newspaper angrily and scrutinized the partygoers featured in it... the city’s rich were too many and too anonymous and this way of appearing in the papers was for them a means of confirming their existence. (Hasan 2016, 23–24)

Through these daily experiences, the novel illustrates how urban space generates alienation, surveillance, and emotional loss for Sophie. Debord and Coverley argue that “psychogeography affects how an individual’s emotions and behaviours within specific environments are caused and influenced directly by their environments” (quoted in Khaidzir, Hashim and Yusof 2022, 245). In a similar way, when Sophie attends Anil’s rooftop birthday party at an elite apartment, known as “Bangalore’s most exclusive piece of heaven” (Hasan 2016, 121), her psychological state begins to shape. She finds the excess of wealth oppressive. Anil showcases his affluence to her in every way by boasting about his BMW, hiring a top DJ for the party and wearing a heavy cologne scent, which makes her uncomfortable. The apartment building itself becomes a symbol of inequality and privilege, as

Every resident owns six, yes, six parking lots, and enjoys spending a few minutes every evening wondering which of the four swimming pools to use. (Hasan 2016, 120)

The space around her feels more like a showroom than a home. The “gilt-framed mirrors on the walls and mahogany tables holding fresh,

tall-stalked gerberas, and notepads with golden pens” (Hasan 2016, 121) make her feel less. She compares the living room, “which was so large that it got positively blurry at its far reaches, was like a posh version of the minotaur’s labyrinth” (Ibid, 122). This comparison reflects the extravagant lifestyle that dominates her everyday life and completely alienates her. She starts to “experience that familiar lurch of nausea mixed with awe that wealth in all its forms evoked in her” (Ibid, 121), making her realise that the whole world is made only for the rich and leaving no space for people like her. Then Sophie notices Anil’s mother, who sits on a sofa as if

trapped in the heart of the labyrinth on whose neck and ears Sophie could, even from that distance, see egg-sized pearls softly glowing. The surprising thing is not the size of the pearls but the way the woman sat, staring into space with her hands clasped in front of her. (Hasan 2016, 122)

This image reveals how such lavish surroundings completely freeze emotions. Mina Najafi and MustafaKamal Bin Mohd Shariff (2011, 1054) state that “a place is a strong affective bond between a person and a particular setting” however, this bond is absent in Sophie’s experience. From a psychogeographical perspective, Sophie’s experience reveals that even the most luxurious spaces can feel alienating and out of place.

Even in a modern and diverse city like Bangalore, Sophie still cannot escape the stereotypes tied to her origins, which intensifies her search for identity. When Shiva remarks to Sophie, “I hear you’re from the Northeast. What a tragic place” he silences her, reminding her how others often stereotype her region as an “amorphous, eternally misty region whose people apparently spent their lives either fighting each other or resisting the bullying arm of the Indian state” (Hasan 2016, 124). These encounters show that, even far from home, the burden of prejudice and the trauma of displacement continue to fracture her sense of self.

Trauma and disconnection in the urban everyday

Sophie’s emotional struggles become worse after a traumatic incident at the mall, where a child dressed as Superman falls to his death. She is horrified as “she saw a child sprawled face down on the Mercedes Benz” (Hasan 2016, 72). Despite the tragedy, what disturbs her even more is the way people around her continue to shop and act as if nothing had happened. This moment leaves Sophie emotionally

shattered as she realises that “now when pleasures were graded for her and lay stretched out in every direction like some version of paradise, all she got was suffocation, death, people screaming” (Ibid, 74).

The darkest moment comes when Ringo murders his girlfriend Rukshana in a fit of jealousy and dumps her body near Ulsoor Lake. In the apartment, Sophie’s friends Swami, Mama Mia, Anil, Shiva and Anu struggle to process the news, repeatedly ask in disbelief, “He had a knife in the car? He stabbed her till she died? He dumped her by a lake?” (Hasan 2016, 136), which horrifies Sophie. She sees herself as “the chosen recorder of other people’s suffering” (Ibid, 129). She recalls how she pressured Ringo to spare Mr. Bhatt from public humiliation and feels partly responsible for upsetting Ringo’s fragile peace of mind. Overwhelmed by violence, alienation, and moral chaos, she returns to Shillong in search of peace.

The return and the *dérive*

Sophie’s journey from Bangalore to Shillong reflects the *dérive* since she travels through several settings, each of which has a significant, unforeseen impact on her feelings, memories, and sense of self. As her plane lifts above Bangalore, she notices “houses packed together in a way that suggested only unpleasant things—haphazard construction, claustrophobia, over-population” (Hasan 2016, 181). She remembers all the people she left behind: Ringo, Rukshana, Swami, Mrs. Bhatt, Anand and Anandi, Shiva, until she feels a sense of disconnection. Then, when she wakes up mid-flight, the landscape has changed to “clean white sunlit snow that unfurled in every direction, extending till the horizon” (Ibid, 182), and she feels calm, almost heavenly.

This sudden emotional shift continues when she meets Uncle Rock, who also shares how Bangalore has made him feel alienated, saying, “I didn’t get the right vibe” and that people there “can’t handle us—our strange names, our strange languages, our strange accents” (Hasan 2016, 183). At Calcutta airport, Sophie sees Northeast Indian faces and feels a sense of return, unlike in the polished, impersonal Bangalore airport, where people sound like “a play on the brain-dead middle class” (Ibid, 185). Finally, on the road to Shillong, it feels peaceful and nostalgic and she recalls Emma Bovary’s thought that “certain places on earth must bring forth happiness, as a plant peculiar to the soil” (Ibid, 186). Sophie’s changing emotions through these varied environments, such as airports, skies, cities, and hills, beautifully

reflect the *dérive*, as the places she moves through actively shape her inner state.

Back in Shillong, Sophie finds her family in a state of disintegration. Her father plans to move to Shantiniketan, and her mother plans to move to Benares while Muku grows emotionally distant. Although Sophie longs to preserve her bond with Muku, it now exists only in memory. During another encounter with the Killer Queen, she asks, "When will it all end?" and the Queen replies, "It will end on the last page" (Hasan 2016, 202), symbolising unresolved struggles of life. Muku's teenage pregnancy further destabilises the family. After the abortion, she turns inward and stares "at the ceiling" (Ibid, 250) and distances herself from others. When she gradually recovers, Sophie asks Muku to accompany her to Bangalore and they both decide to begin again.

Fragmentation and survival in a postmodern landscape

In cities, cultures, roles, and desires, Sophie always finds herself in the no-man's land, which embodies the theme of *Neti, Neti*. Ultimately, she chooses to return to Bangalore, a decision that symbolises her acceptance of her unstable existence. Her choice to live in a multicultural metropolis reflects her understanding that movement, displacement and constant self-reflection shape identity. As Anjali Vaidya (2017) notes, "Sophie is an outsider wherever she is, be it Bangalore or Shillong, always a bit dissatisfied with the options at hand". Still, this dissatisfaction does not hold her back; instead, it allows Sophie to explore, drift or start again.

The novel ends with Swami's statement to Sophie, "The only problem we'll have in life from now on is the problem of where to find parking space" (Hasan 2016, 287), a line that reminds everyone it is enough to focus on what 'this' particular moment needs. In the same way, Sophie's life in *Neti, Neti*, full of departures and returns, silences and longings, makes clear that even when no place truly feels like home, survival lies in the willingness to keep moving.

Conclusion

This article demonstrates how *Neti, Neti: Not This, Not This* serves as a literary cartography of fragmented identity and emotional survival in post-liberalised India. By applying psychogeographical theory to Sophie's spatial journey, it becomes evident that movement across different spaces and emotional displacement are deeply intersected in

the construction of fragmented selves. Her transitions through shifting environments reflect the instability of identity in a world where certainty is elusive. She does not escape her dislocation; instead, she learns to live with it. Sophie's journey offers a powerful insight: even when one's direction is uncertain and the sense of self feels scattered, it is still possible to move forward. Her experience reveals that healing does not arrive through sudden, dramatic change but unfolds gradually through continuous acts of endurance, adaptation and resilience. And sometimes, that is enough. By portraying dislocation as a catalyst for inner strength, Hasan's narrative redefines notions of belonging and freedom, presenting fragmentation not as an end but as a potential path to liberation that challenges fixed ideas of home and self.

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