
**Moral Ecological Nexus: Behavioural Strategies in Anjum
Hasan's *NETI, NETI: NOT THIS, NOT THIS***

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ABSTRACT:

NETI, NETI: NOT THIS, NOT THIS (2009) by Anjum Hasan presents India as a land of multilingual, multireligious, multiethnic and multicultural powers. Amit Chaudhuri comments the author has displayed 'an unexpected combination of shrewd noticing and poetic insight about how small-town imaginings and cosmopolitan sophistication flow in and out of each other'. Shillong and Bangalore are juxtaposed against the unifying canopy of India. As a young student Sophie has understood Rabindranath Tagore's vision 'Into that heaven of freedom, my father, let my country awake' (125) sung at school assembly on Independence Day was India. Now she realises the Northeast 'that country within a country whose hallmark was multifariousness' draws her from Bangalore. But 'Bangalore airport, in a way that was symbolic of Bangalore city, crackled with affluence' whereas Calcutta airport had a sort of decript air and it was possible straightaway to tell where people belonged. She understood this as home – 'a place where everyone is a different ethnicity from you and where your ethnicity defines who you are' (185). Twenty-five- year old Sophie Das moved from Shillong to Bangalore in search of a job. As she spends more time with her free-spirited friends at pubs, night streets, malls, rock concerts and parties, she feels alienated. Coming across tragic events – death, murder – she travels home. The mythical landscape also seems to be tainted by course of events. What brings her back? Will she ever find a home?

To get to the depth of the text, the moral ecological views / concepts are to be dealt with in a brief way and then the events and matters in the text will be analysed in that light.

Key Words: *Moral ecology, behavioural strategies, violence, family decline, desensitization.*

... We know nature through images and words, a process that makes the question of truth in science or literature inescapable, and whether we find validity through data or metaphor, the two modes of analysis are parallel. Ecocriticism observes in nature and culture the ubiquity of signs, indicators of value that shape form and meaning. Ecology leads us to recognize that life speaks, communing through encoded streams of information that have direction and purpose, if we learn to translate the messages with fidelity.

William Howarth, 163.

Ecology is inseparable from ethics. The Greek word *oikos* for Eco is nature. In other words, it is our widest home. As we live in this home, it becomes part of our life. Jozef Keulartz refers to Kropotkin who maintains that 'nature does entail ethical implications, indeed that nature could even be considered as humanity's first ethics teacher' (114). Keulartz analyses that

according to classical anarchists, social order can be maintained just by the true or authentic self which is neither subjective nor arbitrary but objective.

Morality is objective because it emanates from the essence of human nature which in turn is seen as an integral part of a universal order ... Here one man's licence does not infringe on the other man's liberty since every human being takes part in cosmic nature characterized by perfect harmony. The personality of a human being reflects this harmony to the extent that he realizes his own nature (110).

The self can maintain ethical order only on premise that the self is totally aware of itself and be aware of its participatory nature in nature. If the self has full realization, it promotes harmony in the social order.

Moral ecology takes into account the behavioural strategies of individuals which help to promote high levels of cooperation within groups. Each behavioural strategy enjoys different levels of success in the environment. Allen Hertzke presents the view that for Navajo's living an ecological life meant not only living in harmony with nature but also with one another. They had cultivated a system of strong norms to check the individual behavior deemed destructive to the community. The present moral environment is coarser, cruder and more violent than it was in the yester years. There are several causes. For example he refers to radical individualism which threatens the ties of trust, civility and cooperation that knit the human community. There is irrational destruction of natural environment and equally there is destruction of human environment which demands that the society should take effort to safeguard the moral conditions for an authentic human ecology.

Breaking away from the traditional society, people seem to crave for new society and in the process take to liberalism. To what an extent, liberalism acts as an agent in providing peaceful atmosphere needs to come under inquiry. Hertzke says that within liberal societies, the behavior of free persons can undermine the health of communities, whether it be biological or human. Physical ecology and moral realm have inter-dependency that fosters greater concern for the common good and less stress on individual autonomy. The next point, he illustrates, moral ecology appears to distill diverse relationships, like impact of media violence, family decline and gambling, into an elegant and parsimonious theoretical formulation.

Individual freedom, if exercised without restraints, can cause the tragedy of commons. Hertzke says that the tragedy of commons can operate in moral realm as well in the ecology of communities and families in the delicate interdependent relationships of love, self-sacrifice and civility that constitute a healthy society. Some individuals and companies exercise their liberal freedom in such a way that it contaminates the moral ecosystem, undermining its ability to sustain healthy lives. He adds that a symbiotic balance existed in ecosystems. If some happening causes disruption to one member of the community, it would affect all the others. The ecosystem has a carrying capacity. When the contaminants reach a cumulative threshold, the ecosystem's capacity is affected and a long-term degradation takes place, sometimes it cannot be restored. Environmentalists speak of delicate communities that

require unique understanding and care and when humans fail to adopt these ways they can cause destruction both in the human and non-human spheres. These principles are to be observed in our moral ecological system.

After a brief view of moral ecology, the analysis of the text NETI, NETI : NOT THIS, NOT THIS follows. Its author Anjum Hasan has researched the geographical location and the construct that hangs around it. It is a deep study of the modern society that tries to liberate itself from the society that demands accountability and responsibility. Swami, Sophie's friend, comes to Bangalore almost to get away from his Upanishads quoting father. Sophie has cared for her sister so long that when her mother writes to her that Mukulika can continue her studies in Bangalore, she wants to escape that responsibility. Now Muku in rage 'wreaked the greatest damage on herself' (13) and she would have her way. Swami is in constant flight from the 'intractable adult world of rules and responsibilities' (15). Maya mentally visualizes of going abroad to escape the hurting situation. Flight is a metaphor that can be ascribed to most of the individuals in the text for they are not at home within and without.

In the post-modern era, there are lures that entice men to amass and hoard and leave them at the dead end. Swami manages to get loans to buy a car and gets excited about it. He can argue against Sophie's dislike towards getting loans and say 'it's about liking the things you can buy with them'. When each type of car meant 'individuality and beauty' for him, she saw it as only something that moved on four wheels. His statement 'loans make the world go round' defines the world spinning with this conditional force that could topple at any time. It also adds another dimension that his longing for a car was a 'capacious thing that could suck him in' (8). The life style of Mr. Bhatt shapes another shade of getting loan. Ringo Saar, friend of Sophie, besides being the drummer of the Little Idlis, was employed in a financial services company that, among other things, 'functioned as a loan recovery agency for banks'. Bhatt, Sophie's house owner, wants to protect his 'moral stature', among the colony residents and so buys time from Ringo. Bhatt is a 'monumental debtor'. He had taken 'loans to repay loans' (22) and another loan to add an extra floor to his house and another loan to buy a car.

Mr. Bhatt worked as assistant manager in a company that made 'fake Ayurvedic health and beauty products' and it doubled the salary that made him start taking loans, as if 'he had discovered a source as inexhaustible as Aladdin's lamp, once he started he couldn't stop' (23). Ringo spent many hours to draw up a sensible repayment plan for Bhatt but he was reluctant to clear his debts. He is unwilling even to utilise the help and at a point he had to be intimidated by goondas. He has oppressed his wife that he cannot listen to her warning voice and 'he has tied himself into such knots of liability', but remained a 'marvellously unruffled creature' (23). Who will rescue him from the inner downward journey? The company has not maintained ethical standards and due to its success in the market, it continues to affect the ecological as well as human world. The overall statutes for companies had been hoodwinked and the individual, Bhatt had succumbed to his unchecked craving and greediness.

Greediness can tear a person apart. Shanthi, Sophie's colleague, announces of her forthcoming marriage. Naomi Picks is friendly with Shanthi, a brave girl and she unfolds the hidden world of Shanthi. Shanthi's mother is ill, schizophrenia. When Shanthi's brother Sunil went to Dubai to work, as his father died, sent money and brought gold bangles and at every

visit he got more gold stuff. The little mount of gold, which she preferred to keep under her pillow, kept growing. Next time when he did not get gold, the mother attacked him and tried to claw his face and accused Shanthi of stealing her gold. One day, Shanthi found her on the bathroom floor ‘stark naked but with all her heavy pendants and earrings and bangles on’ (45). Her brother flew back to take her to a psychiatrist and ‘she’s stark, raving mad’ (46). Amassing wealth and the heart pining after it leads to incurable insanity. Hence classical anarchists, while emphasizing moral ecology, seek to bring equilibrium through education and so the institutions share a responsibility for sustaining the harmony of the family.

Sophie worked in a company called Star Titles, which had its headquarters in Los Angeles which took on clients. She and her colleagues were paid to transcribe the soundtracks of Hollywood films so that they could be marketed on DVDs. They had to write captions for three categories – deaf, hard of hearing and normal. At the time of joining she aimed at coordinator’s position and so remained in the good books of Maya, the director of operations. As days passed, she was afraid of being promoted and falls into a ‘gentle malaise’ doing the bare minimum. ‘A film was no longer a human thing to her’. At night those images pressed on her. She realizes that ‘there was something sinister about this vomit of images’ (42). She suffers recklessly. ‘Her insomnia gave way only when her dreams’ camera eye could rest on a wide open landscape free of this ceaseless churning of image and noise and then she would sleep peacefully for a while’ (43). Cinema has created a fake world on the basis of a fake world and real world did not exist. It was a ‘retarded job’ and this ‘hackwork LA sent them only because they did it cheaper than anyone anywhere else in this world’ (49). Maya earned a fat salary to live a luxurious life. Sophie ponders over that when a man’s head is bashed actually, we will not be able to recognize it because of ‘all this bad education courtesy cinema. This is not a just a boring job, it’s an ethically suspect job, thought Sophie. I’m paid to mislead people’ (53). Johnny another colleague also seems to be at war with the situation. Shanthi has already applied and would move to a school soon. Maya wants to fly to America, to be isolated from the family.

The text connotes clearly on the company’s total disregard for ethical standard for it wrests cheap labour from a third world country. Secondly it causes irrevocable damage to the society but without any ecological value, it seeks ways to flourish more and more. Hertzke includes media violence in discussing moral ecology. Media violence causes its disastrous impact on society, especially on the viewers. He says its consequential effect includes physiological arousal, attitude change and activation of aggressive thoughts and emotion. But the cinema realm hinges its success on such elements and thereby cause havoc in society quite surreptitiously. The society, as a mass of community, does not act collectively to fight against such violence infiltrating the society. Sophie suffers insomnia and the only cure she seeks is to gaze at the wide landscape that offers comfort to the senses and slows down the feverish rising tenor of films. Nature is dependable and reliable but her colleague, Maya especially, brands her being dull and distracted and probes to find whether it is Swami and tells Ravi to sack her, though she acts to be benevolent towards her.

Mean world syndrome is another feature Hertzke specifies as the illness of society that throttles the moral ecological equilibrium. This syndrome secures its foothold on eroticization of violence. Pornography acts as a vital agent to develop this syndrome. People possessed by

this syndrome indulge in sexual torture. The ensuing act would be murdering women in erotic settings. Sophie misses the flight and stays with Maya who peels the layers of her hidden world. When Maya was seven years old, Maya's mother had fallen in love with an army captain and she had been 'methodically punished over the next ten years for this transgression'. She became a 'clinical depressive, tried suicide twice and detested her husband'. Every Saturday night, by the sixth glass of rum, he would begin the torture. Waking up the children at midnight, keeping them Maya and Rohit in the living room and making them watch, 'he whipped her with the buckle end of his leather belt' on her upper arms, stomach, back and groin so that the bruise would not be seen. He called her a 'lying bitch, a stupid cow, a saali haraamzaadi' (176) and jerked her hair back so that she was forced to look into his eyes. Then the whimpering children would be allowed to sleep. Brigadier Singh drank moderately on other days. Maya 'speechlessly watched her father's brutality in living rooms across the country' (176). Her brother urinated in fright and whined. It did not stop with the torture on her mother alone. The vicious wave spread to children and others.

Her lover had been thrown off his scooter by a civilian jeep coming at full speed from the opposite direction. When the captain's broken arm got healed, once again the jeep would zip into his path and he stopped driving the scooter. The captain sought a transfer out of Pune but her punishment followed wherever the family went – Jabalpur, Nasik, Darjeeling, Hyderabad, Bombay. One day Maya locked her door and would not come out and the wife started telling people that her husband beat her. 'She didn't care if the whole damn Indian Army was in on it' (178). It is from this complicated world, Maya wants to fly away but into US, 'that mysterious and grand' (179) world. Sophie after peering at this blood oozing tear, she goes to the balcony and 'looks at the luscious, creamy moon in the sky, the colour of jasmine in the flower market' (178) and wonders whether Maya's mother had a full-blown affair or just smiled at the mention of the captain's name. The above episode appears to have irrational logic but rational beings operate it in a calculated manner but justify their cruel deeds. The silent victims of such psychopaths live across the world.

Murder is an act that violates the moral nexus and acts against the basic source of life. Terminating and erasing a person's life from the planet-earth definitely goes against the stream of life. One has no moral right to kill another person, when he is incapable of endowing life. Sophie and her friends, at Anil's birthday party, have a hilarious time. But Sophie feels the 'poisonous tentacles of her insomnia' (131). Swami is fully drunk and blabbers. They drive through to get food for Mama Mia. The police stop them and demand a fine but also inform of a murder. Mama Mia rings up to inform their friend Ringo Saar had murdered his lady love Rukshana. He had a knife in the car, stabbed her till she died and dumped her by a lake. Swami could not comprehend for Ringo made her breakfast every morning while she was on the phone. He would drop her to work and kept buying things for her. It is a mystery that he murdered her.

Sophie felt things go 'darker and darker till the flashes of disorientation' (138) caught her and could not suppress her horror. She moaned as Swami hugged to comfort her. Anil was frightened, despite the advantage of money he had, and was helpless when 'life turned shitty' (139). The reason, they guess, is that Rukshana 'cheated him yet so compelled him that he

could not leave her; his work had brutalized him; he had grown-up watching his parents fight' (138). 'Rukshana kept her purported extra-Ringo affairs well-hidden' (140). She played a game on him and always threatened to leave him. She wanted Ringo around but also could not give up other men. He had discussed few things with Swami. She was using him. 'For laidback guy he was surprisingly obsessed with her' (141). She would not answer his phone call and said that he was free to go. He killed her; Swami says 'That's kind of scary, isn't it – he had the guts to stab her but not to let her go'. Sophie thinks that Rukshana's behavioural strategy indicates that she 'enjoyed ambiguity' (142). Sophie 'felt the pain that arises when death changes from a single, shocking fact to a mist that blurs all of life' (142). Anu wanted to settle down with Shiva in Australia; they all wanted love; Swami was after car; Sophie need a tolerant landlord. None of it seemed worthwhile anymore. Ringo was mocking at everything from his prison cell. They get additional information that since he had a knife in his car, it is a 'premeditated murder' (144). Sophie gets affected much and feels that it is this garden city that when one is out on the streets, one feels he could kill someone every day. 'Everywhere she looked was this nauseating carnival conspiring to kill her' (145). The images hurrying in her mind were on the brink of precipice. 'Motives had always been mysterious to her'. She was after 'the truth about people's emotions, the logic of people's motives' (148). But it eludes her.

Pre-marital affair, as per moral ecological codes, if it exceeds the boundary, the involved members face consequences. Ringo had been driven beyond the line of patience by Rukshana who had a tendency to use people and treat some people in contemptuous manner. Once she called Sophie a bitch. Swami and Sophie seem to go on in a friendly / comforting manner but at Ringo's act of murder, everything shatters and he does not want to wait for two years. But Sophie feels that she cannot fit in for he wants her for himself. Anu quickly snaps away from Shiva for he does not yield to her push of seeking a job in Australia to settle down quite comfortably. Besides after Shiva's attack on Baba Sampige, a guru, Anu and Shiva split. Now Anu and Anil are to be married quite soon and it is only on the night of the murder, they got to know each other. They have planned to go to Maldives for honeymoon. Muku encircled herself in Pavan's love, though the constant opposition from the family was a reality, and planned to go with him to Delhi but becomes pregnant and the whole family was in a 'state of mourning'. The foetus was three weeks old and the abortion is carried out. They all have a 'shared shame'. Now Sophie has to take the responsibility of accommodating her sister in Bangalore. She is pushed into it, though she resisted earlier. Radical individualism, which the youth take to as a new behavioural mode, does not shelter them in a family environment, instead promotes a free style of living that leads to loss of virginity, pre-marital sex and pregnancy. These acts are not constricted to the involved individuals but it affects the inner circle, family members and then the closer group of friends and the community at large. Each one's behavior sends ripples across the community. Steadfastness, constancy, fidelity and dignity are virtues that bear no relevance with people practicing liberal freedom in this context.

Moral rules are accepted in society for 'the beings have intrinsic moral status or moral value in virtue of having certain 'value-adding' features' and the moral rules protect the beings. Stating so, Andrew Brennan & Y. S. Lo say autonomous beings have moral status and so respect autonomy is the most basic moral rule. But if we begin to manipulate people, we

move away from moral law, we have undermined the capacity for self-determination and the person's autonomy (59-60). In pre-marital affairs, starting as a harmless relationship, the individuals exploit their own freedom and in the name of liberalism they thwart their capacity. Pavan had sex with Muku but after that he had terminated her. In the biocentric world the first duty is a standard one in interhuman relation, and is usually called the duty of not doing harm, that is of non-maleficence. Not doing harm to others is a deep-seated and ancient idea and one guide for life is a principle of sympathetic understanding (Brennan & Yo, 74-75). Ringo's violent emotions overpower him and he becomes a wreck in failing to observe non-maleficence and it could be justified that Rukshana also had been killing him constantly in playing her game. Sexual promiscuity and sexual liberalism are not codes of individual autonomy which in true sense owns responsibility for value-adding life.

Family, as Hertzke points out, lies at the centre of moral ecological nexus. It is the sanctuary of life where there is room to love and be loved and eventually one learns of human dignity. Hertzke states family decline is both an independent and dependent variable, both a cause and an effect of moral ecological disruption. There is growing marital breakdown, divorce, and illegitimacy. By sexual revolution, liberated individuals have altered the moral ecology. Maya's family had undergone physical violence and mental trauma under the patriarchal anarchy of Brigadier Singh. Maya's mother never opened her mouth at the time of getting whipped and the bleeding bruises were speechless too but were silent volumes. Ringo's job involved bullying people to make them settle debt but Sophie thinks that he has become thus due to his 'parents' recent divorce'(61). His mother ran a chocolate shop in Bangalore that thrived on orders from software companies. At festivals, they ordered chocolates in thousands with the names of employees printed individually. Ringo's father was an alcoholic who ran a 'booming brawn farming business in Kerala' (62). Ringo did not live on his parents' success. Besides, Rukshana, his girlfriend, was expensive. So he worked hard. When he is handcuffed by police for murder, Ringo's mother faces it alone. The family separation has affected him to a large extent.

Family decline is never sudden, it is gradual but people live in their own ego-centred shelters that they are not able to have a sympathetic understanding. Sophie's mother Mrs. Das's 'lack of complete faith' in her husband's abilities separates her. Mr. Das had been provoked by the Head of English Department where he worked to resign and he is forced to school teaching. But she has risen up from taking tuition to enter school teaching. It has been 'a hide-and-seek family' (55). Sophie seems to be in love with Ribor, who has a small smoky music shop in Shillong. When Sophie goes home, soon after Ringo's murder incident, the parents complain of Muku being rebellious and 'Muku personified disregard' (193). Muku informs that the parents are going to separate and already they have the least communication between them. 'She's going to live in Banaras, he's going to rent a house in Shantiniketan'. For Muku it was only the lifting of a veil. 'It satisfied a deep-seated sense of rage in Muku to see that her parents were now going to separate and be lonelier than they already were'. In a self-centred manner, she needed them to be in Shillong as long as Pavan was there. 'After all these years of fighting everyone, Muku had latched onto one person with the desperation of a drowning woman' (200). Their plan of going to different places had been unvoiced so far but had been in their heart for she had been sending money to the dharamshala in Benaras and he had been talking about the friend who moved to Shantiniketan.

The parents fail to see Sophie's desolation, which she carries to Ribor only to know the entanglements of treachery and betrayal in their music world. When Sophie questions her father, he talks of the experiment and the possibility of entering the university to teach- his old dream. Mrs. Das's mother at death bed had secretly let her know she was missed. The twenty five years gap shrinks and Sophie thinks people go to Benaras to die. When they cooked and were about to eat, Sophie felt 'something oppressive about this search for familial harmony through food' (230). When Sophie tries to talk it out Mr. Das says that 'Everyone has their own priorities here'. Mrs. Das watched television. Muku could not stay home two hours at a stretch and they had decided to send Muku to Bangalore. They feel there is nothing left in Shillong for them and it is a formula of moving in and moving out. Sophie is also warned not to leave Bangalore while she had come to get rooted to the magical place Shillong, which keeps calling to come back wherever one goes. The decision is final and needs no revision. None seems to revert to the former. Muku's pregnancy and abortion drive them further to the edge to cling to the decision. Living any longer in Shillong would bring further ruin to the family that is already tumbling down. Symbolically it represents the shattering of families, each member taking unruly and wanton ways. It is sad that the younger generation do not find a home to come back to be shielded from the emotional havoc, and to be nourished against the draining trauma of life.

The next aspect is consumption and people's attitude. James J. Farrell in his essay 'Shopping: The moral Ecology of Consumption' points out that shopping starting as a recreational activity has far reaching consequence. 'Shopping is an imaginative activity ... an intertextual collage of ideas and images of things and their spiritual and social penumbras' (154). He adds that it is a travel from the real to the fantasy world conjured up. This enables to compensate for the poverty of our experience. Corporate advertisers are agents in producing the new ethic of mass consumption and they make the ads appeal to the physiological, social and individual needs.

In Bangalore city, huge malls are centres where people pool in and dump the amassed and meagre wealth. The behavioural pattern of people in such malls signifies non-entity. Products engulf their whole being and the varieties send a sensation of greediness. Shiva narrates that they have built a new mall near his house. 'This hideous UFO has appeared, like overnight-decorated like a Christmas tree, lots of parking space, giant posters of chicks in the windows, great discounts'. Though it is not a 'rich neighbourhood' all the 'suckers' go there for a 'trip', perhaps to the fantasy world. Shiva's mother goes to come back trembling. She says 'I was caught in a stampede, I nearly died'. As there was an exchange offer, people rushed in and went berserk. She escaped with a bruise on her arm. Ordinary humans become desensitized individuals in that environment. The grand opening day experienced the 'shopping mall stampede' (128). Shiva could not imagine of any untoward happening. The moral ecology of not harming anyone finds no binding hold in a crazy crowd.

The consumption attitude gets reflected when Swami and Sophie visit the mall. 'The new mall was clogged with Saturday night shoppers and in the atrium, on a tiny ramp, a fashion show was in progress. Girls with jewellery ... wearing richly embroidered saris of silk and georgette ...' (68). The people crowd around, unaware that this is a device to attract them and offer a fleeting erotic and aesthetic pleasure. Swami and Sophie keep surveying and engulfing

things. Looking at the crowd, Sophie feels a ‘sudden paralysis’ and ‘the general ocean of things ... come rushing down ...’ (71). She feels dizzy and her bodily experience carries a kind of premonition. ‘A sudden scream rang through the air’ followed by absolute silence. Woman screamed and people were running to the railing on each of the four levels of the mall. Sophie was ‘feeling trapped in the beginning of some exitless nightmare. They were imprisoned in this tower with its gleaming cancer of things, which had now started to conspire against them’ (72). Swami shouted some kid fell down and ran down. Sophie pushed the people aside and saw ‘a child sprawled face on the Mercedes Benz’ (72). The child was dressed in blue and red Superman suit. ‘He was sitting on the banister and his dad held him with one hand and had tonnes of shopping in the other’ (73). When he lost hold, the child fell down and died. ‘Her claustrophobia had given way to an intense sadness’ (74). In addition to this death, Ringo’s murder drives her away from Bangalore. But the family disintegration and the magical spell of Shillong crumbling down send her back to Bangalore to start hunting for a job.

The text connives both attractive and repulsive features in life. The essence of human nature cannot emerge as all the characters get entangled and are unable to free themselves. They have not come in touch with the harmony of life. Irrational destructive behavior runs through resulting in chaotic order. Individual freedom is exercised causing painful moments for the people in common. Companies and individuals, malls and centres act upon greed and violate ethical standards. Violence through media and at secluded spots-home, lake – permeate sending waves of horror. Desensitized individuals throng and sadness hovers over the people with moral essence. Family decline is the main cause for the tragedy that spearheads at various levels. Shopping is a form of perpetual motion. The carrying capacity of life stream is reaching its threshold and human beings, as Sophie does, need to look at the wide landscape to restore, if it is possible, and regain moral equilibrium, not to be ejected, but to taste harmony of the inner and outer spheres.

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