

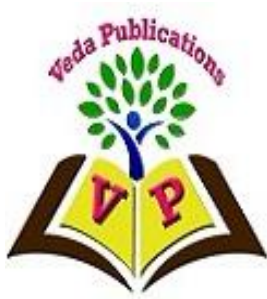


A SAGA OF TRIBULATION: ETHNO-NATIONALISM, CONFLICT AND VIOLENCE IN ARUNI KASHYAP'S *A HOUSE WITH A THOUSAND STORIES*

Prerana Priyam Doley

(MPhil Research Scholar, Guwahati University)

ABSTRACT



In post-independence India, the idea of 'nation' and 'nationalism' in Assam and other Northeastern states have acquired a complicated position with many nuances raising the questions of national identity which is often defined in terms of common origin, cultural ties, ethnicity etc. Assam has witness militancy for many years and the main cause for conflict is the call for sovereign and independent nation state by various rebel groups shaped by an intense sense of ethno-nationalism. Militant group like ULFA is no exception to such strident regionalism for upholding the values and betterment of 'Asomiya jati'. Taking into account the unrest prevailing in the region this paper shall consider the theme of ethno-nationalism, ethnic identity and violence due to insurgent groups with a dream of an independent Assam as explored in Aruni Kashyap's novel *The House with Thousand Stories*. The novel also explores the dire consequences of adherence to such ideologies by the militant group where the victims are the poor local people who are caught between the rebel group on one hand and the armed forces of the center.

Keywords: *Nation, Nationalism, Ethno-Nationalism, Identity Crisis, Ethnic-Conflict*

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INTRODUCTION

In the post independence/colonial India, the idea of 'nation' and 'nationalism' especially in Assam and other northeastern states have acquired a complicated position with many nuances raising the questions of national identity which is often defined in terms of common origin, cultural ties, ethnicity etc. And moreover the issue of identity itself in the postcolonial context is considered problematic because of its fluid nature and almost all postcolonial communities features its' crisis. Initially the foundation of Indian nationalism was the zeal for free India that would enable the nation to release the shackles of British colonial power and attain freedom. The forbearers of nationalism as an ideology were Rousseau, Fitch, Herder and Mazzini. John Hutchison and Andy D Smith define nationalism as:

Nationalism was at first all, a doctrine of popular freedom and sovereignty. The people must be liberated – that is free from any external constraint; they must determine their own destiny, and be the master in their own house; control their resources; they must obey only their 'inner' voice. But that entailed fraternity. The people must be united, they must dissolve, all internal divisions; they must be gathered together in a single historical territory, a homeland; and they must have legal equality and share a single public culture (Hutchinson & Smith, 1983, 4).

The Indian nationalist mythologies of pre-historic India although provided impetus for the anti-colonial struggle but the grim reality of the nationalistic discourse in the independent India particularly in Assam and other North eastern states has acquired a distorted connotations. Thus in an article M.S Prabhakara, writes that in Assam and other borderlands "nationalism as an idea, and theory, practice, has sometimes been mobilized to advance what received ideas of nationalism in mainstream politics would consider distortion" (*The Hindu*).

While an important corollary to nationalism which is equally problematic in the postcolonial context as the term 'nation' is 'Ethno-nationalism'. Its basic foundation lies on constructing or epitomizing nationalism on the basis of ethnic commonalities. Rajesh Dev defines it as: "The term 'Ethnic-Nationalism' refers to the epitomizing of collective identity mobilization in culturally distinctive territories based on attitudes, memories, local attachments and identities" (Dev, 1996, 116). Ethnicity provides a scope of identification for an individual with its own community or cultural group. But such a kind of allegiance to extreme nationalism as well as ethnic nationalism can have adverse consequences. Northeastern states are home to more than 220 ethnic groups. Each ethnic community wants to assert its own individual identity and the competition for resources and recognition or other privileges leads to ethnical rivalry and conflict. Assam has also witnessed militancy for many years and the main cause for conflict is the call for sovereign and independent nation state by various rebel groups shaped by an intense sense of ethno-nationalism. Militant group like ULFA is no exception to such strident regionalism for upholding the values and betterment of 'Asomiya-jati'. Kashyap's novel captures the gruesome ironic consequences of blind adherence to such ideologies and the false promises made by militant groups who envisions a free Assam separated from the Indian Union. Through the protagonist's eye it presents a state torn apart by insurgency and counter insurgency activities of the Army.

Aruni Kashyap's novel *The House with a Thousand Stories* is a coming of age novel of a young boy Pablo sets in his ancestral village of Mayong, 'the land of magic' located in Assam. Although the superficial layer of the novel deals with familial issues but at the same time it draws a contemporary portrait of Assam which is torn apart due to violence of the insurgency activities. It depicts how the local people lives are affected by the violence. The backdrop of the novel is based on the secret killings of Assam during the 90s and the consequences faced by the people of the place. Pablo visits his ancestral place on two occasions – on a wedding and a funeral. Both this two events have impactful impression on



his life. He witnesses the gruesome realities of insurgencies as well as the rites of passage of the state of Assam in the Indian union.

Although the term 'nation' represents the Indian nation state with its multiple dimensions it has always shared an ambivalent relation with the North-eastern states of the country. Because of valorizing of the "asomiya jati" has always created tensions with the greater Indian national state. There has been a constant rift by the state against the center of ignoring issues concerning them. Because of the attitude of second class citizen meted some militant groups of the states following a strong sense of ethno-nationalism seek self governance. As a result of which they resort to violence disturbing the normalcy of the region. Their dream of a free nation is in itself an unattainable, illusionary and imaginary kind of a concept. Benedict Anderson comments on this regard,

"The nation is an imagined political community. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members meet them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Kashyap, 2013, 49).

The violence associated with the dream of a free state became a common thing for the people which apparently illustrated throughout the novel as Pablo says, "newsreader telling us how the militants came and massacred who had taken shelter in a camp after a prolonged ethnic riots" (Kashyap, p.7). The story is narrated by the protagonist in the first person narrative giving a glimpse history of the period when the separatist movement in Assam was the most violent. The so-called movement instigated with thorough zeal of nationalistic concern which was to endure freedom and beneficent to the people ended up in a bloody bloodshed:

The ULFA wanted a separate country called Asom and wanted to free Assam from what they called Indian imperialism, so they fought with Indian forces with guns, bombs, AK-47 rifles, kidnappings, op-eds, books published under pseudonyms and jingoistic music

albums released abruptly that had words like 'sun', 'blood' and 'sacrifice' in their titles. (Kashyap, 10)

The never ending brutality of violence by the militant group and the counter insurgent activities by the Indian Armed Force of the region had taken a toll over the lives of the people. The constant fear of losing their loved ones became a part of their loved one. Bloodshed and killings became an inextricably related to their lives: "I didn't know if he was referring to the killings that were happening around the state. I had lost track of who were killing whom. At first, masked gunmen had targeted the family members of the ULFA. People said that it was the government that had employed the mean-eyed, gun wielding masked man" (Kashyap 31).

The militants unleashed their atrocities through their incessant killings, extortions and kidnapping. Their violent activities cast a glooming spell over the lives of the people in the novel. Unknown killings became so common, that the people feared that their loved ones would become a victim of either the militant group or of the Indian Army who suspected everyone to be a part of the organization. The horror of the people could be imagined when Mridul narrated to Pablo the incidents prevailing in the village:

More killings were taking place everyday.....The East Bengali villagers who use the Pokoria River most of the time say that they have started finding body parts of unknown human beings at regular intervals, almost every fortnight or so. They are so scared they haven't informed the police. (Kashyap, 53)

The subtext of secret killings in Assam during late 1990s and early 2000s also emerges as a strong voice that narrates the tragic condition of the time. As one character exasperatedly comments on the topic, "*Goptohotyā?*... There is nothing secret about secret killers. Everyone knows who is killing around the state, for which they are working secretly. Two years ago, my uncle's son had gone fishing in the Pagladiya and he ended up having the fish hook struck to a rotten man's wrist" (Kashyap, 68).



Even happy and auspicious events of the characters in the village are tainted by the ever present sense of fear and terror in the region. The wedding of Moina- pehi turned into a tragic and gloomy event with the suicide of the former. With the rumor that the groom's brother was a member of the insurgent organization, everyone including the bride could not stop thinking of the worst consequences, as the aunt exclaims: "It's better to cut out Moina into pieces and throw her body into the Brahmaputra then marry her off to a groom whose younger brother is a rebel"(210-11). There were several instances in the past when relatives of the rebel groups are mercilessly murdered. The Army had brutally murdered him and hanged his mutilated body to a pole for his brother a ULFA refused to surrender to the government:

But we saw the body first. Only in his red underwear. He didn't have legs. They had been chopped off. He didn't have fingers. They had been cut off too. His face was twisted – as if he was repulsed by a bad smell. It was such a horrific sight! Hanging from the electric pole like a dead electrocuted bat. He was from a nearby village – the brother of an ULFA member (Kashyap, 52).

While in some cases, even the entire family including the children is being killed by such secret killers if associated with the organization. The fear of such consequences compelled Moina-pehi to consume phenyl before the night of her wedding. The helpless local people becomes the victim and caught between the two opposing forces and this fear of being caught in middle made people like Moina-pehi to take such severe steps. Even the Indian Army deployed to counter such activities of insurgent groups by the centre is a far cry away from being a solace to the people of the region. The example of such an incident in the novel is the gang rape of the poor girl Mamoni by four military men when she went to wash clothes in the river. Kashyap proclaims in the novel that the pathetic and heart rendering condition of the people of the region will become even worse if such an atmosphere prevails:

One day there will be no ULFA, SULFA, Bodo rebels or Karbi rebels. And along with them their families would also be wiped off the map of Assam by the army and police. But they were not sure how many families would be killed and how many women the army would strip during raids, during secret killing operations by masked gunmen who shot mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters-in-law, brothers-in-law, uncles of ULFA members who had not surrendered before that blessed day arrived(Kashyap, 211).

CONCLUSION

Through the various incidents depicted through the novel, Aruni Kashyap had been able to provide a panoramic view of the tragic and pathetic condition of Assam as result of nationalism and strict regionalism. While at the same time highlighting the terror of the characters those who had to witness the consequences. The novel has shown how a true sense of freedom in terms of a nationalist discourse is unattainable and the so called idea of a free nation by some extremist is attained at cost of other people's lives. The term 'nation' is in itself problematic and elusive. And the people who resort to taking up arms to attain freedom ending up in wasting their lives as well as others' in the entire process. According to Rajesh Dev such instances of ethnic nationalism and the bloodshed associated with it in the northeast is the failure of the central government to implement policies that could accommodate the differences within the region (Dev, 118). The north-eastern part of India is always seen the 'other' of the Indian nation state. The ignorant attitude of the center and the deficits of development, lack of beneficiary project and other policies had created stressful environment within the regions of the north eastern other. According to 2006 count there are at present 109 armed groups operating in Assam (Baruah, 39). Some groups demand separate state, some regional autonomy and while some call for independent states. Due to such and various others reasons armed militia driven by strong sense of ethno-nationalism Aruni Kashyap has



illustrated through the novel the atmosphere of Assam tainted with bloodshed and violence.

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