'Dislocated' Individuals and their Desired Escape to their Former 'Locations': A Study of two Indian Novels

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Abstract

The paper is an attempt to understand the relationship between a 'dislocated personality' and his/her serene and beautiful former environment. This 'trap' in the form of a locale acts as a desired getaway, which however sometimes, as in the novels under discussion, proves to be insidiously disastrous after a visit to the former 'location'. The human mind with its innate ability to adapt to different climes and situations has already set the mind working on the new locale and thus finding in it a solace which was not earlier expected or experienced. Thus when Sophie Das of *Neti Neti* gets back to the fairy land of her childhood and younger days, which is Shillong, she approaches the place with a veneration. However, she is disappointed when she finds that things have changed drastically in that sleepy town and life there has become racy, corrupt and cruel, just as it would be in a metro or a large city. Life in Bangalore was cruel but in Sophie's mind, this was a preconceived fact. On the other hand, Agastya's story in Upamanyu Chatterjee's *English August*, *an Indian Story*, is similar; a story of denial and confrontation with reality. Agastya is unable to live in Madna as there is a mental superimposition of Calcutta over Madna and the latter pales hopelessly in comparison. The dislocation of Agastya is more painful than that of Sophie; while Ms Das gets disenchanted with the place of her longing soon after landing there, she however makes peace and then decides to leave for her new home Bangalore; Agatsya is hopelessly dislocated and trapped in sexual fantasies and drugs even after his visit to Delhi and Calcutta, until he decides to leave his job and Madna for good.

Key words: Location, dislocation, Anjum Hasan, Upamanyu Chatterjee

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Location

Location may be defined according to the senses in which it is used - as the act or process of locating, a place where something is or could be located and a tract of land that has been surveyed and marked off. Location can further be a place of residence which gives a space to an individual to be able to 'settle'. It may be marked by a fixed place in geographical terms; sometimes with borders and sometimes without, and sometimes with a sense of ownership. In my article there are several locations - Shillong, Bangalore, Calcutta, Darjeeling and Madna. They are places, all existing in time and space with the exception of Madna, which appears real, much like R.K. Narayan's *Malgudi*, with all its laziness and village repartee. These 'locations' endow the characters in the novels with their unique individuality and character and play a significant role in the manner in which they view themselves and also interact with others. It is when they are removed from these locations because of circumstance or choice that they show deviant behaviour and long to get back to their places of origin. It is a trap that they find themselves in even though often they leave their places of origin by choice. This article examines the dilemma of such individuals.

This article will attempt to analyze the role that location plays in the equilibrium of an individual. The effort will also be to specifically locate the 'dislocation' and the reasons for the same of Sophie Das in Anjum Hasan's *Neti Neti, Not This, Not This*. Analyzing the role of location will also involve specifically locating the 'dislocation' and the reasons for the same of Agastya Sen in Upamanyu Chatterjee's *English August, an Indian Story*. I will also try and draw a relationship between the dislocations of both characters in the selected novels. Finally, I will try and find out how the dislocation is handled/overcome by the characters in both the novels as both have different responses to their sense of disquiet.

The methodology will involve studying aspects of Shillong and Bangalore as locations and the ethos that they stand for in order to understand the thought processes that go on in the mind of Sophie Das. Since Agastya inhabits Calcutta as the canvas of his mind and Madna in the periphery of his soul, briefly studying Calcutta and Madna as locations to understand the mental make-up of Agastya is essential. Delineation of the characters of Sophie and Agastya is essential in order to get an insight into their unique dislocations. I will also study the contradictory positions of "original location vs new location" in both characters.

Dislocation

Dislocation may be defined as being out of usual place, position, or relationship. My article invokes the definition of dislocation to mean out of proper place. The result of this dislocation from one's place of origin or upbringing is a sense of disorientation with oneself and also with the others around. Dislocation from 'proper place' results in a dislocation of the self - a mental stupefaction. This is the result of the craving for the place that has been left behind and the inability to mould oneself into the new clime and cuisine. Thus there is a going back and forth in time with the result that the dislocation only gets more morbid and interferes with daily life and harmonious relationships. Thus moving from Calcutta to Madna proves disastrous to one character while relocating from Shillong to Bangalore is a staccato experience for another.

Why *Neti Neti* and *English August*

Both the novels under discussion address the problem of location and emphasise how their protagonists reel under the influences of their former positions. There are striking parallels to draw from both the protagonists in the manner in which they feel nostalgic about the places they have left behind. The manner in which their 'old' locations haunt them in leitmotif style are similar - the sounds, the sights and even the smells of the old locations stir up memories that cannot be easily forgotten.

Anjum Hasan's *Neti Neti, Not This, Not This*[1] is a discourse on Sophie Das' efforts at 'cosmopolitanization' of the self and the subsequent inability to face the volley, as the heart is rooted in the 'old' and the 'familiar'. Early in the novel on page 11 there is a mirror image of Sophie in the form of six pots that she had been watering for the past one year. "She watered them as often as she remembered to, picked black ants off the geranium, tore out weeds once in a while, but they refused to respond to her. She'd given up on them, now that they'd been on her balcony for almost a year and shown no signs of improving. A whole year she thought *Neti Neti*". Sophie expects much from the plants but she herself has not been able to yet fit into the Bangalore scaffolding, with its unique *chutney* of urban-rural, traditional-modern and order-chaos melee.

Upamanyu Chatterjee's *English August, an Indian Novel*[2] runs along a similar vein amid the chaos of a disintegrating place called Madna: small, dirty, unhygienic and terribly tropical. The novel is an expose, if not a discourse on Agastya Sen, the new IAS officer at Madna. He is trying hard to become

'ruralized' and 'fossilized' in this new *avatar* which his latest appointment offers him. He however does not have to look very far to know that he 'fits' elsewhere - a 'location' which reminds him of the 'old' and the 'familiar'. Like Sophie, Agastya's train has been derailed onto a track that leads to an unfamiliar station. "Agastya was only Half-Bengali. His mother had been Goanese, a Catholic. He hardly remembered her; she had died of meningitis when he had been less than three. He was athletic thin and bearded. He had no devouring interests and until he came to Madna, very little ambition" (p. 4). Both Agastya and Sophie begin on similar premises in that they do not fit into their new milieus. Their dislocated selves are however not due to their inability to 'fit' into new clime and cuisine, but their unique ability to float into the memories of their previous lives and thus their old 'location'. Upamanyu Chatterjee in *English August* continually uses the word 'stoned' to show the lifeless state that the protagonist is living. As he goes to Madna he is 'stoned' by the shabbiness of the scenes around him. "To him these places had been, at best names of newspapers, where flood and caste wars occurred, and entire Harijan families were murdered, where some Prime Minister took his helicopter just after a calamity, or just before the election. Now he looked at this remote world and felt a little unsure, he was going to spend months in a dot in this hinterland."(p. 5)

Sophie is very much like Agastya. But her shift is a move from the quieter, serener environs of Shillong to the 'steely, shiny' glass buildings of Bangalore. The city has 'everything' but Sophie has a dislocated sense of self. She had once been like Ribor (her love) "hidden in a small town, never seen the inside of a train or known what it meant to watch a plane land, never seen city lights, just watched TV, imagined the world through MTV and Discovery channel, listened to Rock Music, set store by lines in songs."(p.33)

The politics of location interplays with 'mental states' in *Neti Neti*. Shillong is not merely a place; it is an experience of a lifetime. "When people talked about hill towns, they imagined them as holiday destinations. They imagined them as places that offered a brief respite from reality and were for that reason adorable" (p. 35). However, for Sophie Shillong is the essence of her being; her thoughts and attitudes emanated from a lifetime spent in this sleepy town.

Bangalore, on the other hand, "possessed a great zest for ugliness". Everyone just wanted to obscure the view, blot out the sky, erase the gaps. The city not just proliferated but kept reproducing itself. And so you never

arrived anywhere in Bangalore (p. 36). The theme of location forms a central idea in both the novels and the struggle towards adopting the features of the new location is significant. Calcutta is a leitmotif in *English August* and Shillong the leit motif in *Neti Neti*. Even the mosquitoes of Calcutta are more holy as "they never touched the face'. Similarly, Sophie sits outside in the Bangalore sun but it is a "throwback to all the winter mornings she has spent turning brown in the 'gentler' sun of her hometown Shillong" (p. 10). There is a constant juxtaposition of Shillong and Bangalore, and Calcutta and Madna - a comparison between the old and the new, the fresh and the stale and the material and the spiritual. There is an unvarying sense of confrontation in Sophie's mind and her attempt at 'cosmopolitanization'. This frequent juxtaposition of locations results in an unwanted dislocation of the senses.

There is a unique relationship of the mind to a place. Location is not merely a 'positioning' of an individual in a geographical space. It goes way beyond that. Sophie is connected to Shillong not like any other tourist who visits a hill station. The imbibing of the ethos of Shillong is how best describes Sophie's relationship to this far-away town. There however exists a strange dichotomy in Sophie's attitude towards Shillong. As long as she lived there she wanted to run away. Small town sights and sounds and small time expectations made her desperately want to flee it. Like Maya, her friend who wished to 'fly away' to America, Sophie too wanted to explore new grounds. Maya gave a matter-of-fact answer to Sophie on being asked what would happen if she felt horribly out of place there (in America): "I can feel at home wherever there are supermarkets and people have manners" (p. 49).

Location and the Individual

A discourse on the individual and the role that his/her location plays naturally meanders into various aspects of clime and cuisine. However another essential element that we can take into our ambit is the biological aspect that a location presents. Location is not merely a reference to a place with geographical features and topography. It is a factor that shapes a personality in many ways. It is an in-depth relationship that the individual bears to the manner in which he/she thinks and behaves. A change in location can bring about a standard shift in the manner of thought and courses of action otherwise unseen in the individual earlier. It is somewhat like exotic flora that grows somewhere other than its original location. There are four options that exist for this kind of flora:

a. Perish due to foreign circumstances,

b. Adapt to new circumstances with the development of new features,

c. Destroy the domestic species to be vociferous in growth, and

d. Survive as ill and blighted.

The condition of a human being is somewhat different from plant and animal species which invade foreign locales and often dominate the indigenous species. Peter Vitousek, in his article 'Introduced Species',[3] says that human beings 'move species beyond their native ranges both deliberately and inadvertently'. In the process many of these species become established and spread in their new habitat. He further says that the list of introduced species grows annually, as does the number of them that cause significant economic and ecological effects. In the case of human beings who move from native to non-native places, the adaptability required is greater and the rate of success is much lower. Those who can grow new adventitious roots are able to survive while those who depend on their old mental, social and cultural make up either fall along the way or become increasingly maladjusted in their new environments.

India's Northeast is a 'mosaic in the making' in the words of Kumana Bihari. This part of the country is inhabited by people who are 'racially' distinct and different from the other populations in the country.[4] It is interesting to note that this part of India shares 98% of its boundaries with foreign countries and only 2% with the Indian subcontinent. The people of the region consider it an 'accident of history that their fates should inextricably be linked with a country whose people share no common likes of language, customs, race and world view with them'. Hence the idea of being Indian has taken time to sink in. The usual Northeasterner begins with the premise of being an outsider right at the start and all the other problems follow from this sense of alienation.

The problem that Sophie faces is even more complex as she is an outsider in Shillong because she is not a local inhabitant and she is a greater outsider when she goes to live in Bangalore. Thus when Sophie Das and Agastya Sen are removed from their original locations by need or circumstances, they develop in themselves 'dislocations' that lead them to mentally sever themselves from their present locations. The dislocation that they develop is severe as it is juxtaposed by the earlier location which comes in the form of a get-a-way. The desire to escape and get into the cocoon of neo-natal comfort becomes the cause of the dislocation. Even though Sophie

holds Shillong as the dream land of her fantasies and Agastya thinks of Calcutta as the Piccadilly of his adventures, these happy memories cause the dislocation and, in turn, the desire to escape. This going back in the mind to the places of longing is like a patient recovering from a painful operation while the effect of the anesthetic still lingers with its bitter remnants. Similarly Anu, one of Sophie's friends in *Neti Neti* dreams of going to Australia and 'settling down' in the vast continent. There is a nagging desire to change places and that is evident when "eventually she'd make it to that antiseptic place untouched by India's messiness" (pp. 108-09).

Shillong and its Sense of Longing

There are some places that exist and there are others that linger. Shillong would probably fall under the second category as it has an old world charm with the colonial hangover and a uniquely matrilineal set up that puts a premium on the rights of women, even though many changes are taking place, and at times the old order is questioned by new generation males. Shillong, the home of the Khasi-Pnar tribe has its origin rooted in myths. The more common legend traces the name of Shillong to a mythical youth, U Shillong, a supernatural youth, born out of immaculate conception of a virgin mother, named Lir U Shillong or the one who grows naturally and who is the presiding deity of the city. The phrase "Khot Shillong" (call Shillong) is a prayer mantra in times of distress. Another legend involves the Shillong deity, a supernatural being and his beautiful daughter who went on to become the 'Pahsyntiew' (lured by flower) queen mother of the Shillong kingdom following her marriage with a local youth Kongor Nongiri.[5] Myths are predominant here and many old practices are still followed in this ancient land, which makes it uniquely traditional and modern at the same time.

Parbina Rashid[6] says that people from Northeast India are definitely different from the people in North India. They look different and speak a different language but the problem of assimilation is uniquely their own. They find themselves in alien environments and sometimes try hard to assimilate and at other times try equally hard to get into dangerously insulated ghettos. She insists that the problem is real and widespread and has increased greatly in 1990s when young people were looking far more inclined to travel to North India in order to encash on the BPO, beauty and the food beverage business. In fact there is also a positive sign as girls and boys from the Northeast India are preferred over their North Indian counterparts by employers as they are sincere, honest and speak good English. However the

pangs of assimilation are great and the sense of insecurity is greater.

Apart from the enthralling myths that revolve around the origins of Shillong there is also a deep political and cultural discourse that exists in this magical city, like the other Northeastern states of India. Sukalpa Bhattacharjee in her paper "Dilemma of Culture: A Polycontextual Discourse" says that whenever one tries to contextualize the Northeastern experience one finds that "situated at the periphery of the mainstream, the North East is a marginalized other of India, which is the post colonial "other" of its Imperialist counterpart".[7] She goes on to say that this part of the world is caught in a geographical, a political and a cultural ambiguity with the result that these people speak a language which is not recognized by the mainstream and not even promoted within the state in which one lives. So Sophie is a result of this fractured discourse and the confused identity of being a Bengali in a westernized Shillong society. Even while in Shillong she is aware of the second layered narrative of belonging and yet not belonging at the same time. But the attraction of the city is what causes her all the pain.

Sophie is aware of how Shillong nostalgia exists in Bangalore. She comes across 'scores of Shillong nostalgics'- girls and boys whose parents send them with Bangalore-bound youths lots of local delicacies like *tungrymbai* or fermented soyabean *chutney* and lots of *kwai* leaves (betel leaves) which would alleviate that feeling of nostalgia for home. Even online, Sophie was enveloped with Shillong memorabilia like old school boys remembering Shillong, bloggers going over their top about this beautiful hill station and blurry snaps of Shillong and tacky hill station memoirs of bungalows, frisky dogs and picnics at Ward Lake. For Sophie, all this memory of Shillong was like a part of the collective conscience of a people away from home, like exiles in your own country (p. 92).

The second novel under discussion also has a unique character, though similar to Sophie in his 'dislocation' because of the previous 'location'. Agastya is thrown into the throes of Madna and he literally goes mad there. When the New Delhi-bred, directionless 24-year-old Agastya Sen joins the elite Indian Administrative Service he is posted to Madna, "the hottest place in India". To Agastya - known to his friends as August, or sometimes English - he has been sentenced to the back of beyond. He is done with because of the heat and the story then weaves itself languidly around Madna's petty officials, "the pretensions and daydreams of its citizens, endless governmental meetings, hilarious dinner parties, much drunkenness and boredom and bureaucracy".

Agastya is bored and 'stoned' and he meets the locals and makes up stories about his past: He confides to the District Inspector of Land Records that his (nonexistent) wife is a Norwegian Muslim and that his "parents were in Antarctica, members of the first Indian expedition. Yes, even his mother, she had a Ph.D. in Oceanography from the Sorbonne." To the superintendent of police he casually lets slip that last summer that he had climbed Mount Everest.[7] Like Agastya, Sophie takes drugs and she tries hard to run away from something she hardly knows herself. "She was a year into weed but it still surprised her how life slowed down, how the things that were near came vividly near but those that were far seemed to belong to another lifetime" (p. 105).

When Anjum Hasan moved to Bangalore at the age of 26, she had a degree in philosophy from North-Eastern Hill University, two suitcases and a desire to experience the world beyond Shillong. But the journey came with its own baggage – a sense of dislocation. She writes, "I felt doomed for a little while because after the excitement of the city, you can no longer go back and re-enter the boredom of the small town, and yet you miss it in a completely irrational way." Sophie's sense of disillusionment starts to grow when she goes back to Shillong, only to discover that her hometown is becoming like Bangalore, "It wants the same things." "They're building call centres and bringing in the international brands. People are talking the language of money." Northeasterners have, according to her, an "increasing sense of familiarity with the rest of the country, but at the same time, there is the awareness of, and I'd say, even need to establish distance from, mainland India." This "push and pull leads to curious results", such as when Sophie returns to Shillong driven by her love for Ribor and his remoteness from her new world, only to discover that he, too, is looking for a job in Bangalore**[8].** Living in two worlds and yet belonging to none is the dilemma of Sophie Das who lives out of noodle cups and fizzy cans. The novel or a large part reads actually like a lament against the pot-holed, uncouth city of Bangalore with its backdrop of glass reflectors and shop-till-you-drop malls.

Nisha Susan says that Hasan's characters are usually dreamers escaping boredom, non-careers and awkwardness, all through a fully formed fantasy life. They imagine their awkwardness comes from being outsiders: a north Indian in Shillong or Shillong girl in Bengalore. Hasan is deeply respectful of place and its evocation and envies Kiran Desai's capture of Kalimpong. *Lunatic in My Head*, her first novel, is able to conjure Shillong's rainy streets with Flaubertian attention. *Neti Neti* is just as conspicuous in its absent Bengalore landscape[9].

Agastya, on the other hand, is a high career flier who ends up in one of the most covetous jobs in India- the civil service. The thoughts of his school in Darjeeling and his days spent in Calcutta are a scourge while he lives in dilapidated Madna where the only constant companion he has is a stubborn frog. The feelings that the previous locations that he 'inhabited' bring him, though blissful and satisfying become the scourge of the present and they are a 'mental getaway' from which escape is inevitable. Agastya then begins to inhabit an alternate reality where he visits his past and twists his present in a manner that he wants to live in a make believe world. He begins to tell lies about himself to his senior officers and he is in for a free meal anywhere he can. He becomes lethargic and malicious at the same time while he fantasizes his officer's wives sometimes and at other times ridicules them in the canvas of his mental stretches.

S. Robert Gnanamony is of the view that Agastya is not at all ambitious. He has no big dreams or desires. He does not want 'heaven' or 'ephemerals' or 'power and glory'. He just wants to sit in his uncle's house in Delhi or in his house in Calcutta "in the mild sun and try not to think, try to escape the iniquity of the restlessness of my mind". [10]

In *Neti Neti* Anjum Hasan frequently refers to the character of Madam Bovary and how she as a young girl was very keen to read the novel due to its impelling subject. In her novel one can actually see Sophie emerge as Madame Bovary with dissatisfaction in the station while she yearns for the exciting and the unknown. While Sophie lived in Shillong, she endlessly felt restricted by the smallness of the place, the meanness of small-town mentality, the lack of opportunities and the emptiness of Ribor's CD shop. Like most 'outsiders' who live in Shillong this big city bug hits her hard and she wants to flee the town at the slightest opportunity. The dreams of shiny roads and pots of money goad her to look beyond the narrow lanes and the sunny winter comforting mornings. She even lies to her parents that she has landed in a plush job in a publishing house (much to the happiness of her Hamlet-loving father) but actually lands up as an unimaginative English film transcriber for the hearing impaired. Bangalore hits her hard and then the thoughts of Shillong in the form of Ribor sometimes and a washed, post-rain sky at other times makes her hate the city of Bangalore everyday. It is then that she looks at the town of Shillong with all its forgetfulness, its sleepiness and its colonial hangover as a perfect getaway from an arid, cold and booming city. It is strange that the desire to leave and the desire to come back are so tightly packed that Sophie is forced to take the journey home. She expects

an epiphany, an awakening, a rush of love from Ribor - but all is lost in a maze of circumstances that she never could dream of even in the wildest of her imagination. When Sophie reached Shillong and "when, finally, they were at the bejeweled lake that had once marked the outer limit of Sophie's world, she recalled what Emma Bovary thought when 'it seemed to her that certain places on earth must bring forth happiness, as a plant peculiar to the soil, that cannot thrive elsewhere"(p. 186).

Calcutta's Sense of the Urbane

Agastya on the other hand has not been driven by progressive, life changing dreams. He likes it easy and he feels stuck in the job that he is in. His dreams are more of fellow officers' wives and marijuana. He has been trapped in a time warp and the personality that he possesses is completely alien to the dusty, quiet (yet dissonant) milieu of Madna. A place can never be considered merely a place in time as it has many more dimensions to it. His father Dhrubo had prophesied that the experience at Madna would be 'educative'. However he feels only a sense of 'impotence and restlessness'. He was now occupied with all kinds of thoughts, thoughts that 'scurried in his mind uncontrollably, like rats in a damp cavern, though without action' (p. 165). He is constantly reminded of the life that he had been leading - a life full of movement, stylish friends and a bustling city. It is strange that when he goes to Calcutta, the city of his dreams, he is weighed down by the remembrances of the dull and dusty place he once abhorred. Notice how the thoughts of Madna created a sense of complete appall in his mind. "And Madna had tainted his old world here in the city, the crowds at the Puja reminded him of the Madna Club, Durga had recalled Jagdamba (p. 165). It was too much to endure the load of more than one world in the head. So here one comes back to this tug of war between 'new place, new images' and 'old place, old images' which dangerously juxtapose with each other and by the time one realizes this, one has already developed an affinity to the new place of being. It is like school - one loves to think about it but one never wants to go back.

The Anglicized Calcutta that Agastya dreams of is so unlike the Madna of his present and near future. For an individual caught in this time warp, every second becomes an ensnaring noose, which forces him into weed and masturbating. The dreams of Calcutta haunt him and the hellish contrast between Madna and Calcutta causes him to lose his connections with the place where he has to 'serve the nation'. Debjani Sengupta[11] opines that

Calcutta has a unique history which exposes its inhabitants to distinctive experiences. Its geographical position was largely favourable to a brisk trade in cotton, silk and sugar. The growth of English businesses, educational institutions and offices brought along mechanisations that drastically altered the "structure and organisation of occupations" in its traditional economy. By 1880s, Bengal had been industrialised to a large extent and over 20 percent of its workforce was engaged in making and selling industrial goods. Calcutta, by virtue of being at the centre of this 'informal empire', saw the fruits of industrialisations – the first printing press, the first steamer, and the first motorcar were important cultural markers of the age. The nineteenth-century Calcutta was also marked to a large extent by the industrialisation of cultural expressions. Books, handwritten and illustrated on palm leaves, now gave way to print ones. *Palki*s and horse-drawn carriages were no longer in use; bicycles, trams and steam engines changed the face of transportation.

Thus Agastya is accustomed to a modern living with all the expressions of liberal and at times thoroughly unconventional living. Calcutta is thus constantly on his mind. He loved Paris in the summer while he felt an upsurge of affection for Calcutta, vociferously insisting that it had soul. He constantly remembers the city with its babble in crowded streets and bustle of everyday life. His story reminds us of Rabindranath Tagore's story where the postmaster is scourged by the life that he has to lead without any entertainment and without *bhadralok* (decent, educated folk). He is barely able to develop a friendship with Ratan, a girl who works for him. She is heartbroken when he applies for a transfer to Calcutta and leaves to turn his back to the old world full of rotting scum on the pond and a dull bourgeoisie. The postmaster cannot leave behind Calcutta and the sights and sounds of the place constantly haunt him until he makes a return even though he has to leave his job.[12]

The letter that Renu writes to Dhrubo, Agastya's best friend, is also highly suggestive of this clime/cuisine/ discussion and the fact that it is really hard to leave home and 'settle' in an alien land comes vividly through. Renu says that she shares her room with a Mexican girl. She is quite amazed at how people leave their home and their people when they know that they have to go out into a harsh world where no one is yours. She echoes the feelings in her letter when she says "At times I hysterically wonder why people ever leave their countries and go abroad. Why don't we ever learn that all changes of place are for the worse. It's not love for a place; it's the familiarity, like old winter clothes" (pp. 156-57). The feeling is so alien and yet there are generations of people who become arrivals in new lands. Renu

found it amazing how she started getting close to candy floss 'Bollywood' culture while she watched movies like *Barood* and *Deewar*. The feeling of being close to home is felt by identifying with the sights and sounds of Hindi cinema, which, truly speaking, is far removed from reality. However, even the remote closeness that it bears is a solace to a soul far away from home.

What Becomes of Sophie?

It is unsettling to find that Sophie, towards the end of the novel, goes to Shillong on a pilgrimage. She is sure that the visit will turn out to be a panacea for all her ills. She is not just bored of her life in Bangalore, she is terribly afraid after the Rukhshana murder case. She is entangled in the meshes of a metal and concrete city that sees no end in its constructions. She takes a week off from her boring transcription job and visits Shillong. She is excited to think of the scenes and the sounds of Shillong; that little Anglicized town that moves at its own pace, oblivious of surrounding events. Her feelings are like that of Uncle Rock who proudly announces of Shillong that there is no place like it. One can travel around the world but home is where your heart will always be. He says that in the end he just wanted to "go back to my [his] own little place and shut the door" (note the insularity when he says 'shut the door'). The ghettos do not go away ever. He also sounds philosophical when he quotes Dylan and says that "time is an ocean but it ends at the shore. We all need to find our own shores, *moh"* (*moh* in Khasi language is roughly equivalent of isn't it or you know?).

When Sophie reaches the outskirts of Shillong and sees the Umiam Lake, she is filled with a sense of nostalgia and imagines that everyone who lived in high up magical places must come down into the world to mingle 'but all the while there's something calling you back'(p. 186). However there are a series of events and a number of people whom she knew that make her change her mind. She realizes that Shillong has changed with time. She realizes that there is no place so insular that could not be affected by caprice, cunning and manipulation. Shillong no longer remains her pedestal of honour and goodness from the ramparts of which she could shout out that she once belonged to this beautiful place.

She discovers that her parents are about to divorce; her sister Mukulika gets pregnant and has an abortion; Ribor, the love of her life who seemed the epitome of smugness wants to leave Shillong for greener pastures; politicians bribe voters to blow the wind their way and lakhs of rupees are collected from unsuspecting fans of Bob Dylan who was never supposed to come to

Shillong at all. She feels that all the loveliness that she associated with Shillong with its varied ethnicities and simple people are all gone. It then dawns on her that she was occupying a realm of virtual reality where things were the same in Bangalore and Shillong; it just appeared to look good in the latter. It is then that she realizes the falseness of her journey and the reality of situations as they are. She then longs for Swamy and his serpentine car.

Sophie's journey to Shillong takes us to the title of the novel- *Neti, Neti*, which is the Sanskrit translation of 'Not This, Not This'. Both the worlds she inhabits are unacceptable in their own way and yet they are the real worlds that she has to inevitably inherit.

What Becomes of Agastya?

So what really happens to Agastya in the end (so to speak)? Does he lack the resilience that the green frog which occupies his bathroom amid salubrious climate has? Or is he just not 'tailored' for Madna? Can he walk away without the memories of Madna in his head or is he able to be the new age man changing jobs and houses and may be even nations? What can we really expect from Agastya? Aditya Bhatacharjee studies Agastya's stoniness and says that towards the second half of *English August*, Agastya Sen just smokes more marijuana. In fact by the end he is almost permanently stoned. This daze "is the main link between himself and other 'aliens' in Madna and Delhi (Bhatia, Gandhi, Sathe and the policemen in west Delhi with whom he shares a joint)". He is stuck in a world of dark secrets. The story connects the disparate parts of his life. He also listens to Keith Jarret and walks naked in his room.[13]

Like Sophie, Agastya leaves Madna and stays in Delhi for a while. He confesses that he 'never disliked Delhi' and so he just whiles his time there. It is interesting to see Dhrubo, Agastya's friend also caught in this warp that Agastya finds himself in. He is 'well settled' in his Citi Bank job but he wants something more from life. So he prepares for the IAS Exam. It is ironical when Dhrubo's mother tells Agastya to give him some tips for the examination. Agastya is naturally bewildered and it is as if there is a clear attempt at exchange of places.

When Agastya is in Calcutta, he is frequently reminded of drab scenes of Madna and he finds it excruciating to 'endure the load of more than one world in the head' (p. 165). He merely passes time in Calcutta too and he wishes that he were someone's mistress, with a flat, money, a video…nice

underwear' (p. 176). He goes back to Madna after the week's leave and he seems to enjoy the sounds and sights of Madna. However he decides to leave for good and he compares himself to Marcus Aurilius, a sad Roman who looked for happiness in 'living more than one life', who lied but lied so well and he failed but with great grace (p. 288). Agastya does not know if he will even half as much succeed.

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