

## **Adverse Impact of Socio-political Turmoil on the Psyche of Women: An Analytical Study of Aruni Kashyap's *The House with a Thousand Stories***

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### **Abstract:**

This research paper examines how socio-political turmoil originated due to the long-existing ethnic conflict in Assam society that causes mental trauma in individuals, especially among women, with reference to Aruni Kashyap's *The House with a Thousand Stories*. The hypothesis of this research is that the select novel would objectively and creatively reflect the then-contemporary socio-political turmoil in Assamese society that caused mental trauma among the people of ethnically and economically weaker sections in Assam society and its impact was more severe on the psyche of women. The objectives of this research paper include, (i) to study the characterization of Moina-pehi, Mamoni, and Oholya-jethai, (ii) to study the relationship between the disturbed psyche of people and the then-contemporary material conditions of social life, (iii) to understand and analyse the influence the author's world outlook on the characterization, and (iv) to examine how the historical events were reflected in the portrayal of the characters.

**Keywords:** Ethnic conflict- Socio-political turmoil - the psyche of women- psychological trauma - historical events-weaker sections.

## Introduction

The socio-political turmoil causes psychological trauma among people, and the impact of this trauma is worse in women. Having been a direct witness of the chaotic socio-political conditions in Assamese society, Aruni Kashyap recorded the horrendous social realities in his novel *A House with a Thousand Stories* in a naturalistic manner. The social life of the Assamese during the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s was reflected through several personal untold stories of people; thus, "history is filled with political turmoil created by groups engaging in collective actions in an attempt to bring social change" (Jenkins. 2007). How the people are, under some circumstances, obsessed with the fear of uncertainty is depicted through the direct and indirect characterization of the characters, Moina-pehi, Mamoni, and Oholya-jethai. As the purpose of the author is to lay bare the atrocities conducted on the people of Assam by the Government armed forces, and this has resulted in various physical and mental traumas that manifest among the people of Assam, the researcher must study the history of this problem as per the necessity of this research.

The characters in this novel Moina-pehi, Mamoni, and Oholya-jethai, undergo psychological trauma caused by the then-existing socio-political turmoil due to illegal immigrants in Assam. This social reality was/is sheerly neglected by mainstream historians and media organizations. Consequently, this problem of psychological trauma has little place in Indian fiction. This literary phenomenon necessitates the researcher to carry out this research to trace the historical evidence behind the fictitious episodes and characterization of the specified female characters and assess the characters' historicity.

The author, Aruni Kashyap, depicts the plight of the ethnically and economically marginalized through the characterization of the three-woman characters. This aspect symbolizes the existing horrendous social reality --the violence on people, especially the women-- in the turbulent areas of Assam. In contrast, Moina-pehi and Mamoni are sexually assaulted by the government security forces. Oholya-Jethai suffers due to financial imbalances that occurred in her life being caused due to socio-political turmoil followed by severe repercussions. This study focuses on how the socio-political crisis in Assam victimized these characters.

## Methodology

### Historical socio-political context

Assam, one of the states of India, is one of the most turbulent states in India. This state lies in the northeastern region. The locals of Assam apprehend that the immigration of people from the other areas would make them become an ethnic minority in their own state. "This issue of illegal immigration has also given rise to the formation of various insurgent groups", thus forming the 'Assam movement in 1979' (Basumatary. p. 5). Amidst these clashes in 1979, "the Assam Movement provided the platform for the growth of a secessionist force like ULFA" (Mahanta. 2013), leading to the subsequent violent struggle in Assam. Several violent incidents occurred in Assam, and the violence increased during the general elections. Singh writes that "2009 parliamentary poll was one of the bloodiest in Assam's political history" (Singh. 2009). The problem of Assamese is still persisting though the violence is considerably reduced.

The ULFA's violent activities against the migrants from the other regions caused the deployment of armed security forces of the Indian Government. On some occasions, the security forces unleashed their atrocities on the innocent people of Assam. According to Restless Frontier report-1991 the central armed forces were directed "to destroy any structure, to arrest anyone without a warrant and to search any premises"(Army, Assam..... 1991). They used to kill innocent civilians and attributed the crime to the ULFA cadre. As per Hindustan Times report-2010 the citizen forum convenor, Hiren Gohain, tried to settle the harmony between the ULFA and the state Government. It is on "October 21, 2010", that "he met the ULFA members in Guwahati central jail negotiating the settlement of the issues" but in vain (Peace interlocutor meets.... 2010). The late 1980s were quite turbulent, and this environment of social and political turmoil was reflected in Aruni Kashyap's, *The House with a Thousand Stories*. The severe repercussions of the ULFA's armed struggle and the resultant suppression by the Government were heartrendingly depicted in this novel.

### Adverse impact of socio-political turmoil on the human psyche

The characters Moina-pehi, Oholya-jethai and Mamoni are subjected to psychological trauma in the backdrop of the upsurge of the ULFA movement and the consequent suppressive measures by the Government. Even though the impact of the socio-political turmoil on all the citizens is enormous, its impact on the social life of women is worse than

that of men. Pooja Priyamvada opines that “sustained political violence may have long-term mental health effects” (Priyamvada. 2020). All three characters experience fear, anxiety, and uncertainty in their lives, resulting from the state's repressive tendencies. Commenting on the repercussions of the suppressive measures of the Indian Government, Prateek Sharma says, “India, with its ongoing agitation against the states perceived cultural, social and political persecution, is not immune to a mental health crisis” (Sharma. 2020). The depiction of the characterization of the three women mirrors this fact.

## **Results and discussions**

### **The psychological problems among women**

#### **Moina-pehi**

Moina-pehi is a middle-aged woman in a low-income family. She lives with her joint family in a village, Mayong. The village, Mayong, is in a region highly affected by the ongoing struggle of the ULFA against the Indian Government. The problems of Moina-pehi, who leads a wretched life in poverty and with lower social status, are aggravated with the existence of the socio-political turmoil caused by the ongoing militancy of the ULFA and the resultant repression by the Government. The violent disturbances are common phenomena in Assam especially there were such incidents to have taken place in Assam “between 1993 and 1998, as the Bodos had been involved in four major disturbances which had resulted in the death of over 300 people and the displacement of nearly half a million people” (Goswami. 2016). On hearing the truth from her elder brother, Mukut Khura, that the younger brother of her fiancé is a member of the ULFA, Moina-pehi, becomes dumbstruck. She learns that people in the village are talking sympathetically about Moina-pehi’s future. Furthermore, she worries much about her future life with the man whose younger brother is associated with the ULFA. These feelings of insecurity and uncertainty intensify when her “near and dear” sympathetically comments on her marriage, which eventually ends in misery.

Fear is contagious and more perilous than physical reality. Moina-pehi is horrified when her aunt and the other relatives describe the extra-judicial killings of the ULFA militants by the Government’s armed forces. Her aunt, Moon-baido, cries loudly, saying that “it was better to cut the body of Moina-pehi into pieces and throw into the Brahmaputra Valley instead of marrying off a groom whose younger brother was an ULFA member”

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(Kashyap. p. 210 -211). This incident adversely impacts the psyche of Moina-pehi, who was subjected to mental trauma. She rushed into her bedroom, shouted and decided to be unmarried in anger, which is the sign of post-traumatic stress whose characteristics, according to Shira Maguen, may be mentioned as “the guilt, shame, anger and isolation” (Maguen. 2016). The impact of this mass protest would have a severe effect on people mentally and physically. Bhargava and Gupta wrote that “disorders such as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as an outcome in mass protests emerged to be comparable to other traumatic events” would adversely impact the psyche of women (Bhargava. 2010). Moina-pehi drinks phenyl as a result of this stressful event in her life. Eventually, this hopeless situation made Moina-pehi commit suicide the night before the wedding.

The violence unleashed by the Government armed forces and the ULFA further aggravated the mental health of Moina-pehi. Several people were killed in the village (Kashyap. p. 211). According to Justice K. N Saikia commission report, “the masked gunmen used to survey the location and structure of the house. Knock at the door to write up the inmates and then drag him/them out and shoot him/them dead or take him/them away and secretly kill and throw the bodies somewhere” (K. N Saikia Commission. 2006). Moina-pehi fainted at the marriage ritual when Mukhut-khura, her uncle, performed '*kanyaadaan*' rituals (Kashyap. p. 191). Her uncle cries like her own father witnessing the miserable condition of his niece.

However, the life of Moina-pehi ends very pathetically. The Government armed forces sexually assault her, and this incident causes mental trauma in her. In the words of the author, “the armed men raped her during combing operations” (Kashyap. p. 195). This phenomenon is not a mere fictional episode but one of several such incidents during the 1990s and 2000s in Assam society. The study of *Restless Frontier* reveals that “they [the armed forces of the Government] conducted raids, went house to house for the militants. Most of the instances of loot, plunder, destruction and molestation of women that came to light took place” in this era (Army, Assam..... 1991). The depiction of Moina-pehi’s plight tells us that “her life was ended in the hands of khaki dresses or army people” (Kashyap. p. 196). Like many other women in the state, Moina-pehi is terrified by the Government’s armed forces. Several cases were registered against the extra-judicial killings; nevertheless,

as Hrishikeshan writes, “despite such a drawback [registered cases], the security forces have done a commendable job, as is evident from the fact that the ULFA no longer has as free a run of the countryside as was the case in the past” (Hrishikeshan. 2002). The author depicts how the violence unleashed by the armed forces cause mental turmoil in the ordinary through the characterization of Moina-pehi.

### **Mamoni**

Mamoni is the sister of Brikodar, who is the friend of Pablo, the narrator. She is the only girl-child in her family. Just before she was sexually assaulted by the armed forces, she never felt misery. She used to be happy playing all the time in the village joyously. This sexual assault leaves her to remain half-dead. When the ULFA chose to terrorize the migrants by killing them, the armed forces terrorized the native Assamese by killing men and molesting women. This socio-political turmoil is reflected in the episode of Mamoni. Choudary, the Journalist of Assam Preview, writes that “many political parties and people protested the killings after five persons of the Bengali community were shot dead by suspected United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) terrorists in Assam's Tinsukia district” (Choudhary. R. 2018).

Several incidents of killing by both sides were reflected in this novel. Hiren is a silk businessman and former member of the ULFA. Later, he surrenders himself before the Government. However, his move stokes anger among the members of the ULFA. One day, “three masked gunmen shot down Hiren’s entire family” (Kashyap. p. 101). The living conditions of the immigrants from other states are worse than those of a person like Hiren. The state’s policy of protecting law and order in society has resulted in several extra-judicial killings and sexual assaults on native women. According to the report of Human Rights Violation in Assam – 1993, the “rapes of family members are common. The primary goal of these raids appears to be to frighten villagers into identifying suspected militants” (No end in sight ... 1993). This socio-political turmoil was reflected in the episode of the assault on Mamoni.

Mamoni goes to the Pokoria river to wash clothes. The armed forces catch her and commit sexual assault on her. Thereafter she “faints unconsciously and frequently suffered from severe mental trauma” whenever she happens to “see the armed men jeeps and hear sounds of shoes” (Kashyap. p. 191). The sexual assault on a woman by a gang of men

severely causes mental disturbance in women. Karthiki Keshkamat, the psychologist, says that "all types of sexual abuse can lead to mental health issues" among women (Keshkamat. 2017). Mamoni undergoes undepictable mental stress due to the presence of the man (who sexually assaulted her) in the same vicinity where the victim lives. His presence often makes her recollect the horrendous memories of her sexual assault by him. She frequently recollects those horrifying scenes when she sees the military men at her residence. Though this happened two years ago, it still continues to haunt her throughout her life. "This horror affected people physically, and their name or the sound of their shoes was enough to go crazy" (Kashyap. p. 112). Psychologists diagnose these symptoms as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a severe mental condition when the person is affected by terrifying events either experienced or witnessed that can be unforgettable. Its symptoms "may include flashbacks, nightmares and severe anxiety, as well as uncontrollable thoughts about the event" (Mayo Clinic). Due to haunting traumatic events, Mamoni's physical reactions or extreme emotional stress disorder crop up. The author heartrendingly depicts her extreme pathetic psychological health condition through Pablo, the narrator of the story. Pablo says that "she wouldn't stop, she kept screaming like a lunatic until she fainted (Kashyap. p. 112). The author created a character of this kind out of his own knowledge.

Aruni Kashyap witnessed these kinds of terrific events in the state of Assam. He is a native Assamese. He grew up and began writing Assam itself. Sharma writes that "the battle between the Indian state and insurgents, the people's sufferings were largely unreported, whereas social and communal conflict created deep and long-lasting trauma with victims and survivors" (Sharma. 2018). Aruni Kashyap says in the same interview that, "during this period (1979 to the present), more than thirty thousand people were killed on both sides, hundreds injured, handicapped, and killed extra-judicially by the Indian army to brutally crush the rebellion" (Danielle Gilman interview). The frequency and intensity of these extra-judicial killings were reflected in the novel through the characterization of Mamoni.

### **Oholya-jethai**

Oholya-jethai is an elderly unmarried woman who is indirectly affected badly by the upsurge of the Assam insurgency and the counter-insurgency repression by the Government. She falls in love with a doctor who lives in the nearby town, and they are even engaged to

marry. Her betrothal with the doctor, however, is nullified after the doctor and the members of his family know about her acute poverty and her household responsibilities. As she immensely loves him, she cannot accept the bitter truth that he is no longer her soulmate. This phenomenon causes mental instability in her; she gradually undergoes anxiety and depression severely.

The primary cause for the plight of Oholya-jethai's, according to the author, is the socio-political turmoil in the state. The government's failure to resolve the issues of Assamese identity and unemployment resulted in an armed insurgency by the ULFA. The lack of technology, unemployment, irrational education system, land issues between natives and migrants made the native people migrate to nearby regions. This again causes other severe problems such as "endemic poverty, malnutrition, disability, economic/social decline and psycho-social illness" and so on (Murthy. 2006). The father and the brother of Oholya-jethai also join the movement and are killed in encounters with the Government armed forces. When she tells her fiancé, who is a doctor, about her responsibility of looking after her family members in the absence of her father and brother, he abandons her mercilessly. This phenomenon adversely impacts the psyche of Oholya-jethai.

Even though Oholya-jethai tries to forget her past setbacks, they often make her behave violently with others. Once, she goes to Guwahati for the housewarming function of Prodip's house, where she expresses her disgust when Prodip's wife often enters the bedroom during the daytime without having a bath every time. Oholya-jethai madly "demands Prodip's wife, Deepali, to have a bath whenever she enters the bedroom, although she has a bath" (Kashyap. p. 39). Oholya-jethai rigidly adheres to "the deep-rooted social customs because of her disturbed psyche". Aron Dutil says that "someone who constantly experiences fear will develop irrational thoughts due to that intense emotional state. Anger is another emotional state that tends to create many irrational thoughts" (Dutil. 2020). Her thoughts become very irrational generally emerge from stressful familial conditions caused by social turmoil in her region.

Oholya jethai's psychological trauma caused by the existing socio-political turmoil, in turn, injures the psyche of Mridul, a young boy whose father imminently died of some health issue. When Mridul plays music with his guitar and plays carroms, she shouts at him for wasting his time. In fact, she always scolds him for no reason. Oholya-jethai's aggressive,



rude behaviour “irritates him and makes him cry and blow out in front of Pablo” consequently, the young, parentless boy, Mridul, undergoes mental trauma (Kashyap. p. 50). Mohammad Freh, the psychologist, opines that “the impact of wars and insurgency would be severe on children who slowly develop the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and lower psycho-social functioning levels during their lifetime ...” (Freh). In this context, both Oholya-jethai and Mridul appear as the victims of the existing chaotic social and political conditions in Assam. According to Freh, the wars through which undepictable violence occurs may primarily impact children mentally. These ghastly incidents remain forever in their unconscious minds, subjecting them to psychological illness. Through the characterization of Mridul, the author conveys his apprehension that the generations coming would be victimized by the ongoing war between the native Assamese backed by the ULFA and the Government, which constantly fails to resolve the issue.

## Conclusion

Aruni Kashyap, though he aspires that Assam be one of the states of India, scathingly criticises the laxity of the Government as the counter-agitation armed forces are unleashing atrocities on the native Assamese. The author naturally shows the people’s susceptibility to various psychological disorders due to the existing socio-political turmoil through the characterization of Moina-pei, Mamoni, Oholya-jethai and Mridul. Several news reports, real stories published in magazines, journals, and fact-finding reports by some people’s forums testify to this phenomenon. The author believes that the women and the children in Assam were affected with psychological trauma due to the violent agitation by the ULFA and the state violence unleashed through the government's armed forces to suppress the former. The author depicted this phenomenon through the characterization of Moina-pei, Mamoni, Oholya-jethai and Mridul heartrendingly. Although the characters are fictional, the characterization has historical authenticity asserted by necessary recorded evidence. The violent activities of the ULFA and the counter-violent agitation of the Government armed forces are objectively and creatively reflected in this novel. The names of the villages in which the violence unleashed by both sides are fictional. Still, the occurrence of violence in several villages in the ULFA-dominated regions is a fact. Hence, it is asserted that the novel *The House with a Thousand Stories*, reflected objectively and creatively (with the confluence

of fact and fiction) the then-contemporary socio-political turmoil in Assamese society that caused mental trauma among the people of ethnically and economically weaker sections in Assam society and its impact was more severe on the psyche of women.

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