



Third Space and Cosmopolitanism Imaginings in Anjum Hasan's *Neti, Neti: Not This, Not This*

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Abstract

Narratives of belonging can be seen as symbolic ways of creating homes and navigating disputes over differing and conflicting loyalties. In this context, the impasse between the ethnic articulation of home and belonging, often marked by exclusivity, and the “Others” in diasporic spaces advocating for inclusivity, becomes a complex issue. Immigration has heightened existing racial tensions, with “outsiders” seen as undermining collective identity. This contention persists among “insiders,” who define identity through ethnic and linguistic markers. Hasan’s work shifts the focus of early post-colonial Northeastern novels from stereotypical tales of regional discrimination to more nuanced narratives. It introduces a unique dichotomy where the main characters are “outsiders” within the already marginalised Shillong, itself a part of the “otherised” Northeast. This paper examines how Anjum Hasan’s novel *Neti, Neti: Not This, Not This* challenges the insider-outsider binary by introducing the doubly removed outsider who seeks the “third space,” defined by Homi K. Bhabha. However, the paper argues that the desire for a “third space” does not lead to successful negotiation. Rather it evolves into a form of collectivism where the cosmopolitan becomes “rooted” and absorbed into the larger majority under a neocolonial regime.

Keywords: Insider-outsider, Northeast India, Third Space, Rooted Cosmopolitanism, Neocolonialism.

Introduction

The attempts in post-colonial India to homogenise the nation under the concept of “unity in diversity” have led to the creation of

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numerous marginalised pockets (Deb; Mukhim). Voices from these marginalised regions, especially Northeast India, have engaged in a dialogue with “mainland” India, disrupting the unidirectional narrative of inclusivity. The British imposition of unjust homogenisation, disregarding ethnographic and cultural boundaries, is particularly evident in Northeast India. Categories like hill tribes and valley peoples are closely associated with the colonial project of transforming non-state spaces into state spaces (Scott 9-10). H. Kham Khan Suan has noted that the postcolonial state in India has inherited the state-society rupture, exemplifying “the hills-valley divide” (Suan 264). This sharp distinction between the two binaries is attributed not only to a territorial separation but also to a form of life that is different from the other (Kar 52). Sanjib Baruah writes how British colonial officials and ethnographers believed that each “tribe” had its supposed native habitat (Baruah 2), and cited how Paul Gilroy described this classification as a “bio-cultural” conception of ethnic characteristics as “fixed, solid almost biological” and inheritable (Gilroy 39). The persistence of a strong ethnic connotation of identity, ownership and belongingness found in the creative writings of indigenous writers from Northeast India shows that such associations influence even sociocultural and literary imaginaries.

In the twentieth century, Anglophone literature from this region has emerged as a powerful voice, highlighting themes like the mainland-Northeast binary, belonging, displacement, otherisation, and discrimination. These writers challenge the notion of a “united nation” by presenting narratives that are estranged, alienated, and marginalised. However, as successive waves of immigrants arrived in the Northeast, this exacerbated the already racial tensions present in the region. The presence of so-called “Outsiders” who try to undermine markers of collective identity has always been a source of contention among the “Insiders” of the Northeast, who define identity in terms of their ethnic and linguistic markers. Amit Baishya and Rakhee Moral note that Northeast Literature reflects different sensibilities over time. The early post-colonial period focused on nation-building, ethnic violence, and the new Indian identity. Later authors explored indigenous culture to “decolonize” the native mind, while others redefined Northeastern existence by introducing the doubly removed outsider, who desires for what Homi K. Bhabha

calls, the “third space” (Bhabha 50). This paper focuses on the latter group of writers, here Anjum Hasan’s novel *Neti, Neti: Not This, Not This*, whose works explore the “in-between space,” supposedly rejecting the dominance of any single political or social worldview. Nevertheless, the paper also argues that this desire for a “third space” does not necessarily lead to the “beyond” where there is successful negotiation. Rather it evolves into a form of collectivism where the seemingly cosmopolitan becomes “rooted” and is absorbed into the larger majority.

Conceptualising the “Third Space” within the Context of the “Minor”

In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha discusses the “Third Space” as an intermediary realm that allows for the accommodation of cultural and historical ambiguities or inconsistencies. Bhabha views this third space as a necessary condition for expressing cultural differences (Bhabha 38). He argues that cultural identity lacks originality and unity, and can only be accessed in the “negation” of any sense of inherent completeness (Bhabha 51). He further describes cultural identity as fluid, constantly being created and recreated through ongoing negotiations in what he terms the “Third Space.” This Third Space, though unrepresentable itself, shapes the discursive conditions that prevent culture from having primordial unity or fixity (Bhabha 37).

Bhabha positions the Third Space as central to the dynamics between coloniser and colonised and suggests that navigating this space is essential for advancing human history and reaching new horizons, which he terms the “beyond.” For Bhabha, the “beyond” represents a space that indicates a special distance, signifies progress, and promises the future. However, the very act of going beyond is unknowable and unrepresentable without returning to the “present,” which, through repetition, becomes disjointed and displaced (Bhabha 4). This perspective of dwelling in the “beyond,” while seemingly liberating as it creates spaces for experimentation and negotiation, may also be viewed as undermining the essence of national identity.

Consequently, in the context of newly independent nations, Bhabha's concepts of the "split" or "hybridity" in forming national identity can be an obstacle to nation-building (Abou-Agag 30). In his article "Homi Bhabha's Third Space and Neocolonialism," Naglaa Abou-Agag argues that for postcolonial nations, a solid identity is essential for progress, much like it was for European nations in the nineteenth century (30). While the third space is crucial for negotiating different cultures, focusing on "the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity" rather than the exoticism of multiculturalism or cultural diversity (Bhabha 38), it remains confined to endless negotiations and enunciations without ever achieving the "beyond" (Abou-Agag 40).

This is particularly true in post-independent India too, as it started rebuilding the new nation based on Hindu nationalism. These nationalistic forces attempted to homogenise the diverse cultures in the Northeastern states. As far as India's neocolonial attitude is concerned towards the Northeast, Nayar notes that the marginalisation of the Northeast represents a "collapse of the post-colonial project of creating a unified India" (102). Vei Pou has also observed that post-colonial India has, perhaps unwittingly, fallen into the trap of colonial continuity (3), which Homi Bhabha describes as colonial mimicry: "almost the same but not quite" (81). The unjust homogenisation of the Northeast has led to a "sub-nationalism" in the region that opposes both the overarching pan-Indian narrative of nationalism and the inclusion of migrants from other parts of India which worsened the tribal/non-tribal divide (Biswas and Das 73). In this scenario, the literature that focuses on the voices of the migrants becomes a "minor" as they are "a counter-culture to the counter-culture," breaking the political, social, and economic dimensions of a unidirectional binary by portraying their adopted place of the settlement that turns marginalised individuals into "outsiders among outsiders" (Dewan 410).

In their seminal work *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, Deleuze and Guattari explain that in minor literature, politics permeates everything, and all elements acquire a collective value. This forms a "collective assemblage" of subjects, potentially fostering a new sensibility and community of expression (Deleuze

and Guattari 17-18). This ideology of collectivism eventually gets ingrained even within the “minor.” In contrast to Bhabha’s notion of the need for a third space that involves the “negation” of fixed cultural identity, Deleuze and Guattari view “desire” (in becoming a “minor”) not as an indicator of lack or negation but as the driving force behind political formations and social structures. Desires are shaped by politics to create “interests.” In Northeast India, these coded political signifiers have generated a counter-culture where tribal identity and language respond to the dominant nationalist discourse.

In *Neti, Neti* there is no promise of a future that surpasses the historical moments the text revisits. Instead of an epiphanic moment of reconciliation or negotiation of cultures, we will see that the migrant subject in her quest for liberation from ethnic exclusivity is finally absorbed into mainstream society. So, the third space, instead of serving as an agency of negotiation, becomes a tool manipulated by the forces of neocolonialism (the larger dominant group) (Abou-Agag 38). Additionally, I argue that this may explain why the main character in *Neti, Neti* adopts a form of “rooted” cosmopolitanismⁱ (Nadiminti 355-56).

Narrativising Alienation in the Third Space

In *Neti Neti*, Shillong is portrayed as having an undercurrent of ethnic violence and conflict, with hostility towards migrants evident at every level. This hostility highlights a larger political issue: the desire for a third space. Hasan offers a nuanced perspective on what it means to be an outsider by focusing on the predicament of the non-Khasis, particularly the Bengalisⁱⁱ, who had begun to identify as belonging to the place but were treated as outsiders by the Khasis, the original occupants of the place. The conflicts in Meghalaya over the past four decades stem from the politicised division between tribal and non-tribal communities, with non-tribals perceived as infiltrators whose unfamiliarity threatens social order and stability (Matta 52).

The main protagonist, Sophie Das, is the grownup fictional character of Anjum Hasan’s earlier novel *Lunatic in My Head* (2007) who is an eight-year-old girl living in her fantasy world. In *Neti Neti*,

Sophie is now a twenty-five-year-old. She was born to parents from different linguistic backgrounds: her father is a Bengali from West Bengal, while her mother is a Hindi-speaking North Indian. Although non-tribals are Indian citizens and thus insiders to the Indian territory, Sophie is categorised as a “dkharⁱⁱⁱ” by the Khasis, a term they use to denote individuals they perceive as “outsiders” to their ethnic group, “foreigners” to the tribal hills, and ultimately, “strangers” to the land. While Shillong tribal inhabitant’s counter-narrative responds to unwilling dislocation, second-generation migrant Sophie longs for a space that comfortably accommodates her. Her liminal existence and desire for freedom prompts her to seek migration.

The opening of the text highlights some of the significant phases of change occurring locally, as the narrative immediately introduces us to Sophie’s family’s anxious dissatisfaction with their home location in Shillong, which, in the words of her mother Mrs. Das, has “gone down the drain” (Hasan 29). An encounter with Killer Queen where she is questioned about her presence in Shillong prompts Sophie to realise that it is time for her to leave the small capital town. Her constant ruminations about her place of birth and the inability to find acceptance on the ground of being a “non-tribal” remain the core thematic concerns of the novel. The dilemma of being an “outsider” is that while not wanting to move out of the place that one calls home, one is also aware of the sense of not being accepted. Sophie expresses anxiety about not having identical features with the people around her: “She wasn’t one of his (referring to Ribor who is a native of Shillong) people, didn’t look like one of his people” (Hasan 58). Hasan writes that “[T]his is what Sophie 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). Thus, the tribal communities have adopted the notion of “territorial ethnicity,” a term coined by Meiron Weiner, indicating a profound link between particular ethnic groups and specific geographic regions. This has intensified conflicts between settlers and Indigenous communities, as well as ethnic violence even between various ethnic groups.

This sense of existential crisis is reflected in the text through the dialogues between Sophie, who is struggling to cope with her

situation of being an “outsider,” and Ribor, a native of Shillong who is an “insider”:

‘But I have to leave some day so . . .’ she said.
‘But you’ve always lived here so . . .’ he said.

These incomplete sentences didn’t need completing. Both of them knew what they were saying. Sophie was saying—of course you can’t take off into India just like that—you with your secret language and your unique face. And Ribor was 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)

Although belonging to different ethnicities, the narrative of the friendship between Sophie and Ribor reveals the possibility of transcending essentialist identity markers. Yet, Sophie’s secret affection for Ribor serves as a metaphor for her incapacity to openly declare her emotional bond with Shillong. There is a tension that exists between longing and belonging. The critic Avtar Brah poses some important questions in this regard:

When does a location become home? What is the difference between ‘feeling at home’ and staking 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. (Brah 193)

Sophie’s feelings for Ribor become intertwined with her love for Shillong, the city of her birth. Similar to Sophie’s unfulfilling love relationship with Ribor, Shillong represents an unattainable entity compelling her to find a way to leave the city. The sentiment of permanently departing from Shillong has been ingrained by the older generation in the minds of the younger ones, causing Sophie to grapple with this conflict until she eventually departs from the city. While the first generation viewed Shillong as a place of opportunities, the second generation saw it as their native land, their homeland.

Despite experiencing various ethnic clashes and feeling like an outsider in her own homeland at times, Sophie came to realise that this small town was her context. It was the town that defined her and her family, shaping their identities and experiences.

Even though Sophie has made an effort to move on from Shillong, she still feels a deep connection to it. Even during her time in Bangalore, thoughts of Shillong persist, indicating that her connection to her hometown is deeply ingrained and not easily severed. The places to which we feel the strongest commitment may indeed be central to our lives. Despite her relationship with Swami in Bangalore, Sophie is constantly preoccupied with thoughts of Ribor. She mentally narrates her experiences to him, imagines his reactions, and considers the advice he might have given. Ribor's influence endures, shaping her perceptions and decisions even in his absence. Paradoxically, a strong attachment to places can also confine people, transforming them into figurative prisons that are difficult to escape.

Hasan delicately explores the sense of alienation and the paradoxical attraction Sophie feels for Bangalore and Shillong. Transitioning from the sylvan beauty, camaraderie, and solitude of Shillong, Sophie finds herself grappling with the anonymity, callousness, and confusion that seem to greet her at every turn in Bangalore. Her disenchantment is partly fueled by the chaos and ugliness she perceives in 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. (Hasan 36)

Sophie contrasts this cacophony with the perceived stasis and peace of Shillong, highlighting the fundamental conundrum she grapples with in her life. At first, Sophie is captivated by the variety and abundance of merchandise on display. However, with her keen social awareness, she quickly discerns the emptiness concealed beneath the glossy surface. Observing the crowds from the highest floor, Sophie “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” (Hasan 71). Her boyfriend Swami, unable to grasp her mood, repeatedly urges her to make a purchase. The fervour of consumerism surrounding her fills her with a profound sense of disgust. In a moment that seems to mirror her disillusionment, a sudden scream pierces through the mall as a child plummets to his death from three floors above. Sophie had an epiphanic moment when she understood that “nothing in this mall had any connection with her life” (Hasan 74).

Sophie’s departure from Bangalore signifies both a physical and metaphorical flight from the city. When Sophie first returns to Shillong, she is lured to the peacefulness and beauty of her childhood home, finding it alluring once more. Yet, Sophie realises that her idealised vision of Shillong as a place of pristine beauty and unshakeable tranquillity is nothing but an illusion. She eventually realises that her nostalgic image of a close-knit family is also illusory. The fractures beneath the surface soon become evident as Sophie observes her family drifting irreversibly apart. Her father intends to relocate to Shantiniketan to fulfil his ambition of translating Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* into Bengali. Her mother has become increasingly devout and wishes to visit Benaras to absolve herself of the perceived negative karma of marrying outside her community. In a final effort to establish a sense of belonging, Sophie embarks on an affair with Ribor. Yet, despite her earnest attempts, she finds herself unable to realise her fantasies of settling down with him. She is confronted with the truth of her father’s words: “Whatever happens, you’re not coming back here, Sophie. You’ve moved on” (Hasan 234). It dawns on Sophie that one can never truly return to what was once considered “home.” As a *dkhar* or settler, Sophie understands that she can never truly “belong.” She comes to terms with the fact that she is merely a passing interest in Ribor’s life and could never

find contentment in his aimlessness or be privy to the complexities of his world. Sophie decides to distance herself physically and emotionally from them all, walking away until she is as far removed from them as she feels in every other sense. They inhabit a different world from the one she had once imagined, a world free from the burdens of history, “a life without history” (Hasan 255). Although Sophie frequently questions her ambivalent sense of belonging, she is surprised to discover that she is less of a foreigner than she believed herself to be in far-away India (Hasan 126).

From Failed Third Space to Rooted Cosmopolitanism

The longing for one's roots and the political desire to belong where one lives without renouncing one's sense of identity is reiterated in migrant writings. For migrants of all generations, the home away from home thus registers emancipatory confabulations. *Neti, Neti* demonstrates a recurring theme in diasporic writing: that the new “home” is a haven of cultural freedom in contrast to the inescapable conservatism and claustrophobia that are inherent in one's place of birth. The fact that diasporic literature repeatedly emphasises emancipation as a particularly advantageous trait cannot be overlooked, even though this perspective of emancipation is occasionally criticised as essentialist. Irene Skovgaard-Smith and Flemming Poufelt in their article “Imagining ‘non-nationality’: Cosmopolitanism as a source of identity and belonging” argue that cosmopolitan identity projects are socially and relationally accomplished using cosmopolitanism as a cultural resource (2). This is predicated on the idea that cosmopolitan identities are just as cultural and collective as national, ethnic, or ethno-religious identities (3). The collective here does not refer to an abstract notion of humanity as a whole or a global culture, but particular situated modes of belonging contingent on shared social spaces, circumstances and a set of collectively held understandings that represent a discourse of cosmopolitanism. This collective identity, categorised as “non-nationals,” is constructed in the context of diverse social spaces and shared circumstances. It equally involves boundary drawing to establish who does not belong and what the “non-nationals” define themselves vis-a-vis, namely national (mono)culture and parochialism.

In a manner reminiscent of diasporic literature, the novel delves into identities shaped by multiple cultures and cities. The diasporic^{iv} struggle of Sophie regularly reverberates throughout the narrative as she tries to find a sense of identity and belongingness. Anjum Hasan navigates the complexities of hybrid cultural identities and their interactions with national issues, which are frequently marked by conflict and contestation (Nayar 217). This is why Sophie's character seems to embody a cosmopolitan identity^v in contrast to an identity bounded by ethnicity and culture. The capacity of the characters to seamlessly integrate into other cultures can be linked to a globalised environment and cosmopolitan attitudes. In *Secularism in the Postcolonial Indian Novel: National and Cosmopolitan Narratives in English*, Neelam Srivastava argues that cosmopolitanism as "an intellectual reaction [is] a response to excessively restrictive notions of identities and identitarian politics" (157). Hasan's novel offers an alternative spatial understanding of indigenous people's "localism" through her counter-vision of cosmopolitan experience. Yet, she remains preoccupied with the ideas of identity and belonging made available by a geographically defined sense of the region.

Shillong, seen as a Third Space, fails to offer a space where elements from different cultures can engage in meaningful negotiations. Renowned social anthropologist Bengt G. Karlsson describes modern Shillong as a "tribal city," characterised by nostalgia and an inability to reconcile with its present. This establishes Shillong as a new socio-spatial form, where the idea of the city has shifted towards a more exclusive understanding, suggesting that only certain people belong there (Karlsson 33). The novel does not illustrate a negotiation between two cultures or cities—one tribal and the other cosmopolitan. Sophie's stories are not merely personal but rather a collection of social and political impressions. Her fantastical ideas of being adopted by a Khasi family to gain acceptance or having a Khasi lover to feel a sense of belonging are not only reflective of broader politics but are also integral parts of it. Thus, the primary conflict of identity in *Neti, Neti* is not merely a veiled critique of the authorities, but rather a response to encoded political interests expressed through personal microcosms. In her analysis of the novel, Anita Balakrishnan has commented that:

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. (Balakrishnan 8)

On closer reading of the text, Balakrishnan's observation is not quite true because the narrative does not transcend the spatial boundaries of ethnic versus national binary. Hasan has stated that, as far as her writing is concerned, she viewed Shillong as a "minor, forgotten place" and saw herself as bringing it into fiction (Hasan 5). According to Deleuze and Guattari, for a piece of literature to become "minor," everything must acquire a collective value, forming a "collective assemblage" of subjects (Deleuze and Guattari 17-18). They write:

It is (minor) literature that produces an active solidarity in spite of scepticism; and if the writer is in the margins or completely outside his or her fragile community, this situation allows the writer all the more the possibility to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility. (Deleuze and Guattari 17)

The emergence of "another possible community" and the forging of "another consciousness" and "another sensibility" can, however, not necessarily lead to negotiation but separation. This development is reflected in Sophie's final decision to envision herself as part of the broader national identity in response to regional identity politics.

Although Sophie had felt the pain of being an émigré, and the enforced sense of foreignness in her hometown Shillong, her filiation is projected primarily toward being a mainstream Indian citizen. The definition of "Indianness" given by Sophie excludes the marginal from the mainstream. Her description outlines the idea of India through her affiliation with the "values," "cultures," and histories of mainland Indians in contrast to the Northeast:

Somewhere in the depths of her childhood she had formed the idea that India was an exact feeling, a series of things in contrast to everything else in her environment which was simply what it was and had no relation to India. . . . The words of Rabindranath Tagore's poem— 'Into that heaven of freedom, my father, let my country awake'— sung during the school assembly on Independence Day were India. The yellowed pages of her history book when she was eight, filled with stories about King Harshavardhan and scenes from the Mahabharata, were India. The little flags with their dripping orange and green watercolours . . . were self-evidently India. ... At school, the girls who oiled their hair and worried about exams reeked of India, as against those who wore their skirts short and who, already at thirteen or twelve, understood the mysterious workings of sex. . . — all of these were uniquely and indisputably India. (Hasan 125)

Her conception of India as "a fixed series of things in contrast to everything else in her environment" becomes a kind of ultimatum that stands in opposition to the supposedly Northeast's indigenous people's "search for purity and aloofness." This realisation made her "foreignness" in Shillong strange as she finds herself more relatable with her mainland counterpart as the narrator says:

As far as Sophie could tell, this was the only legacy of having lived in Shillong—the sense that India was far away even though it managed, now and then, to manifest itself. When Sophie moved to Bangalore, she'd expected to be overwhelmed by the excess of India, and for the first few months she had approached everything with caution—the alien-looking mangoes, [. . .]. *But over the past year, she had by implication herself become India and now the opposite seemed strange—the idea that she could have lived the first twenty-four years of her life believing in her foreignness.* (Hasan 126, emphasis added)

Anjum Hasan's privileging of Indian metropolitan cities as the geographical and ideological locus for personal and cultural metamorphosis can be read as either naïve or complicit with neocolonialist values and practices, given the threat posed by Indian hegemony at the present times. In the novel, there is no meeting point between the two cultures where negotiations can be achieved. While the strength of the narrative lies in depicting the lives of migrants who strive to achieve a reframed sense of what home is, the failure to negotiate a common ground with the "other" is its limitation. Rather than bridging the fissures between the self and the other, Sophie, in a cathartic realisation of that elusive space called 'home,' finds herself becoming an embodiment of "India" itself.

In her essay "Review: Imagining Rooted Cosmopolitanism," Kalyan Nadiminti highlights how "Rushdie's cosmopolitanism fails in the Bombay novels because the individual can never supersede the group" (359). For instance, Saleem's suppression of Gandhi in *Midnight's Children* reflects an aversion to heroic figures in nation-building. This is because national heroes, no matter how inclusive they intend to be, cannot include everyone. Citing Trousdale, she shows how this issue also underlies the "immense real-world repercussions of nationalist imaginings of community" (Nadiminti 359). These imaginings seem to leave readers unable to reconcile the competing demands of cosmopolitans and communalists, offering instead "a vision of the absorption of the narrator into the surrounding crowds" (115). In *Neti, Neti* too, the absorption of Sophie into the mainstream culture is made evident as she fails to reconcile with the insider-outsider conflict in Shillong. Shameem Black has made a significant argument that "cosmopolitanism should be less invested in a traditional idea of feeling 'at home' in the world and more committed to recognising 'the world through the home'" (Black 45). Perhaps, taking Bhabha's notion of the "unhomely" where the traditional division between the world (public sphere) and the home (private sphere) becomes blurred, Black argues "how (domestic) homes can mimic the exclusionary tactics of nationalism and communalism" (49). In *Neti, Neti*, the disintegration of Sophie's family is a symbolic representation of the failure of cosmopolitan ethics at home and the societal level.

While Sophie's position as a non-tribal/outsider in Shillong is placed alongside the cosmopolitan and overpowering space in Bangalore, the novel also touches upon the narrative of Northeast India as a marginal location from the mainstream. Even today, the mainland's perception of the Northeastern region is viewed as "spatially distant and frontier-like" (Baishya 176). In a section of the novel titled "Don't Stop the Noise," Sophie's vulnerable situation is presented through the conversation between her and Shiva from Bangalore:

'I hear you're from the Northeast. What a tragic place,' said Shiva. . . .

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)

Dialogic interactions with Indian co-nationals like Shiva's character demonstrated that the latter seems to have a more certain sense of belonging. The character of Shiva can be read as a representative of the unassuming, ignorant and yet mindful individual of the mainstream society. He appears to be strongly established in his identity as distinctively "Indian," and unaffected by the notion that it is something constructed.

The stigma of rejection and alienation becomes apparent in the numerous interactions between individuals from the Northeast and those from mainland India. The exodus represents a reversal from migration from the hills to the plains, indicating to some extent the success of the government in fostering a sense of pan-Indian nationalism. However, the challenge lies at the grassroots level, where individuals from the Northeast often face the most difficult experiences in attempts at assimilation. In the novel, the character of Uncle Rock represents people from the Northeast who find it hard to connect with mainland Indians. On being asked by Sophie why he does not want to go back to Bangalore, he replies:

‘Something about the feel of the place – it’s not right. I didn’t get the right vibe. No one really has the time to have a conversation. And whether you’re 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. ... Uncle Rock’s not coming this way again...’ (Hasan 183)

The traditional cultural symbols that represent India are not shared by the “tribal” Northeast. In “North-East India: Demography, Culture and Identity Crisis,” Balmiki Prasad Singh pointed out that despite their numerous variations, various parts of the Indian nation can relate to the major Hindu epics, such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata. But the epic is viewed more as a category of distance than of closeness by many Northeastern Christians who never professed Hinduism. While this also applies to other minorities in India, like Muslims, other Christians, and the “tribals” of the “mainland,” there are still linguistic continuities and caste-related affiliations among these latter groups, which allow for a degree of integration. This applies to Sophie’s character. In stark contrast, through the character of Uncle Rock, we witness how tribal people from the Northeastern region become marginalised as “outsiders” within the same national context. Thus, the violent ethnic and conflicting politics of the insider-outsider dichotomy are not restricted to the ethnic groups in the Northeast region but are a production of a larger political identity contestation vis-à-vis the Indian state (Bosco 588).

Conclusion

Since the early 20th century, the British have attempted to homogenise the Northeast for easier colonial administration, often treating it as an appendage rather than an integral part of the mainland. Baishya and Moral argue that the Northeast’s history of militarisation, ethnic violence, and rash political decisions has significantly contributed to an “incipient Northeast Indian identity” that engages with the heartland of India as a binary on issues of inclusivity and belonging (2). These issues not only highlight the

failure of the post-colonial pan-Indian discourse but also emphasise the ethnic and social conflicts in various regions of India that have influenced the modern Indian narrative. Hasan's novel highlights the fragility of human belonging by illustrating how individuals become alienated from the socio-political discourse, where the ethos of non-inclusivity and non-belonging becomes a defining characteristic of the region. *Neti, Neti* aptly articulates the experience of homelessness which is as much psychological as it is physical. The novel becomes minor on account of its role in reshaping conventional narratives and re-contextualising the modern Northeast. The liminal narratives from the margins deserve recognition as they seek to explore the uncharted territories of "imagined communities."

Endnotes

- i. Building on Kwame Anthony Appiah's idea of "rooted cosmopolitanism," which describes a person who appreciates the value of community and the benefits gained from belonging to it, and broadens their sense of self-interest to encompass the preservation of that community viz-a-vis the world at large, Kalyan Nadiminti identifies a "missing piece" in Appiah's concept by reading the works of Trousdale and Rushdie's works: rooted cosmopolitanism can also result in the formation of new identity categories and competing loyalties, making it difficult for individual identities to entirely rise above group affiliations. The close connection between rooted cosmopolitanism and national belonging calls for a thoughtful approach to nationalist sentiments, alongside advocating for cosmopolitanism's inclusive, progressive values. This perspective helps explain why characters like Sophie in the novel (a migrant) hold onto national identity as a way to counteract the alienation and instability caused by local/regional communal conflicts.
- ii. The derogatory terms "dkhar," "outsiders," "infiltrators," etcetera, are often applied, particularly to Bangladeshi migrants attempting to enter India through the porous border with Northeast India. This labelling has fueled resentment and fear among tribal populations, who feel under constant threat of losing not just their land but also their language, culture, and

customs. This pervasive anxiety and fear of infiltration, termed the “Tripura Syndrome” by Duncan McDuie-Ra, describes the fear of assimilation and destruction by non-tribals settling in tribal lands, exemplified by the plight of the tribal population in Tripura (69). The term “infiltrators” emerged in official discourse in 1962 when the Indian government identified immigrants in Tripura and Assam as such and initiated expulsion measures (Hazarika). Since then, it has been consistently used to describe migration inflows into India, especially from Bangladesh.

- iii. The term “dkhar,” while currently carrying a negative connotation to signify foreigners or non-tribals, originally referred to individuals belonging to an adopted clan. These clans were formed to include those who married outside customary Khasi practices, marrying non-Khasi individuals. These adopted clans, known collectively as the Dkhar clan, were created to distinguish them from indigenous clans. Many members of these clans use the prefix “Khar” before their adopted names to denote their identity. The term “Dkhar” was initially used by the Khasi to refer to people inhabiting the plains area near their territory, hence the common title “Dkhar.” In its original context, the term was not necessarily derogatory. As clarified by Diengdoh, there are many Khasi clans with the same title. The usage of the term's derogatory nature depends on the context of the conversation or the political environment in which it is used. (See also Valentina Pakyntein, “The Khasi Clan: Changing Religion and Its Effect” (2010), 354. Available at: <http://dspace.nehu.ac.in/handle/1/2042>. See also Tiplut, Nongbri, "Problems of Matriliney: A Short Review of the Khasi Kinship Structure," *Journal of NEICSSR*, 8.8 (1984), 6.)
- iv. The term “diasporic” space is not used here in the sense of Walker Connor’s definition of “living outside their homeland.” Rather it is used only in the context of her fictional characters living an “inland diasporic existence.” This concept is relatable with William Safran’s extended notion of the diasporic existence of people who “believe that they are not — and perhaps cannot be — fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it” (86). Although writers such as Floya Anthias have criticised the idea of essentialising the notions of “homeland,” “origin,” or “roots” in the context of diasporic studies, since it homogenises the

diaspora populations and overlooks the ideas of trans-ethnic bonds, nevertheless the concept of home remains an intrinsic motif of diasporic narratives.

- v. A cosmopolitan individual is at ease interacting with people from diverse cultures and regards the world as their home. The core concept of cosmopolitanism revolves around interconnectivity, mobility, and experiences that foster cross-cultural solidarity and advocate for a world free from discrimination. Martha Nussbaum, a prominent advocate of cosmopolitanism, defines it as the capacity to “recognise humanity wherever it occurs, and give its fundamental ingredients, reason and moral capacity, our first allegiance and respect” (7). Cosmopolitan cities are characterised by diverse cultures and cohesive urban cultures that unite people of various cultural identities and languages. They embody diversity, civility, sophistication, economic vibrancy, quality of life, creativity, and tourism.

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