

Eco-literature and Ethics: A Study of Select Works of Aruni Kashyap

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Henry David Thoreau wondered “Where is the literature which gives expression to Nature...I do not know where to find in any literature, ancient or modern, any account which contents me of that Nature with which even I am acquainted” (Thoreau). In response to that incapability of literature to converse with nature, Thoreau took it upon himself “to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil – to regard man as an inhabitant or part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society” (Thoreau). And that literature which concerns itself with the real world of Nature and with the diverse ecological aspects of nature representations in certain works of art is come to be termed as an ecoliterature. “In the literature of the last hundred years is to be found attempts to reconnect deeply and lastingly with nature’s voices” (qtd. in Martinez 1).

Ecocriticism is an inclusive term that has a multi-dimensional approach toward all kinds of literature and constitutes a panoramic view of different aspects of reality while analyzing any work of art under the lens of certain other literary aspects or theories like sociological, ethical, spiritual, psychological, Marxist, feministic, etc. There are various literary genres wherein nature has been depicted either in a smaller or a larger extent. In eco-literature, Nature and ecology express larger contexts of significance and are depicted abundantly. Ecocriticism is a kind of study that focuses upon the interrelationship between nature and literature and analyzes the works of art from an environmental perspective.

The ecological criticism especially concerns itself with the inherent distinction between nature and culture where nature is intimately connected with the human culture and culture in itself is rooted in the world of vivid Nature. For Jonathan Bates, not only culture is embedded in nature but nature is also interconnected with culture. Both Nature and culture mutually influence and affect each other. This distinction between nature and culture represents the postcolonial ideology where Culture takes the form of a master that always dominates and exploits the natural world and Nature becomes the slave of culture being continuously mutilated and tamed by it. The culture always progresses by stamping upon nature and crushing it under its feet through a constant indulgence in wars and all sorts of conquest that leads to the destruction of the natural environment. From times immemorial, various forms of destructive activities have been followed by human beings like deforestation, excessive utilization of the natural resources for material purposes, commercialization of natural objects, etc. So, it has become essential to adopt and follow certain ecological ethics for survival of life on this earth. “Ecological ethics are moral principles governing the human attitude towards the environment, and rules of conduct for

environmental care and preservation” (“Ecological Ethics” *Glossary*).

The present paper seeks to study the nature-representations and its cultural significance in the works of Aruni Kashyap like *The House with a Thousand Stories* and his poems. In the novel *The House with a Thousand Stories* (2013), the author describes the natural surroundings of Assam, especially its regional and cultural atmosphere. The major focus of the paper is upon exfoliating the human culture that has become degenerate in its moral and ethical principles towards its immediate natural surroundings. Literature is a potent medium to discuss ecological concerns. The literary world acknowledges the symbiotic connect between social life and ecology. Ecoliterature appreciates and employs themes such as environmental changes and its impact on social living, how environment shapes and defines society and so on but ethical concerns in literature are subtle and nuanced. Ethical values in ecoliterature avoid propagandist or pontifical approach. Starting from the point of time when stones, trees and animals were deified, to the description of nature as a spontaneous source of benign happiness, to a time when acquisition got the better of all humanitarian values and wrecked havoc on the environment – the ethical approach to nature needs to be revised and subverted with times. Today when ecology has been ruthlessly damaged – be it through carbon emission, pollution of sea water, deforestation or other sheer materialistic concerns, ethics need to be given a pragmatic perspective. Ethical appeal can no longer be limited to what is *good or bad* but what is *right or wrong*. This would provide a perspective to analyze situations within in a cogitative and imaginative framework.

The present paper endeavors to analyze selected works of Aruni Kashyap, namely, two poems, “Journeys” and “Me” and his debutant fiction entitled, *The House with a Thousand Stories* (2013). Kashyap comes from the NorthEast India where nature is a constant consociate in literary expression. Whereas his poems blend the natural backdrop and themes of insurgency, oppression and a lover’s keen anticipation, in the novel nature is a sagacious observer of festivities, mourning and brutality by the army and the militants. The dense forests, the intimidating mountains and the magnificent Brahmaputra draw lineaments of the landscape which in fact defines the mindscape as well as the ideological space. The landscape exudes an air of premonition – as if awaiting an impending doom. There is a timorous anxiety which is so very palpable – making the plot taut and racy. The grave and eerie environment bespeaks of the anguish and turbulence in the lives of the protagonists. The landscape is an incarnation of the shared culture despite heterogeneity of all kinds. Kashyap’s work aptly presents how ecology defines not

just the physical environment but also the sociocultural and ethical undertones.

The Indian Literary scene epitomizes a panoramic diversity of cultures, customs and traditions. Contemporary Indian literature truly reflects the polyphonic nature of our national identity. Indian writing in English is a well-established and widely acknowledged domain by itself which has long ceased to be palimpsestic, aggressive or self-eulogistic in nature. Writers evocate their region responsibly and aesthetically, vivifying its geographical and cultural singularity, indigenous themes and concerns. One such literary expression comes from the NorthEast region in Aruni Kashyap's debut novel *The House with a Thousand Stories*. Here the personal and the political ensemble spontaneously. It is the story of a family in Mayong (Assam) riven on the one hand by insurgency, atrocities by the army, the ULFA-SULFA factious feuds and encumbered on the other by personal issues such as unreciprocated love, elopements turning into misadventures, marriages gone sour and so on. However, life goes on, vibrant and rearing as the waters of the Brahmaputra which flow nearby, majestically.

Northeast India has a predominantly humid subtropical climate with hot, humid summers, severe monsoons and mild winters. Along with the west coast of India, this region has some of the Indian subcontinent's last remaining rain forests which support diverse flora and fauna and several crop species. . . The region is covered by the mighty Brahmaputra - Barak river systems and their tributaries. ("Northeast India" *Wikipedia*)

In analyzing the remote North East, some basic themes seem recurrent. The literature of the 'mainland' looks at the writings of the North East as coming from the "enchanted spaces" (Dube 81), belonging to the mysterious 'other' with little capability for epistemic enunciation. A distinct literary stream flows from the region as compared to the literary trends in the rest of India. The NorthEast is invariably identified with concerns of insurgency, corruption and natural calamities. Due to its geographical location, ethnic groups, porous borders and other related issues, much of the discussion about the literature of the NorthEast focuses on violence as a primary interest. In fact this new ontology related to the cult of violence has spawned a corpus of literature with little emphasis on peace and harmony as an antidote.

Aruni Kashyap in his novel *The House with a Thousand Stories* presents a beautiful description of the luscious natural surroundings of Assam. The novel not only evokes the whole panorama of Nature of the northeast region but at the same time also presents a parallel between the urban and the agrarian landscape of Assam that has been thrown into a stark influence of the political insurgency in this part of northeast India. The landscape is of Mayong – a place in the NorthEast which has withstood Brahmaputra's rage and also has a long standing reputation as the Indian home of black magic. Mayong, as described by Kashyap, is the heart of rural Assam – bleeding and triumphant at the same time. The work draws its power from a brutal and hushed up chapter in India's history during the late nineties when hundreds of people in the North-

East India were killed extrajudicially during an insurgency against the Indian rule. The erstwhile ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam) has mutated into SULFA (Surrendered United Liberation Front of Assam) – both glorious in their inability to offer hope to the people. The landscape has the fertile beauty of any place through which a mighty river flows. Kire, an author from the NorthEast avers, "The entire cultural base of the NorthEast is different from the rest of India ... Its myths and legends are tied to the land, the hills and the rivers. Both the natural world as well as the spiritual world are always alive and real to the NorthEasterner" (qtd. in Borpujari "Reading the NorthEast"). The lush green moors, formidable mountain ranges and dense vegetation have a multiplicity of myths attached to them which are alluring as also intimidating, germinating into a plethora of tales, boasting of a "robustly polyglot character" (qtd. in Misra *Oxford Anthology*, Vol. 2 Introd. xiv). According to Nii Ayikwei Parkes:

In Kashyap's crumbling House, is the beating heart of Assam; in its belly its termites, its conflicts, its dogs that lay eggs, its stunning fireflies, its dangerous gossip, the disintegrating spines of its own histories. Beside it is the Brahmaputra, the river that veers towards the villages it loves, consumes them whole – emblematic of Kashyap's House's stories of love that end in disaster. The House with a Thousand Stories is the complex tale of an India rarely seen outside North East India, scarcely spoken about, making Kashyap's debut a courageous and necessary one.

In the novel, Nature plays an inherent role in Mayong culture. There is a ritual of 'fishtouching feast' i.e. '*matsyo-sporsho*' on the death of some close relative in which mantras are chanted and people pray for the peace and salvation of the soul of the dead. In the novel, Pablo meets his cousin Mridul for the first time when he comes to attend the funeral of Pablo's grandmother Aaita, but after getting bored of the chanting of mantras he along with his cousin "went to the village stream and sat there with our legs dipped in the flowing water. We were startled by tiny fish nibbling at our legs" (Kashyap 12). This shows how the people of Assam are deeply connected with the world of nature which is full of wonders and mysteries. Mridul belongs to the village whereas Pablo is a citybred boy. Mridul has a deep knowledge of the world of animal kingdom. He shares the knowledge of certain mysterious things about snakes and bees with Pablo and fills him with wonder.

Writings from the NorthEast are rooted in the politics of the region and have a strong sense of place. The politically astute assertion of a conventional essentialism in Kashyap's rendering of the NorthEast exemplifies the idea of "Strategic essentialism" (Spivak 197) given by Spivak. It refers to:

a strategy that nationalities, ethnic groups or minority groups can use to present themselves. While strong differences may exist between members of these groups, and amongst themselves they engage in continuous debates, it is sometimes advantageous for them to temporarily "essentialize" themselves and to bring forward their group identity in a simplified way to achieve certain goals. (Spivak 199)

The novel is multistructured, the personal and the political delicately nuanced. The narrator, Pablo, is a seventeen year old boy from Guwahati, raised with upperclass privileges and the ambition to clear the SAT (Scholastic Assessment Test) and go to the United States for higher studies. Pablo's father Prodip, his uncle Prosanto and the matriarch, Oholyajethai, are cousins. The household in Mayong is run by Oholyajethai, who tries her level best to reign in the young as well as the old in the family fold. She is worried about the wedding of her ageing youngest sister Moinapehi. Prosanto wants to marry a widow which has ruffled the feathers of all the womenfolk of the house. Another scandalous relation is between Pablo's cousin Mridul and Mamoni, the girl from the wine brewers' clan forced to live on the outskirts of the town. Pablo himself has a torrid relation with the enticing Anamika. Mayong is far away from Guwahati both in distance as well as in character – "people used to refer to Mayong as Kalapani" (Kashyap 5). Guwahati is a bustling city, the capital of the state of Assam, whereas Mayong is a village, a place so small and sleepy where "by eleven, people are fast asleep" (30). The wedding of Moinapehi, Pablo's aunt, the youngest female cousin of Pablo's father is the backdrop.

It took Moina's family quite long to fix her wedding, so long that Pablo's mother feared Moina too would become "an old maid in that house" (46). Due to the stigma attached to an unmarried woman growing old in her parent's home, this wedding is a very important affair in Pablo's family. Since it's a wedding, there's hullabaloo – the arrival of guests, naughty, almost vulgar jokes and gossip. It is the gossip which throws open the secrets which the family had been concealing and unspools those thousand stories which are not just of this family but of the entire Assam. The news brought in by cousin Anil da about the ULFA connection with Moinapehi's groom's family leads to the suicide of Moinapehi. Mridul never gets to elope with Mamoni and Anamika dies an unnatural death.

For Pablo, his stay in Mayong is a rite of passage. A lot happens to him inside a room of the decrepit house where:

the space under the bed wasn't spared too. Instead of mosquitoes trapped in cobwebs, there was an old harmonium from the days of Oholyajethai's youth when she was the subject of the biggest gossip in the entire village ... Besides the harmonium, there were iron trunks and I didn't know what was in those trunks. (Kashyap 7273)

The room is a metaphor for the blighted lives in the house. Its dilapidated state is metonymic of the lives inhabiting it.

The rumour brought in by Anil da is regarding the brother of the groom being an ULFA militant. This rumour assimilates the personal and the political strands so that along with the descriptions of festivities, rituals and ceremonies there are intersecting gory tales of atrocities and intimidation. However, it is precisely the wedding that keeps the novel from becoming merely a political document. Kashyap has an eye for detail. This is evident as he describes each event during the days leading up to the wedding. The various rituals invoked, like

juron and the fishtouching fest, the goats kept for slaughter, the holes being dug to set up the wedding tent and so on nothing misses his keen observation.

However, it is the description of the Bishoya family which is animated and elaborate. The spinster Oholyapehi and her piercing "Iwillpoisonyourtea" (136) gaze is as much familiar part of our families as the young, fatherless boy Mridul's predicament who had had to grow up suddenly from someone "who could sing songs . . . on whom girls had crushes", to someone "who had an air of an oldman" and had "badly tanned from working in the fields" (Kashyap 119). Prosanto da "the rebel lover" is as much a nextdoor person as the "sassy, chirpy, constantly laughing" (204) Karbi girl Mamoni. With such characters – memorable and easy to identify with as also the wedding songs and rituals, the novel establishes a spontaneous rapport with the reader.

The book has been called *The House with a Thousand Stories*. Such a book cannot have an easy denouement without each of those stories being told, without those stories shaking up the reader as much as they shook up and altered the lives of the characters they belonged to. So, one realizes that Oholyapehi is not wicked. She is tied up by her memories that "stung her like angry homeless bees" (167). As an old spinster staying in her father's house, she had to build an impenetrable aura around her. But the fact is that she is capable of loving, a love for which she wrote "letters to a dead man for more than a year after his death" (154). Mridul's love is a secret. It wouldn't receive the sanction of either his family or the society. But such is the power of this forbidden love that he is ready to take a journey for it, even if it made him return "defeated, dejected, pensive and brooding" (192). All these stories and a thousand more get connected to each other by that one piece of gossip at the wedding that sets the ball rolling.

The novel has a wellwrought structure with a shuttling between two time references, that is, 2002 (when Pablo visits his ancestral village for his aunt's wedding) and 1998 (when he had come to attend the funeral of his father's best friend). At times, the story is recounted in flashback, reminiscences, recollections and such similar modes. The descriptions of the characters, landscapes and culture though topical go down well with any reader unfamiliar with the terrain. It is the first person account by Pablo. The novel is replete with anecdotes, folk tales, rituals and vivid descriptions of the landscape. The prose has a rhythm about it so that the moments of shared joy, communal grief and individual angst of frustrated ambitions and unrealized dreams get powerful rendition.

There is an element of unease and tension which is rather premonitory as if something untoward is in the offing and in fact it does happen when marriage goes wrong, celebrations are taken over by mourning and happy endings turn nightmarish. The eerie calm on the surface conveyed through festivities of marriage is merely a façade. The decimation of the ULFA militants, the barbarism of the army molesting young girls, elopements resulting into misadventures and nonstarters – the personal and the public are all ensembled in one encompassing plot. It's creditable that there is little

overlapping, exaggeration and interpolation in the plot. The narrative is racy and stories intersect, cohere and diverge refracting myriad images. The reader partakes equally in the jocular and frolicsome ceremonies, bawdy jokes as also in the timorous anxiety while listening to footfalls of the approaching army. Kashyap's gaze is unflinching and tender producing a family narrative crafted from memory.

The House with a Thousand Stories comes from a relatively less represented region of the North East. So also Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) are fictionalized narratives about the hinterland from Kerala and Nepal respectively. These indigenous writings have ample richness, diversity of concerns and great mythical tradition to vocalize their themes aesthetically. Edward Said appreciates the stance when writers:

take on or appropriate the forms, styles and symbols—in short, the cultural vocabulary...by subversively adapting, refracting and manipulating these, by playing on the contradictions in the text themselves.... In so doing they express their own subjectivity, their own perceptions of the world. (89)

Said disagrees with Foucault for whom, resistance is always represented as equal but opposite to the system of power and therefore locked into it. Foucault denies any scope for the productive instabilities, ruptures and faultlines along which new literature could be deciphered, understood and interpreted more realistically. According to Said, the forces of resistance take a "contrapuntal" expression. Bhabha also concurs when he avers that "the systemic analysis of the colonial encounter on strictly binary lines paradoxically operates to reinstate the structures of authority which colonialism was concerned to implement in the first place" (130). To oppose the binary is often to put another structure in its place and inadvertently entrench the colonial divide. The idea of "destabilizing ambivalence" (Bhabha 88) as suggested by Bhabha is more relevant to explain works such as Aruni Kashyap's novel as it is located in that in-between space negotiating the regional concerns through "destabilizing ambivalence" (Bhabha 88), erasing the boundaries between subaltern traditions and the so-called Great Traditions. The novel is about family, growing up, the political scenario in the

country, but above all it is about life as it flows on, at times turbulent and sometimes serene much like the enigmatic sojourn of the magnificent Brahmaputra.

Violence is a recurrent motif in the works from the region. It is emblematic of disorder and chaos as also an aesthetic tool to approach the subliminal, the turbulence without manifesting the angst within. Violence deeply affects sensibilities, disturbs the psyche, with an inherent urge to communicate and share through literature. So violence infects is a mode of dismantling obfuscation in the private or public sphere. Much of the discussion about the North East focuses on violence as a thematic interest.

Kashyap's novel is equally a subversion of the theme of violence when he employs it not to gloat over horrifying details but as a tool to concretize the ineffable yet trenchant responses. Any commentary on the Assam of 90s inevitably is a critique of the ULFA and their violent modes of expression. They did receive support from a large section of Assamese society but it also crippled the future of two generations of Assamese youth. So, contemporary writers from the region prefer to articulate their identity in a larger sociopolitical canvas, rather than gasping for breath in an insurgency driven environment or talking about the 'foreigner' issue and the issue of separation from the federal structure. Kashyap's voice is of assuagement of a race desperately trying to construct a new Assam with a positive frame of mind, veering cautiously while dealing with political issues.

Literature from the North East has a powerful sense of arrival with writers such as Kashyap. For a region scarred by decades of violence, its literature is not just a social and historical map of events, but also a medium of telling its story to the world. In the literature of such a region, there is anger, fear, pain and also endurance, restraint and hope intricately woven. It is an act of assuagement and recuperation. Kashyap's novel and poems thus evoke a sensuous atmosphere of the panoramic world of nature and culture as is found in the eastern most region of Assam, "The sensuousness of Kashyap's prose makes you touch the pages of the book from time to time, for fear of the Brahmaputra making its pages wet, or fear of the blood sticking to them ..." (*India Today*).

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