

Postcolonial Aesthetics and Sensuous Geographies in Aruni Kashyap's *The House with a Thousand Stories*

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Abstract

The place is fundamental to our existence; it conforms to the phenomenology of being in the world as we always occupy a place "if not with our minds, then always with our bodies", to quote Moslund. The role of the senses in knowing the geographies of our existence, form a kind of structuring of space and defining of place. To understand the construction of sensorial-socio-cultural space of Assam at the time of extra judicial killings that produces a 'sense of fear' jeopardizing the everyday negotiations of people inhabit the exceptional zones, this paper takes into account Aruni Kashyap's debut novel *The House with Thousand Stories* (2013) that set in Hatimura village of Mayong area and deals with alternate retellings of micro-historical account of Assamese people. The paper dwells upon the artist's creative response to the Agambenian 'bare life' that he associates with 'bare' or 'pure senses' to cultivate the idea of sensuousness of geography produced through the life stories of people and the interactions between human and non-human beings. Like Manipuri mother's Naked March in front of Kangla Fort and Irom Sharmila's sixteen years long hunger strike that can be looked at as the metaphor for staging the 'bare life' against the body polity of the state, the sensual dimension of geographic experience of Pablo, the narrator of the novel, in the village helps to understand the spaces of difference in the time of conflict.

Key Words:

Peripheral Aesthetics, Sensuous Geography, Secret Killings, Embodied Experience, Assamese Literature in English

Introduction

The spatial representation of literature has long been recognised as the background or setting for the narratological plot (Genette, 1988; Todrov, 1975; Barthes, 1972). The "Spatial reading" of narrative, as argued by Stanford Friedman (1993), involves both an approach to decipher the "horizontal axis" and "vertical axis" of the literary dimensions where the horizontal axis represents the transaction between writer and reader and the "vertical axis" conjoins the text with its context (intertextuality) and completes the text's dialogic interaction. In this sense, the text is not a static point but a "dialogue of writer and reader, text and context that include author-reader relations, literary-historical considerations and intertextual allusions" (Kristeva, 1980, p. 65). The study of



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place in literature or the topo-poetic reading of the narrative always starts with the two primary concerns: how language produces both the physical and textual world and how this very produced place will influence the sensory experiences of the readers. By delving deep into the literary tropes, i.e., the aesthetics of the narrative, the readers get to explore places produced by the body and the senses- which according to Sten Moslund (2015), is "sensuous geography"- a term he borrowed from Paul Rodaway (1994). Hence, to excavate literature's sensuous geographies is to explore the place-world produced by the language "as an event of bodily sensations" (Moslund, 2015, p.10). The spatial setting of the novel, the bodily movements of the characters, the eco-cosmological descriptions- are all invoked through the aesthetics of the narrative.

The narratives from Northeast Anglophone literature compellingly reflect the socio-political crisis of the land, which jeopardizes the quotidian transaction of ordinary people by creating a landscape of fear, uncertainty, anxiety, and at large, the landscape of death. As the writers from the region are on the receiving end of bearing witness to the trauma and violence, the scholarship of Anglophone writings has unavoidable traces of terror (Gill, 2014). Recently, academia witnesses an emerging literature relating to the socio-cultural history of Assam through the lens of literary studies, displacement, migration, and policy (Baruah, 1999; Bhaumik, 2007; Goswami, 2014; Hazarika, 1995), but a very few scholarly works on the 'secret killings' or "gonohatya" of Assam in the 1980s has been published in English (Kalita, 2009; Baruah, 2013). A small number of literary publications in regional language by former United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) members has marked its existence in Assam's public sphere (Baishya, 2017, p. 161). Aruni Kashyap, an eminent writer from Assam, has been writing on the several political and cultural issues of Assam, a land which he knows the best, resulting in an aesthetics that is typically place oriented and stylistically complex. In his novel *The House with a Thousand Stories* (2013), Kashyap traces the turbulent period of Assam's political history between the 1980s and early 2000s through the quotidian and uneventful "bare lives" of people amidst the ubiquitous culture of militarism and violence. Kashyap uses a narratological loop to represent the thanato-sensuous geography of Hatimura village in the Mayong district, which is marred both by the Brahmaputra River and the atrocities of the militants, to show how these postcolonial texts have conjured up the senseless vertiginous violence and secret killings of Assam. Drawing from Henry Lefevre's "rhythmanalysis" and Merleau Ponty's "embodied experiences", this paper will propose a "peripheral aesthetics" through which Kashyap's narrative world communicates a socio-sensorial world of 1980s Assam to the readers. Engaging with the narrative structure of the novel, especially Kashyap's art of mixing rumours and history, this paper shows that Kashyap's experimental style is improvised to constitute the historical document as well as the unprocessed trauma of his people.

Peripheral Aesthetics and Northeast Anglophone Novel: A Geocritical Perspective

The central concern of postcolonial criticism revolves around the text's historical and political context, giving little attention to the literary aesthetics. Elleke Boehmer, in her book "Postcolonial Poetics," suggests that the writers' creative style, strategies and mode of writing help in understanding the intersectional society from where the cultural product is produced (2018, p.2). The concept of postcolonial aesthetics, according to Boehmer, concentrates on the linguistic, structural, and metaphorical elements of literary works while maintaining a primary interest in the

extratextual, political, and historical dimensions of postcolonial writing. Indeed, "the diagnostic mechanisms of resistance, terror, and post-trauma re-imagining that a postcolonial poetics might apply or set in motion" are tightly linked to aesthetic qualities (Boehmer, 2018, p. 35). Extending the main concern on the literary study of postcolonial re-imagination, the paper now investigates the poetics of postcolonial terror literature from the periphery in which terror denotes not an "event", but it seethes into the quotidian lives of the people. The analysis revolves around how postcolonial literature aesthetically present and represent the terror occurrences by using writing as fertile instances of a poetics which grows out of the 'events' but goes beyond such traumatic events as a strategic mode of continuation and regeneration. A writer like Aruni Kashyap does not only represent the secret killings, violence, and the traumatic effects on the people but also establishes the blatant truth of Assam's secret killings along with the unheard and unsung lives of the ordinary people of Assam village in a narrative mode that best suited for this purpose. In a lecture about his novel in 2013, Kashyap talks about his deliberate choice of realism as a mode of writing. While the form of realism is used to indicate the immediate socio-cultural upheaval of the then Assam, he intermingles social subtleties, Assamese tradition, ecological realities, and diverse negotiations between State-sponsored violence and insurgent movements to create a sensuously embodied narrative-which the paper will read as "peripheral aesthetics". "Peripheral aesthetics" relies on the geographically peripheral location, Mayong village, which once has been called "mayabi" that practices occultism and cut off from the cultural and financial centre of Assam. Various borders and binaries demarcate the world which Kashyap describes to make sense of the helpless situation traversed through the diegetic space: Hatimura village, guarded and controlled by age-old traditions; the scared and traumatised villagers and authoritative soldiers with sovereign power, the oppressed women against the patriarchal and militarised society.

As an analytical entry point in this paper, place will serve as a "geocritical" perspective on postcolonial literary texts. This paper will look at the "place" as it is *produced* by Kashyap's literary aesthetics in this particular novel. That is, how place is *brought forth* in the literature from Assam, how the place world is instigated to appear, and what kind of human-world relations literature may unveil accordingly. In the novel, the place will be visited as a sphere of experience where suprasensory relations are played out into the place-world. By place world, the authors of the paper mean, the extratextual world or physical world as it is presented in the textual world. As Australian philosopher Jeff Malpas succinctly puts it,

...the significance of place is not to be found in our experience of place so much as in the grounding of experience in place, and this binding to place is not a contingent feature of human existence, but derives from the very nature of human thought, experience and identity as established in and through place (1999, p. 1)

But what exactly is "experience" intended to entail? "Phenomenology" is the study of phenomenal experiences understood as the sensory properties of seeing, hearing, feeling, as well as "sensation, perception, thought, memory, imagination, emotion, desire, and volition, bodily awareness, embodied action, and social activity, which includes linguistic activity" (Smith, 2013, p. 3). In "The Nervous System", Taussig talks about the sensuous apprehensions of the world:

But what sort of sense is constitutive of this everydayness? Surely this sense includes much that is not sense so much as sensuousness, an embodied and somewhat automatic

“knowledge” that functions like peripheral vision, not studied contemplation, a knowledge that is imageric and sensate rather than ideational (p.141-142).

The diegetic space in *House* tells the story of Pablo’s growing up and his sensual experiences in Hatimura during 1998 and 2002. Terror is a subtext, always remains in the background of the squabbles, love, friendship, and ordinary village life. The narrative plunges into the memories of the narrator Prachurjya Medhi (Pablo), a young boy in his seventeen who went to his native village Mayong from his overcrowded home of Guwahati for two different occasions— one the marriage of his aunt Moina and the second on the death of his uncle Bolen-Bortta, and through his memory the readers encounter the unprocessed collective trauma of Hatimura village. Tracing his journey and his experiences in the village Mayong, the novel offers a poignant reflection on the physical and social production of space that can be touched, felt and is not restricted by the senseless mortification. The narrative is not linear but goes back and forth, sometimes in 1998, sometimes in 2002. The novel starts with stating a rumour in 2002, at Moina’s wedding and the rumour is disclosed in the end of the novel with the news of two deaths. This strategy of juxtaposing the ordinary with the occult effectively maps Pablo’s growing consciousness of the links between everyday and exceptional forms of terror. Kashyap uses a realist mode of writing to register the everyday and ordinary. The realist narrative conjures up with codes of desire, fantasy, dreams and rumours. The story is told in flashbacks, reminiscences, recollections, and other similar modalities at times. Anecdotes, traditional tales, rituals, and detailed descriptions of the landscape abound in the narrative. The text has a rhythm to it, allowing for strong depictions of common joy, social pain, and individual angst over frustrated desires and unrealized dreams. The imperative query we are able to pursue, therefore, is how these exceptional modes of postcolonial writing, instead of simply restating the event of terror, invents certain modes of writing that equally express Benjamin-esque ‘moment of danger’ to represent the unsaid and unsayable things into the corpus of writing. Kashyap’s characters are bewildered and disoriented, inhabitants of the village Mayong where the everyday uncertainties are seeped into the psyche of everyone.

Place and Narrative: From Visceral to Textual

The conception of the paper owes its origin to the phenomenological theory of space that suggests the embodied relationship between people and their surrounding place. Sensuous geographies cannot be reduced to the mechanical sensory responses of the body. The senses are intensely implicated in making sense of our social beings. How incorporeality of the human body creates places and spaces? How are bodies shaped by the places through which they move? These are some of the fundamental questions that we refer back and forth while moving to the discussion on the form and strategy of the novel. In inhabiting space, bodies traverse through it and it is through these bodily movements that space and bodies take their shape and simultaneously affect each other- it is a process of continuous negotiation. Body, bodily rhythms, and space are interweaved into phenomenological hermeneutics which in terms of Lefebvre generates energy. Lefebvre called this relationship rhythmanalysis (2004). The place is always embodied by the bodies and the surrounding non-human bodies. According to 20th Century French Philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the body and the surrounding world is engaged in a

dialogical process where the tactile activities of the body become the mediator of receiving stimuli from the external world. To Merleau-Ponty, we are not only our bodies but all the associations and experiences which contribute to our ways of understanding the world are directly related to our active engagement in the world. His concept deviates from the Cartesian dualism of body-object to newly formulate a non-dualist concept of "body-subject" in which one's own body is closer to the "self" than other material objects. The phenomenological world of Merleau-Ponty is best described in his *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962) as "the sense that is revealed while the paths of my various experiences intersect, and also where my own and other people's intersect and engage each other like gears", which he referred as "intersubjectivity" (xx). Merleau-Ponty advocates that perception and bodily activities are the primary ways through which the body 'possesses' the environment and also it 'flows over into the world' (1962, p. 78). In *The Visible and the Invisible*, he philosophizes the process of 'intertwining' of the body and the world through a term- "flesh", which is "the sense of a general thing, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea...an element of Being" (1968, p. 139). This flesh is different from the flesh of the human skin; as he argues, the body shares the same flesh as the world and the world also reflects it. The flesh of the world means the worldly reality composed of human and non-human elements and actualized by human perception (1968, p. 248). Thereby, the body is always embodied by the socio-natural world of the outside. Thus, as a result, the most significant property of this flesh is its reversibility, which allows body-subjects' actions and perceptions to be entwined in an "intermundane space". The idea that the phenomenal body is simultaneously spatial and temporal implies that the body does not exist just in space or time, but rather inhabits both, and that "the space and time that we inhabit are always in their different ways indeterminate horizons" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 139-140). One of the vividly drawn instances from the text- the description when Pablo saw Anamika, sitting in darkness and narrates, "On the veranda, she, with her open hair, her bamboo creel full of blackberries- all were part of the night's darkness" (p.120)- is an example of "intersubjectivity" and how through language, Kashyap has created the spatio-sensorial place-world.

The House with a Thousand Stories begins on an auspicious day in January 2002, in the Bishoya family of Hatimura village where the youngest daughter Moina's wedding rituals are going on, which has been turned into a catastrophic event by a rumour presented by Anil, one of the sons of Bishoya family. Then the narrative progresses with the hysterical gossips, rumours, conversations, and superstitious events, which, in a way, reflect the anxiety of the time and the terrandscape of society. The narrative world is not only very plausible and palpable but also profoundly sensual. Kashyap's main objective is to put us into intense sensory contact with the events, and this objective means that the physical impression must precede the understanding of the cause. Rodaway has described the five senses as "geographical in that they contribute to orientation in space, an awareness of spatial relationships and an appreciation of the specific qualities of different places" (1994, p. 37). Sensuousness is one of the components of Kashyap's "peripheral aesthetics". Kashyap creates a perceptual world where the senses of human beings- touch, sight, smell, taste, and hear- are involved in making the narrative world real. It seems as if phenomena, and the human sensation of phenomena are not metaphorical but are made to represent their agencies, they do not stand for an idea other than the pure sensorial appearances projecting towards pure senses.

Aruni Kashyap writes his first debut novel with references drawn from bodily metaphor, flesh, sensation, and spatial materiality, which assert the embodied relationship to place that we can see from the starting of the novel. From the ritual of "juron", where the bride's body is smeared with turmeric and oil, 'matsyo-sporsho' i.e. fish touching feast on the death as the customs to the carnal scenes between Anamika and Pablo where it is the cheap perfume, Anamika's giggling, her crying in pain and the warmth of her body which harbours the tactile receptivity of the skin (p. 221)-the novel presents several incidents of these haptic geographies. Pablo describes the emotion between him and Anamika, he narrates, "there was no love in it. No heart. Only skin. Only smell. Only sweat. Only touch" (p. 197). The auditory experiences of everyday lives, be it "girip garap" sound coming from the boots of the military personnel, the sound of conchs at midnight after seeing the dance of the three owls (p. 134), the titling conversations or the folk songs, the soundscape of the novel is scary and uncanny. The visual experience implies the spatial setting and spatial relationship with the surrounding. The text refers to incidents where the entire families of ULFA militants are being gunned down at night, the dismembered bodies float in the river, the dissected bodies hung from the electric pole and many such incidents. One such incident is when Brikoder's sister Mamoni saw the military personnel and "screamed and fainted, leaving behind a pale-yellow trail" (p.112) because of her traumatic shock after getting gang-raped by four military men. Anamika had stepped on "terrains she shouldn't have" when she crossed a little curve near an electric pole in 2002. The electric pole is the site of memory for the people of Hatimura where in 1998, the body of the brother of a ULFA member was found strung up. Pablo had the "strange sense of fear" for Anamika because she had stepped on a "portion of the ground which a blood-spattered body had drenched with blood" (p. 130), which does prefigure Anamika's own death "in a pool of blood, after a long night of bleeding" (p. 187) when she is forced to abort her (and possibly Pablo's) baby. Moina's dead body was brought by her in-laws, which looks like a garbage (p. 194) and due to the accidental death, the ritual of 'mukhangni' had not taken place. Very consciously Kashyap has chosen Assamese cultural practices and events like Juron, 'matsyo-sporsho' on the death of some close relative, the wedding songs, the taboos, the rituals, which are directly related to human body to elaborate on the bodily experiences of the situation and then later half of the novel we encounter with the frenzied act of Moina who drank phenyl as an act of resistance to the marriage. The spectacular bodily resistance is the same body through which one makes sense of the sensuous pleasure of the world around us.

With the Olfactory geographies, we can be grounded into local places. Taste-smell system is the intimate of all the senses as it establishes an immediate connection with the local geographies- the novel has references of the smell of sweating bodies, the smell of winter, the smell of love, the taste of Assamese cuisines, the taste of illicit affairs etc helps to build the narrative landscape. The constant physical or bodily reference and comparison with materialistic thing- such as the descriptions of gifts sent by groom's family on the day of *juron* as "...two lipsticks -one red, like the stains of betel nut on old woman's lips, and the other soft pink, like a cow's salt-hungry tongue..."(p. 3), creates the aesthetics through which the novel progresses. "Girls' buttock with large borali fish" (p. 8), already touched body as sucked sugarcane (p. 84), drooping breasts that hung like huge jackfruits (p. 89), "her fair skin was bright, fresh, just like new leaves that have recently sprouted from a mango seed after the first rains" (p. 125), are the mundane and ordinary expression of the sensuous world around us. Kashyap uses the erotic as a

rediscovery of the ordinary, as a strategy for writing alternate stories of history, memories and violence.

The House with a Thousand Stories: Rumours, Secrets and History

Hatimura is the region of rumours and the region of unfinished stories. A brief detour to the ontology of rumour conforms that it is believed to be a mass-mobilizing agent "specific to a pre-literate culture," as has been underscored by the historian Ranjit Guha (1983) while talking about peasant movements of India. Homi Bhabha (1994) has further analysed the performative nature of rumour in which the communal adhesiveness of rumour as a social discourse leads to contagious spreading. Performing the narration of history from the margin is a daunting task which has the risk of finding oneself believing in the rumours. As Veena Das once commented, that the telling of history has the potential of producing rumours (2007, p. 108). These rumours act as the meta-data or the footnotes which are equally important in writing of history. Sometimes in the villages like Hatimura, history becomes rumours. The apparently insignificant events, the secrets of the house, the rumours are the medium to get an idea of the larger picture of socio-historical crisis of the time. As the narrator of the novel Pablo says,

Rumors inevitably destroy all happiness in weddings. But with the girip-garap sounds of boots, with the fratricidal violence in the state, I guess such rumors became verdicts, alternative realities, faceless voices turned real. Some of those faces had scars and you can count the numbers of stitches on it (p. 190).

The ubiquitous presence of rumours in villages, be it for Oholya Jyethai's marriages, or the love affairs of or the abortion of Anamika- these rumours have been used to understand the socio-ethnic mosaic of Hatimura village where the Brahmin boy cannot love or marry a lower cast girl due to the humiliation and indignation, he might bring to the family, where the sight of military personnel makes women hysteric. It is through multiple secrets of the family members, rumours of the village, folk songs, colloquial conversation that Aruni Kashyap has forged an alternated retelling of micro-history of Assam. The stories, according to Kashyap, can be interpreted in different perspectives depending on "what you want to leave the listener with" (p. 210) which again points towards the unheard "peoplestories" of Assam.

The political regime of postcolonial Assam with the militarised scapes of fear and violence, have a direct involvement in the intimate lives of its citizen for the purpose of National interest. The Assamese society emerges from how citizens navigate the system and survive in everyday life. With the publication of Aruni Kashyap's novel *The House with a Thousand Stories* (2013), Kashyap excavates the hidden crisis of Assam's political history between 1998 and 2002, which is known as 'secret killings' in Assam and represents it through the medium of fiction to the Pan Indian context through "using local vocabularies of human relationships that persuasively engage distant history through intimate remembered memories" (Saikia and Baishya, 2017, p. 14). Secret killings or "goponhatya" are the extra-judicial killings targeted towards the family members, extended family members or sympathisers of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA). It was the state machinery that wanted the fratricidal conflicts between ULFA and Surrendered ULFA members. The authors of *Secret Killings of Assam* write:

In the name of search operation, SULFA members, aided by security forces, would enter the house of the victim at midnight, pick up their target and then the bodies would be found the next morning. (2009, p. 8)

Literary work like *House* gives an aesthetic and narrative shape to the bare experiences of necropolitical power of state by the innocent people dwelling in the zones of emergency. These zones are “new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead” (Mbembe, p.40). Through Mbembe’s cartography of necropolitics, which deals with the fragmented sovereignty, opposed to the unilateral sovereignty preferred by Foucault and Agamben, becomes instrumental to “human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations” (p.14).

Conclusion

The novel *House* is haunted by a sense of uncertainty and unfulfillment. The ubiquitous presence of rumours, the conspicuous occurrences of militants, and the ecological uncertainty by Brahmaputra River underscore the tactile relationship of the people with the place. Pablo-Anamika, Prosanto Da-Onulupa, Oholoya jethai and his dead husband, Mridual and Manju Mahatu all are lured into the vortex of love and desire. The other characters like Aaita, Onimborma, Okoni-pehi, all are victims of the predicament. The dilapidated house of the Bishoya family is the metaphor for the lifeless and meaningless lives of people living there. Influenced by the writings of Toni Morrison, R.K. Narayan, Amitav Ghosh, and Indira Goswami, Aruni Kashyap chooses to write for the Assamese people and consciously does not care to give descriptions of regional words and customs. Kashyap asserts, “If I had to celebrate the resilience of the rural folk in Assam, I had to bring their stories to the foreground and leave the stories of the agents who disrupted peace and the anger of the author behind” (Kashyap, 2019, p. 203). The narrator Pablo once says, “the truth behind stories mercilessly ensured that certain things should remain unsaid between us forever” (p. 208) which echoes the voice of the novelist. Place can be understood through the narration; their distinctive meaning as concrete places is brought to life in stories. Places are not only necessary for the telling of our life stories, but they can also provide the finest access to information about a location. Kashyap’s fiction is concerned with the Bishoya family’s attempt to come to terms with the ordinariness and uneventfulness of life in the militarised time of Assam’s political history by bringing in the secrets and rumours of the family in the process of survival with each other. The use of rumours and family secrets are instrumental in telling the appalling history of the margin, which, in turn, shape the aesthetics of the novel. The words of Nii Ayikwei Parkes, appears in “praising the book” section, correctly sums up the literary value of the novel:

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 début a courageous and necessary one.

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