

A Post-modern outlook of Anjum Hasan's *Neti, Neti*

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Abstract

The term *Neti, Neti* in Sanskrit means - Not this, Not this. This novel, *Neti, Neti*, is about people facing different challenges in society, like Sophie Das, Mukulika, Maya, and Swami. Different types of critical situations are encountered by other characters. Anjum Hasan has depicted her protagonists fighting for survival in the cyber age. She is aware of the challenges and troubles of women in the technocrat's world. Migration is a significant phenomenon in the postmodern era. These modern young men migrate to other states or countries for luxurious life, attractive salaries, and freedom. Moreover, the novelist poignantly brings out the human predicament in the postmodern age.

Keywords: Technical world, Shillong, Dreams, Bangalore, Modern life.

Anjum Hasan is a reputed novelist from Shillong in India. Anjum Hasan's collection of poems called *Street on the Hill* has won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2006. She has authored four novels, including *Lunatic in My Head* (2007), which was shortlisted for the Crossword Book Award 2007. Her second novel *Neti, Neti* (2009), was listed for the 2008 Man Asian Literary Prize and shortlisted for The Hindu Best Fiction Award in 2010. and *The Cosmopolitans* (2015), *The History's Angel* (2023) and two collections of short stories, namely *A Day in the Life* (2008) and *Difficult Pleasures* (2012), which were shortlisted for The Hindu Literary Prize and the Crossword Book Award. She has contributed so many poems and articles for publications. She is currently working as the Books Editor for *The Caravan* in Bangalore.

The historical era after modernity is called the postmodern era. It captures the arts, architecture, and criticism developed from the mid to late 20th century. According to a critic, Alka Singh,

Postmodernism, like poststructuralist and deconstructionist is a critique of the aesthetics of the preceding age, but besides mere critique, postmodernism celebrates the very act of dismembering tradition. Postmodernism questions everything rationalist European philosophy held to be true, arguing that it is all contingent and that most cultural construction have served the power of empowering members of the dominant social groups of the expense of "others". Thus, beginning in the mid-1980s, modernism emerged in art, architecture, music, film, literature and sociology, communications, fashion and other fields. (Singh vii)

The above passage suggests that postmodernism questions everything. In the novel *Neti, Neti* characters like Sophie Das and Swami question the changes Bangalore City undergoes. For example, they discuss the changes in art, music, and architecture. Bangalore is a city that keeps on changing. City life constantly deconstructs and constructs the native town and takes a new form, always giving people new experiences. This is clearly portrayed in the novel *Neti, Neti*.

Sophie Das is the protagonist of the novel. Her life in Bangalore has transformed her life and personality. The owner of the house, Mr. Bhatt's unannounced entry into the home of Sophie Das, his tenant, makes her feel awkward. He also questions about her panties that were hanging on the balcony for drying, which, as a woman, he says, she is not supposed to do. There is no privacy for her. He interferes in her life too much, making her lose her privacy. He ill-treats her as she is smoking and drinking, and she invites her female and male friends into her house. If she continues this lifestyle, Mr. Bhatt threatens to send her out of his house. Mr. Bhatt says,

The doorbell rang in a series of slowly fading pleas.

Madam, please remove your underwear, said Mr. Bhatt, the landlord.

'Huh?

Underwear, underwear, said Mr. Bhatt urgently. For a few moments, the impatient Bhatt and incredulous Sophie stared at each other. It was only when he gestured in the direction of the balcony she understood. He had peeked out of the window on the landing and was objecting to the panties she had hung out to dry. (NN 15)

The above lines show the embarrassed young woman who faces an adverse situation as she has migrated from her hometown, Shillong, to another state. These uncomfortable situations embarrass her, so she wants to return to her house after work. Mr. Bhatt's action breaks the peace of Sophie Das.

To prosper in life, Sophie Das joins "Star Titles," an American-based company headquartered in Los Angeles. Sophie spends her time typing the subtitles for Hollywood movies. Her colleagues are jealous of her because of her command of the English language. In this novel, *Neti, Neti* comments on computers' mass communication and media. According to N.P Shukla:

We should therefore distinguish between a theory of postmodern power and a postmodern analytics of modern power. While there are salient postmodern aspects to his analysis of power whereby he dissolves power into a plurality of micro forces, and while he anticipates a new postmodern era, Foucault never theorizes those technologies and strategies that some theorists identify as constituting a postmodern power. For theorists such as a Baudrillard, a postmodern power involves electronic media and information technologies and semiotic systems that undermine the distinction between reality and unreality and proliferates an abstract environment of images and manipulated signifiers. (Shukla 81)

Neti,Neti also deals with the working environment of the technical world. It speaks about the postmodern era, where one can get a job online and lose a job through e-mail. Postmodern elements like the internet connect Shillong and Bangalore in the life of Sophie Das. The novelist comments about the trauma of Sophie Das thus,

She continued staring at her sister, a sister rendered unrecognizable by the fact that she was pregnant. Sophie was hardly able to say the word to herself – a word she associated with middle- aged women, long years of marriage, domesticity, all the things Muku had absolutely nothing to do with. Sophie did not dare well on what Muku was herself thinking, What horrifying new perceptions of herself she was grappling with. All she seemed to project, lying huddled and shrunken on the sofa, was the greatest self-pity. There was neither remorse nor embarrassment in her crying. (NN 247).

Mukulika is a young daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Das. She always longs for love and care. When her elder sister Sophie was with her, she used to feel the warmth of love, but now Mukulika has become more violent and rebellious as she finds herself neglected. Her uncaring family makes her long for love. This makes her accept the love of Pavan. Sixteen-year-old Mukulika dates with Pavan, which leads to her pregnancy. The lack of sex education in India has misled young Mukulika into unwanted pregnancy. The author, Anjum, has discussed a severe issue that must be addressed. Through Mukulika's character, the novelist emphasizes that sex education is necessary at home and then at school.

The happenings of Shillong, such as her younger sister Mukulika getting along with boys and her mother's complaint to Sophie to take care of her younger sister, confuses her, which in turn affects her life. Maya the boss of Sophie, threatens her with termination of her job as she has failed to complete her target. The novel is written in the stream-of-consciousness technique. Sophie Das remembers her past in Shillong with Ribor, her beloved. He advises Sophie not to go out of Shillong as he knows many people who go into the mainland of India suffer due to loss of identity. Many people identify the Shillong people as Chinese, and they try to exploit them. Then, the South Indian climate is humid and unbearable for her to stay in. Sophie is determined to explore the areas that are behind the hills of Shillong. The cost of her so-called dream is unimaginable.

Swami and Sophie are engaged in courtship; encounter a shocking accident as they go to a shopping mall. Inside the shopping mall, a small kid falls accidentally from the top floor of the supermarket on a Mercedes car and dies. This shakes Sophie's heart, and the sudden death breaks her heart and makes her ponder over her feeling of meeting her death being unloved. City life does not give value to human life, and they precede their life as if it were just a day-to-day incident. People living in busy cities are not sensitive about the traumatic incidents around them. But Sophie, being a girl from a rustic background, is agonized by the tragedies of city life. The unshaking response of the mall owner makes her wonder. She questions about strong influences and simple people. It creates an unforgettable sore in her heart. Throughout the novel, one can see Sophie thinking of herself being crushed by a vehicle or by the clash of cars. City life in Bangalore completely contrasts with her small-town life in Shillong.

Violence is very prevalent in the city of Bangalore. Sophie's friend Ringo Saar kills Rukshana, his girlfriend, without thinking of the consequences that he should face in society. Alcohol, opium and drugs are part of the life of these youngsters which breed violence. Rukshana's impulsive actions, like looking for other men while she is in a serious romantic relationship with Ringo Saar, end up in her murder. Here, one finds the outcome of a relationship which gives freedom as their relationship is not legally recognized and also it is

not sanctified by the tag of marriage. There is no security in their relationship. It gives rise to violence also.

This novel *Neti, Neti* has an open ending as one finds Sophie Das neither plans about her future in Shillong nor in Bangalore. According to a critic Nandini Saha,

Postmodern art and thought emphasizes reflexivity and self-consciousness, fragmentation and discontinuity (especially in narrative structures), ambiguity, simultaneity, and also focuses on the destructed, decentred, dehumanized subject. In contrast to Modernism, postmodernism intends to celebrate the fragmented, incoherent picture of the world. Modernism affirms that art would give meaning to reality, Postmodernism denies all such claims and intends to have fun instead with meaninglessness and nonsensical. (Saha20)

The above quote emphasizes the decentered concept of Modern literature. Thus is the novel *Neti, Neti* which ends with a note of discontinuity. This clearly indicates the sense of post-modernism.

Finally one can find the concepts of post-modernism in the novel *Neti,Neti* which questions the modernity surrounding it. The nature, culture and lifestyle of modern people lead the youngsters to violence and destruction. It also shows how one should be very careful about the influences that cities might create on the people those who live in the city. This novel describes the adverse effects of city life.

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