

Original Research Article

Unfulfilled Desires and the Shadowed Self: A Psychoanalytic Inquiry into Anjum Hasan's novel Neti, Neti: Not This, Not This

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ABSTRACT: *Anjum Hasan's Neti, Neti: Not This, Not This* offers a subtle yet penetrating portrayal of a young woman struggling with the tensions of her own inner world. This paper examines the unconscious mind and the fragmented self in the character of Sophie Das by drawing on the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and Jacques Lacan. Freud's ideas on repression, dream-work, and the conflict among the id, ego, and superego provide insight into Sophie's persistent dissatisfaction and her inability to locate emotional stability. Jung's conception of archetypes and the shadow illuminates the unacknowledged fears, inherited anxieties, and unresolved contradictions that surface in Sophie's interactions and private reflections. Lacan's notion of "lack" and the endlessly deferred pursuit of wholeness further explain Sophie's recurring sense of emptiness, which aligns with the novel's title invoking the principle of negation through Neti, Neti: Not This, Not This. Critical works by P. F. John Bosco, Anita Balakrishnan, Himakshi Kalita, and Cheryl Davis underscore Sophie's divided consciousness and the psychological strain produced by her shifting attachments and ambivalent desires. Interviews and reflections by Hasan, including those documented by Sravasti Datta and by Hossain and Islam, reinforce the centrality of interior conflict and emotional restlessness in her fiction. This study argues that Sophie's fragmented psyche emerges not from external cultural forces but from the silent operations of the unconscious, where unfulfilled desires, anxieties, and unresolved memories continually reshape her sense of self. Ultimately, Neti, Neti: Not This, Not This reveals a mind caught in the recursive movement of longing, negation, and self division.

KEYWORDS: Unconscious mind, Fragmented self, Repression, Anjum Hasan, Lack and desire.

1. INTRODUCTION

Anjum Hasan's fiction frequently explores the intricacies of the human mind, revealing the subtle forces that shape personal identity, emotional unrest, and inner contradiction. In *Neti, Neti: Not This, Not This*, Sophie Das appears as one of Hasan's most psychologically complex characters, a young woman whose inner life is marked by uncertainty, dissatisfaction, and a persistent sense of incompleteness. Hasan herself remarks that her characters often inhabit "restless interior worlds," shaped as much by memory and self-doubt as by external circumstance (Hossain and Islam 176). Sophie exemplifies this condition through her constant self-questioning and emotional hesitation; at one point, she recognizes that "she was always on the verge of something, yet never quite there" (Hasan, *Neti, Neti*). Her inward unease manifests as withdrawal, hesitation, and emotional fragmentation, traits that echo the psychological tensions depicted in Hasan's earlier novel *Lunatic in My Head* (Hasan, *Lunatic* 12–13). The sharp distinction Sophie experiences between places and people is not merely territorial but existential, as she senses that "each place demanded a version of herself she could not fully become" (Hasan, *Neti, Neti*). Her fluctuating desires, abrupt shifts in mood, and inability to commit to relationships or environments thus reveal psychological tensions that demand a deeper exploration of the unconscious.

Psychoanalytic frameworks offer powerful tools for understanding this instability. Freud's theory of repression explains how unresolved wishes, latent fears, and early emotional impressions resurface as anxiety or emotional paralysis (Freud, *Civilization* 28). Sophie's tendency to avoid emotional confrontation reflects this dynamic, as she admits that "it was simpler not to ask too much of herself or of others" (Hasan, *Neti, Neti*), indicating a defensive withdrawal from desire. Jung's concept of the shadow further illuminates how unacknowledged aspects of the self intrude upon conscious behavior, producing conflicts between perceived identity and suppressed impulses (Jung 91–92). Sophie's discomfort with introspection and intimacy suggests the presence of such unintegrated psychic material. Lacan's notion of "lack"—the enduring sense of absence at the core of subjectivity—is especially relevant to Sophie's repeated feelings of emptiness and her search for meaning in transient connections. Her reflection that "something essential always slipped away before she could name it" (Hasan, *Neti, Neti*) exemplifies Lacan's claim that desire is structured around what cannot be possessed (Lacan 64). Critics such as Himakshi Kalita accordingly describe Sophie as a "divided self," driven by impulses she herself cannot fully articulate (Kalita 38), while Anita Balakrishnan observes that Sophie's emotional unease emerges through fragmented routines, abrupt departures, and unresolved longings rather than overt crisis (Balakrishnan 7).

While earlier studies of Neti, Neti: Not This, Not This have emphasized social dislocation or cultural tension (Bosco 84), the psychological depth of Sophie's journey warrants focused attention on the silent operations of the unconscious. Sophie's sense of isolation is less socially imposed than internally generated, as she realizes that "even in company, she felt curiously alone" (Hasan, Neti, Neti). By examining Sophie through the psychoanalytic perspectives of Freud, Jung, and Lacan, this study argues that her fragmented psyche arises not primarily from external pressures but from unresolved inner conflicts, repressed desires, and persistent feelings of inadequacy. In doing so, this paper positions Neti, Neti: Not This, Not This as a profound literary investigation into the unstable terrain of the mind and the enduring human struggle to achieve a coherent sense of self.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research adopts a qualitative analytical methodology grounded in classical and modern psychoanalytic theory to examine the representation of the unconscious mind and fragmented self in Anjum Hasan's Neti, Neti: Not This, Not This and Lunatic in My Head. The study employs close textual reading as its primary method, enabling an in-depth interpretation of narrative structures, character psychology, and symbolic patterns. Guided by Freud's concepts of repression, dream imagery, and unconscious desire (Civilization 52–54; Interpretation 113), the analysis focuses on identifying latent emotional conflicts that shape the protagonists' fractured identities. Jung's understanding of archetypes and the shadow self provides a complementary framework for tracing the characters' inner divisions and their struggles to integrate disowned aspects of the psyche (Jung 89–93). Further, Lacan's theories of desire, lack, and symbolic instability support the examination of narrative gaps, internal monologues, and the recurring sense of incompleteness that marks the protagonists' experiences (Lacan 28–32). The methodology also incorporates thematic coding to identify patterns of psychological fragmentation, alienation, and emotional dissonance across the texts. Insights from Balakrishnan's study of urban anxiety and Kalita's analysis of divided selves help contextualize these patterns within the emotional landscapes constructed by Hasan (Balakrishnan 7; Kalita 34–38). Catherine and Davis's discussion of alienation in Neti, Neti: Not This, Not This further supports the coding of mental dislocation and internal rupture (Catherine and Davis 22–23). Narrative elements identified through this coding—such as spatial transitions, inner dialogues, and shifting self-perceptions—are examined in relation to unconscious motivations, following Veena Das's emphasis on how ordinary emotional ruptures reveal deeper psychological tensions (Das 112–13). Secondary sources, including interviews with Hasan and critical essays on her fiction, offer additional interpretive insight. Datta's reflections on Hasan's focus on "inner tensions" and Hossain and Islam's discussions of identity and emotional interiority help triangulate thematic findings (Datta; Hossain and Islam 176). Throughout the study, theoretical interpretations remain closely tied to textual evidence to ensure analytical rigor. The methodology thus synthesizes psychoanalytic theory, textual analysis, and thematic coding to provide a comprehensive examination of the unconscious and fragmented self in Hasan's novels.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of Anjum Hasan's Neti, Neti: Not This, Not This and Lunatic in My Head reveals that both novels foreground characters whose identities are profoundly shaped by unconscious impulses, repressed emotions, and unresolved psychic conflicts. Close textual reading demonstrates that the protagonists repeatedly act from hidden motivations that align with Freud's understanding of the unconscious as a reservoir of unacknowledged desires and anxieties (Freud, Civilization 52). Sophie's abrupt shifts in mood, irrational longings, and persistent dissatisfaction illustrate this unconscious tension; at moments of acute disorientation, she experiences a breakdown of self-recognition, asking, "Who were these people and what place was this and why was she here? For a moment she had no clue" (Hasan, Neti, Neti). Such moments underscore Freud's assertion that unconscious forces exert a more powerful influence on behavior than conscious intention (Interpretation 113). Sophie's emotional numbness marked by her sense that she "felt nothing strongly—neither happiness nor despair—only a dull, persistent unease"—further suggests repression and melancholia, where unresolved loss remains internalized and unarticulated.

Themes of psychic fragmentation emerge consistently across the texts. Jung's concept of the shadow provides a compelling framework for understanding the protagonists' divided selves, as the characters repeatedly encounter aspects of themselves they neither recognize nor accept (Jung 89–93). Sophie's persistent conflict between her perceived self and her felt self—captured in the admission that she "belonged nowhere completely"—reveals a fractured interiority intensified by the pressures of urban life. This reading is supported by Balakrishnan's identification of emotional disorientation in Hasan's urban settings (Balakrishnan 7). Kalita's findings on internal division in Neti, Neti: Not This, Not This similarly note Sophie's inability to reconcile contradictory emotional demands, reinforcing the Jungian notion of an incomplete process of individuation (Kalita 34–36). The data also reveal that Lacan's notion of desire as an endless pursuit of an unattainable object resonates strongly with the protagonists' cyclical patterns of longing and disappointment (Lacan 28–32). Sophie's recurring sense of absence—"she wanted something, though she could not have said what"—exemplifies Lacan's claim that desire is structured around lack rather than fulfillment. The conversations between Sophie, who struggles with her position as an "outsider," and Ribor, an "insider" rooted in Shillong, further dramatize this existential divide. Sophie's search for belonging, emotional stability, and meaningful relationships repeatedly collapses into dissatisfaction, reflecting what Lacan describes as the subject's structural incompleteness. Catherine and Davis's analysis of alienation in Neti, Neti: Not This, Not This reinforces this interpretation, demonstrating how emotional rupture and inner dislocation constitute a central thematic concern in Hasan's narrative (Catherine and Davis 22–23). Interviews with Hasan further support these findings. Hossain and Islam note the author's

sustained focus on characters whose emotional lives remain unsettled and deeply inward (176). Datta similarly observes that Hasan's fiction is marked by persistent "inner tensions" that shape both character development and narrative movement. Taken together, these findings indicate that the unconscious mind and fragmented self are not peripheral motifs but structural forces that shape the emotional, relational, and psychological landscapes of Hasan's fiction.

4. CONCLUSION

The study of Anjum Hasan's *Neti, Neti: Not This, Not This* and *Lunatic in My Head* demonstrates that the author's fictional world is fundamentally shaped by the intricate operations of the unconscious mind and the resulting fragmentation of selfhood in her characters. Through a psychoanalytic reading informed by Freud, Jung, and Lacan, this research establishes that Hasan's protagonists embody deep psychological tensions that extend beyond conscious awareness. Freud's understanding of repressed desire and inner conflict provides a crucial interpretive lens for reading Sophie's fluctuating emotional states and her persistent sense of dissatisfaction (Freud, *Civilization* 52). These unconscious pressures reveal themselves in recurrent patterns of longing and withdrawal, illustrating Freud's argument that unacknowledged impulses continue to govern the individual's visible behavior (*Interpretation* 113).

Jung's notion of the shadow further illuminates the psychic fractures present in Hasan's characters, who struggle to integrate conflicting aspects of their identities (Jung 89). Sophie's inability to reconcile her aspirations with her emotional vulnerabilities reflects the tension between the persona she constructs and the deeper self she avoids confronting. Kalita's observations about "divided selves" in *Neti, Neti: Not This, Not This* reinforce this reading, showing that the protagonist's internal disunity is a central thematic concern rather than an incidental trait (Kalita 34–36). Catherine and Davis similarly note that emotional dislocation shapes the characters' interpersonal relationships and their perception of selfhood (Catherine and Davis 22). Lacan's theory of desire—structured around absence and incompleteness—further clarifies why Hasan's characters remain caught in cycles of pursuit and disappointment (Lacan 28–32). Sophie's shifting goals and repeated failures to attain emotional fulfillment demonstrate Lacan's claim that desire is sustained not by its objects but by the impossibility of satisfaction itself. Insights from Balakrishnan on urban anxiety provide additional context, showing how external environments intensify internal fractures (Balakrishnan 7). Interviews with Hasan confirm this psychological focus, as the author herself emphasizes the emotional restlessness and introspective depth of her characters (Hossain and Islam 176). Overall, the findings affirm that Hasan's fiction centers on characters whose fragmented psyches reflect unresolved tensions within their unconscious minds. By foregrounding introspection, emotional instability, and the search for coherence, Hasan crafts narratives that resonate with the complexities of modern psychological experience. This research thus concludes that the unconscious mind and fragmented self are not only thematic threads but foundational structures that shape character development, narrative progression, and the emotional texture of Hasan's works.

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