

Mapping Gender and Conflict with Special Reference to Aruni Kashyap's *The House with a Thousand Stories*

Anmona Bora

If someone believes they are limited by their gender, race or background, they will become more limited.

- Carly Fiorina

Mapping of Gender and Conflict in the context of North East has many dimensions. In North East India, conflict has a direct impact on civilians specially women. Deliberate violence against women by state agents in the form of intimidation, threat of assault, actual rape or physical abuse are markers in many North-Eastern states. Women experience a continuum of violence in a connected form of domestic and political spheres that encompass both home and the street. North East India is considered as one of the most complex conflict zones in the world. However, most analyses of conflict are usually not based on gender perspective. The history of post-colonial Assam as well as the other states of North East is one littered with different types of conflicts. These conflicts have their roots in the linguistic, ethnic, political and social factors. The identity conflicts, as observed by Regehr "emerge with intensity when a community, in response to unmet basic needs for social and economic security, resolves to strengthen its collective influence and the struggle for political recognition ..." These ethnic, cultural, linguistic, social and religious conflicts are closely related and influenced by gender. Gender issues are usually ignored or marginalized. Before analysing this, let us ponder on what is gender and what is conflict with a view of mapping both. The term 'gender' refers to culturally based expectations of the roles and behaviours of males and females. The term distinguishes the socially constructed from the biologically determined aspects of being male and female. Gender roles and behaviours can change historically.

These roles are a set of cultural expectations that define the ways in which the members of each sex should behave. Because of religious or cultural traditions that define and justify the distinct roles and expected behaviours of males and females are strongly cherished and socially enforced, change in gender systems is often contested. Simone de Beauvoir suggests in *The Second Sex* that "one is not born a woman but rather becomes one". For Beauvoir, gender is constructed and one becomes a woman. She also proposes that the female body ought to be the situation and instrumentality of women's freedom, not a defining and limiting essence. So, when there is the talk of male superiority and gender discrimination, there is this unavoidable truth that in conflict situations, women are the sole bearers. For centuries, on the basis of gender stratification, women have been treated as inferior in this patriarchal male dominated society. Consequently, women have become prone to violence and exploitation. Violence against women in various forms exists everywhere. When women are made to suffer, they have to face conflict. Such conflict situations are to a large extent based on the ideas mooted by the concept of gender stratification: that women possess physical and cultural traits that distinguish them in many ways from the dominant group of Homo sapiens, the man; that women are the weaker sex and they have to depend upon men for their survival; that men should have the controlling power as they are strong; that the physiological differences between men and women are of their psychological differences as well; male dominance is a natural process and accepted phenomenon which stems from psychophysical reality; that in order to show superiority, men show a greater tendency to exhibit their behaviour in such a manner so as to attain dominance in hierarchical male-female encounters. In such a context, mapping of gender and conflict will reveal the fact that violence is a recurrent phenomenon for women. They have been facing it in various forms in a widespread manner. In fact, its prevalence and pervasiveness is of damaging nature both to the psyche and perception of women. Violence, as defined by Megargee is the overtly threatened or overtly accomplished application of force which results in the injury or destruction of persons or their reputation.

According to the report of United Nations Publication, 1980, women constitute half of world population, perform nearly two third of work hours, receive one tenth of the world income and own less than one hundred percent off world's property. The scenario in Assam and the other NE state is not a different one. Women suffer with so many problems and if we tie the history of violence against women to the history of women being viewed as property, it will definitely lead to a gender role assigned to women to be subservient to men. When women have to face violence and conflict situations, it causes untold misery and they become unable to realise their full potentials. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) has described violence against women as "any

act of gender based violence that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women including threats of such act coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether accusing in public or in private life". In patriarchal culture, power is equated with aggression and masculinity, weakness with compassion and femininity. Women are supposed to bear the male oppression in a silent manner. The male dominated society presumes that in any kind of conflict situation, women should not be allowed to have a voice. If women are not meek enough to remain in that subjugated condition, they are termed as loud. It has been observed that in the time of armed conflict, rape of women is a common enough experience. The women, who are subjugated to rape need not be political activists. That they are women - this gendered construct is their crime leading to molestation. They become the vulnerable targets. The increasing identification of women with violent ethnic and religious fundamentalism is a pointer to the increased victimization of women. The question is why do they remain silent in most of the cases? The reason is the victims feeling of powerless resulting from the fear that the social support system would not stand by them. And for this, they continue to suffer humiliation in silence. UNESCO study on women and violence define the term violence as Violence in general is a coercive mechanism to impose one's will over another in order to prove or feel a sense of power. It can be perpetuated by those in power against the powerless or by the powerless in retaliation against coercion by others, to deny their powerlessness. A proper gender analysis will throw light on the imbalanced power control between men and women. Women are found to be facing in a frequent manner structural disadvantages in the areas of social, political and economic terms. In conflict situations, gender identities tend to become politicized.

Against this backdrop, I propose to take Aruni Kashyap's novel *The House with a Thousand Stories* (2013) to illustrate the mapping of gender and conflict so far as the female characters of this novel are concerned. Kashyap's novel is set against the backdrop in the ruthless killings in Assam during 1998 and 2001. An insurgency plagued Assam has been intricately sewn into the storyline of the novel. From a family's dark secrets playing against the horrors of insurgency, Aruni Kashyap has created a true to life storyline. It is a complex tale of an India rarely seen outside NE India, scarcely spoken about. Through the eyes of Pablo, Aruni paints a picture of Assam between 1998-2001 centred on the gross violation of human rights as well as women's rights by systematic militarization, killings of relatives, friends and sympathisers of ULFA insurgents. Here, the personal becomes the political. In an interview, Aruni replied to the question "what made you write this novel" by saying : "The memories of my parent's generation are divided by the year 1979; the year ULFA was formed, the year Assam Agitation started. For them, life is divided into before 1979 and after 1979. Before 1979 was good, after was messed up; but they still have

before 79 to cherish, laugh, be nostalgic about. But young people in Assam of my age don't have that album of wonderful memories. We grew up accepting violence as the norm. I wanted to write a story that my contemporaries in Assam would identify with". Aruni's stories centre around the common Assamese people who have lived under state oppression and insurgency for a long period. The everyday life of people is permeated by a sense of fear. Militarization has become a way of life. Aruni's narrative moves between the capital city of Assam, Guwahati and Mayong, a small place situated in the heart of middle Assam. In this profoundly moving novel, Aruni has drawn a picture of contemporary Assam which was once gentle and tender but torn apart by violence and conflict now. Aruni's novel depicts two life changing events for Pablo, the young sensitive urban teenager from Guwahati, who in the course of the novel undertakes two visits to his ancestral home in Mayong. The stories unfold, one after another making a tapestry of myths, hearsay, gossip in which the gendered role of women play a significant role. The stories are endless, even when it is said out story ends here, it does not actually end and re-emerges with more power. Aruni says in the novel, "There are so many ways of telling the same story; It really depends on what you want to leave the listener with". Within a span of four years, much has changed both within the House and in the state of Assam. Pablo narrates how SULFA scared the villagers more than ULFA since they were allowed to roam freely with carbines and AK47 rifles apparently to protect (?) themselves. Aruni's narrative space moves between foreground and background. Pablo, who has a life of shelter and privilege in Guwahati goes to Mayong first in 1998 to attend a funeral and then in 2002, to attend the marriage ceremony of Moina Pehi. It took long to fix Moina's wedding. As per the social norms of a male-dominated society, girls should get married and should not remain an old maid in the house. Hectic preparations are going on for the wedding. Guests have arrived. Exchange of jokes and gossips are doing the rounds and it is this gossip that throws open the guarded family secret that was kept hidden from others and also from each other. All the stories - thousands and more are connected to each other by that one piece of gossip at the wedding. And through these gossips, a whole gamut of extra judicial killings, the role of state terrorism came out. The storyline leaves the confines of a House to encompass the perilous terrain of uncomfortable stories where women become the powerless victims. Pablo says, "Mridul my friend told me how life had changed in the village after people with guns started to roam around like rabid dogs". The peace of the village was lost since the army camp was built in Mayong. "The girip garap sounds of boots, with the fratricidal violence in the state, I guess such rumours (on the eve of the wedding) became verdicts, alternative realities, faceless voice turned real". Here, we may refer to Mamoni, a woman from Mayong. The state terrorism, the sinister shadow of rape has turned her almost hysterical. Any hierarchical system of social organization where there are categories

of dominant groups; it is inevitably accompanied by the victimization of the latter - the subordinate groups through various means. Hence, Mamoni is an example of this conflict between her gender stratification status and her status of a raped powerless victim. Rape is such a crime where a woman at that particular moment is in no position to defend herself against physical assault. According to Susan Brown Miller, "Rape is the only crime for which the victim cannot have a revenge". Rape is an assertion of class power. It is committed by virtue of the simple and biological fact that one who commits the crime is physically stronger than the victim. In Moina's case, she is not in a position of resisting and the consequence is that of trauma and pain. The holding up of women as bearers of tradition, ethnic identity can expose them to threats of attack. Hence, in conflict situations, women become the worst sufferers. Often, the rape of women in conflict situations is intended as an act of aggression against a nation or community. The feeling of being neglected; the feeling of alienation from the Mainland has given the agents of the Mainland the power to oppress the vulnerable section of society. The act of rape committed by errant army men is the symbol of that adversary against the Other. Pablo narrates the trauma of Mamoni in a poignant manner. The bodies of women in the village bear the signs of this state terror. Mamoni turns hysterical whenever she sees the army men because she was raped by four military men last year when she had gone to wash clothes in the Pokoria river. She even urinated out of fear whenever she had heard the sounds of boots marching girip garap; saw the military jeeps; the khaki dresses. The men in uniform speaking in Hindi unnerves her, she screams, she faints, Pablo keeps on revisualising the yellow colour of Mamoni's urine. Such is the impact of state terror on the lives of women.

The secret brought by Anil dada crumbles Moina Pehi's life. She is also undergoing a conflict situation. Everything is disrupted on the eve of the wedding. The gossip that reached the House a day before the wedding compelled Moina Pehi to take a drastic step of ending her life. Her story can have many different names - The Old Maid who Didn't want to Marry since she Didn't want to be Raped During Search Raids. Moina Pehi did not want to be killed by unknown assassins. She was negotiating with this fear because the gossip was that the groom's brother was an ULFA member. Her fear was a real one at the time of conflict situations. The fear of masked gunmen; the fear of rape by army men during combing operations explain Moina Pehi's fear. It is difficult to explain how scared she was like many other women in Hatimura village of Khaki dresses. They are always more scared of the government than the insurgents. One significant point to note here is that the mention of ULFA and SULFA in relation to the women character's of the novel is one of empathy. Women in the House are rarely scared of the insurgents. At least the insurgents speak their own language and address women as baideo, pehi, khuri and borma, that too with great

respect. Here, the relevant question is can women be made part of the conflict resolve process? What can be their roles in the peace process? D Pankhurst and J. Pearce suggest four steps for this. First, to make women visible as change agents; second, the removal of male bias; third a rethinking of the theoretical constructs to take gender into account and last but not the least the inclusion of gender in the mainstream policy making and practice. In the novel, the helplessness of the female characters caused by the shackles of a patriarchal society is presented as tragic as the fate of Assam and its dream of an ideal democracy. The women have to bear the brunt of conflict, be it armed conflict, be it cultural conflict.

If we analyse the situations in the lives of Pablo's mother, Oholya Jethai, Anurupa it is seen that all of them, at one point or other are facing cultural conflicts. Pablo's mother is from the city and she has to face the cultural conflict when she is restricted to have a conversation with her husband during daytime in the confinement of a room. In a village, it was unusual for a woman to talk to her husband during the day inside a room. Oholya Jethai said to Deepali, Pablo's mother : "This is not your city ... I have never raised the issue that you call Pablo's father by his name or that you share a room with him when you visit the village, but at least you should be careful during the day."

Oholya Jethai is the custodian of all core cultural values. There is, as if a manual of what should and should not be done. Who should marry whom, who should bathe when and how many times. But this Oholya Jethai has also faced a conflict situation due to gender stratification. In her youth, she was the subject of the biggest gossip in the entire village. This gossip ultimately changed her for life. If a girl remains unmarried, she has to face many conflicting situations. Moreover, all the time, a girl has to remain concerned about the social norms. She has to keep her head covered, she has to be shy. There was no place for unabashed girls in the society just as there was no respectable place for an old maid. As per the social norms, a girl cannot go to invite for her own marriage. The conflict felt by Oholya Jethai is that she finds that traditional habits are core cultural roots and they are eroding in a fast manner. As an unmarried women, she expresses her life in the following manner: "I devoted my life to this house, to these children, this family, but I should have hung myself with a jute rope from the jackfruit tree behind our house than listen to such abuses from my own brother's children. My brother, who came out of the same womb I came from ..."

The patriarchal set up also creates conflict situations. Onima borma says, "we can't take big decisions, the men of the house have to take the initiative". According to Prosanta da, "... an unmarried, unemployed woman has no respect, no ground beneath her feet in our society". The only way somebody can hold her head high is by adhering strictly to what society expects from her. By becoming a jealous guardian of the rules and regulations, she buys acceptance and respect, carves a place for herself. Mapping of gender and conflict in

Aruni's novel can be summed up with these words of Okoni Pehi which are symbolic of gender stratification : "... We women are so weak. God has only created us like that. Nature is unjust ..."

The women are like the silent cooking pans whose permission is never asked before heating. But we have to change such a situation. Gendered understanding of conflicts would definitely contribute in a meaningful way to the process of conflict transformation.

Works Cited

- Biswal, Tapasi. *Human Rights Gender and Environment*. New Delhi: Viva Books Private Limited, 2006. Print.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. London: Routledge, 1990. Print.
- Gill, Preeti. ed. *The Peripheral Centre, Voices from India's North-East*. New Delhi: Zubaan, 2010. Print.
- Hazarika, Sanjay. *Writing on the Wall, Reflections on the North East*. New York: Penguin, 2008. Print.
- John, E Mary, ed. *Women's Studies in India : A Reader*. New York: Penguin, 2008. Print.
- Kashyap, Aruni. *The House with a Thousand Stories*. New York: Penguin. 2013. Print.
- Mishra, Jyotsna. *Women and Human Rights*. Delhi: Kalpaz Publications. 2000. Print.
- Pandey, S.K. *Women Rights Voilence, Human Rights and Empowerment*, Global Publishing House (India). 2012. Print.
- Saikia, Pahi. *Ethnic Mobilisation and Violence in North-East India*. London: Routledge. 2011, Print.
- Sen, Sujata, ed. *Gender Studies*. (India) Dorling Kindersley Pearson. 2012. Print.
- Talukdar, Bora Daisy, ed. *Gender, Peace and Development in North East India*. Guwahati : DVS Publishers. 2012. Print.