

Reading between the Currents: Water as a Recurring Motif in the Writings of Aruni Kashyap

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Abstract:

Be it the river, the rains, or the floods, water remains a constant presence in literature from Assam, a north-eastern state of India situated south of the eastern Himalayas along the river valleys of the Brahmaputra and the Barak. Water, as a literary motif, finds myriad expressions in writings from Assam. It is, at once, the provider, the nurturer and the destroyer. Aruni Kashyap, a writer and translator from Assam, presents water as the elixir and the destroyer. In his writings we see the river as the gentle provider and the ravenous predator, and the rains as the fond memory of childhood as well as the thunderous cloud burst that wipes out everything in its way. Kashyap's poems, fiction and non-fiction writings, depict the river and the rains as an inseparable part of the natural cycle of birth and rebirth. His writings paint a picture of Assam in which the various dichotomies of life co-exist in perfect harmony. The multifarious aspects of the socio-political landscape of Assam and its inherent contradictions—the rural/urban, old/new, pristine/polluted, serene/violent, and traditional/modern—are presented as entwined with the images of the river, the rains and the floods. This paper focuses on water as a motif in the poems and nonfiction writings of Kashyap such as "Land of Rivers and Rains" (2008), "Me" (2008), "Freedom" (2013), "My Grandmother Tells Me about the Earthquake in 1950" (2017), "The Man Who Loved to Plant Water Spinach" (2019), "It Rains All Night Long in Teteligur (2018)," and "Romancing the Rains" (2014). The rain, the flood and the river imagery in the writings of Kashyap as entwined with the animistic faith practised by the indigenous people in many parts of Assam as well as the human destruction of nature, and the resultant natural calamities will come under the purview of analysis. It argues that the vagaries of monsoon, the changing colours of Brahmaputra, and its erratic currents provide a perfect backdrop to the scenic as alternating between the serene and the stormy. The story of creation, destruction and rebuilding, which is at the heart of the survival story of

Assam and its multi-ethnic population, will be analysed from an ecocritical perspective to unearth the parallels between the rhythms of nature and culture that exist in the explicitly political writings of Kashyap.

Keywords: Water, dichotomy, nature, culture, rhythm

Assam, home to a multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic and multi-religious population, is a melting pot of cultures and traditions. The physiography of the region is as varied as its cultural landscape with the hills, plains and plateaus. Home to thousands of endemic species and two UNESCO World Heritage sites and many National Parks, the region boasts of a rich biodiversity. Nestled in the lap of nature, the region is isolated from the mainland and has been troubled by illegal immigration from the neighbouring Bangladesh. The political climate of Assam has been marred by insurgency and state-sponsored violence. Amidst the political unrest and natural calamities, the indigenous people of Assam have endeavoured to preserve the rich cultural traditions as well as the natural environment. The scenic beauty of Assam, its rich and varied folk traditions, the political climate of terror and violence, the clash between tradition and modernity and the discrimination faced by Assamese people in other parts of the country on account of their race and ethnicity are some of the recurring

themes in writings from Assam. With the emergence of many Indian English writers from Assam and the appearance of translations from Assamese to English and other regional languages of India, voices from Assam have become a strong presence in Indian literary scene.

Aruni Kashyap, touted as one of the original voices from north-eastern India, is a writer and translator from Assam. His writings in English include *The House with a Thousand Stories* (2013), *His Father's Disease: Stories* (2019), and numerous short stories, poems and essays published in different magazines, newspapers and journals of repute. He has also translated writings from Assamese to English and is the author of the Assamese novel *Noikhon Etia Duroit* (2019). Kashyap's writings interweave the personal and the political with the natural and the cultural. This paper focuses on water as a motif in the poems and nonfiction writings of Kashyap such as "Land of Rivers and Rains" (2008), "Me" (2008), "Freedom" (2013), "My Grandmother Tells Me about the Earthquake in 1950" (2017), "The Man Who Loved to Plant Water Spinach" (2019), "It Rains All Night Long in Teteliguri (2018)," and "Romancing the Rains" (2014). The rain, the flood and the river imagery in the writings of Kashyap as entwined with the animistic faith practised by the indigenous people in many parts of Assam as well as the human destruction of nature, and the resultant natural calamities will come under the purview of analysis.

The "Land of Rivers and Rains" as the title suggests is a poem about how "waters rule" and "govern" the "lives" of the people of Assam (56). The poetic voice begins by saying that he comes from the land "where rivers are born/And People die, born/In rivers, over boats" (55). In these lines the cycle of birth and death are connected to the river and the rest of the poem is about how life in the region, its stories, histories and

myths are closely connected to the river and its numerous manifestations. The river and its tributaries as the meandering lifelines and the marauding killer waves, which advance and recede as they please, appear in the poem. The poem compares the flooded rivers to the "electric wires, phone lines, / Satellite-TV cables" and states that "they house arrest us [the people of the region], / [and] Make us move" (56). These urban metaphors stand in contrast to the natural beauty of the river and are suggestive of the ecological impact of human activities that often result in natural calamities. The poet states that the stories woven around rivers, rains and the life that moves around the moving rivers and falling rains, as evident from the "blue" in the map of the region, tell the "blue" story or the melancholic story of the people of the region. The idea of Assam as the "supernatural land/ of rains, rivers," and "the other/ of others" is painted beautifully using the image of water as a life-giving as well as a life-snatching force (57). The idealisation, the isolation, the discrimination and the unpredictability of life in the region owing to the callousness of man towards man and man towards nature is brought out using descriptions about life and death along the river during the calm, the storm, the rain and the floods.

"Me" is a profound poem about forest songs, words, languages, and literatures that the poet claims to be his, the ones that were handed down to him through his grandma's tales—stories that "crawl back centuries" and have circulated and "drenched" the minds of countless generations. These oral, linguistic and literary traditions are compared to the rains. The poet proceeds to compare the folk tunes to rivers—"legends-laden" and "mournful/ yet swelling with furious energy" (54). The land is described as a land "[w]here rivers and rains are born/ [t]o flow down as legends, life-blood" (54). The poet sets apart the history of his land from the history of the rest of the country. The colourful and fantastic tales of the land,

of “dogs transforming into man / [m]an to sheep, goats” and the like are not able to quench the thirst of the poet. What he longs for is an inclusive love, a “warm embrace” and a patient ear “eager to listen” to the stories of his land and its people (55). The rivers and rains as connected to the legends of the land and its people, the idea of uniqueness and difference and the unquenchable thirst for acceptance are blended together in the poem. The nature becomes one with the poet in his appeal for the acceptance of his difference.

“Freedom” traces the never-ending wait for freedom, of a people who have been living under the shadow of insurgency and army brutality. The pictures of a childhood, a youth and a life time spent in anticipation of freedom are painted by the poet. He proceeds to state that the banks of the “ruddy” Brahmaputra, where the chopped limbs get stuck in the fishing nets and the cut off fingers get scooped up by the woman who goes to wash dishes in the stream beside her house, is where freedom has been defined. The violence, the bloodshed and the terror that is at the heart of the lived reality of the people of Assam are reflected by the image of the “ruddy rivers” and streams. The severed limbs, floating through the lifeline of the land, are symbolic of degeneration, and destruction that have penetrated the everyday life of the people and their quest for freedom. The river or water, a symbol of purity and regeneration is seen as the bearer of severed limbs, symbolic of a death-in-life situation. The poet seems to be seeking an answer to the question that resonates in the minds of millions: what will constitute true freedom for a land torn by rebellion, militancy, terrorism and the terror unleashed by the guardians of the law?

The image of the river and water as the “furies” of nature that attack mankind, sweep away houses, places and people, and force man to flee for shelter are presented in the poem “My Grandmother Tells

Me about the Earthquake in 1950.” As evident from the title, the poem describes one of the most destructive earthquakes in the recorded history of quakes. The poem talks about how the ants, the birds, the crows, the ducks, etc. had heeded the warnings of nature and left their natural abode well in advance. The grandmother’s description of the earthquake clearly shows the intimate connection between the people of the land and the flora and fauna of the region. She states that the changes in the natural environment had warned them and they knew “something was coming” (10). The poem juxtaposes the devastation caused by the earthquake with the destruction caused by the atomic bombs in Nagasaki and Hiroshima, the “Fat Man” and the “Little Boy.” It states that the river that sprouted as a result of the quake was a million times more powerful than the atomic bombs. A submerged river that reappeared after several days causing untold destruction in Assam, resulting in the loss of life and property, is one of important events in the recorded history of the quake. The poem with its attention to detail charts the course of events that occurred during the earthquake of 1950 and presents it as part of a narrative on manmade disasters.

“The Man Who Loved to Plant Water Spinach” (2019) presents a comprehensive picture of life in Assam. It talks about a man who came from far away and asked the natives of the island to plant water spinach to stop the river. The men, women and children who were connected to the river by the losses they had incurred, of lives, loved ones, or dwellings, loved the man. However, some people mistook him to be a spy and abducted him. The poem then takes a fantastic turn, and narrates how the man when shoved into the river turned into a green turtle and swam away to the “unreachable tips of the river.” The story of the man who wanted to plant water spinach is reminiscent of the story of the social worker

and Indian rural developmental activist Sanjay Ghose who strived hard to check soil erosion in the fast disappearing river island of Majuli in Assam. Ghose was abducted from the river island by a militant group and is believed to have been killed and thrown into the Brahmaputra. The poet weaves together the story of loss, and displacement with the fantastic tale of a man who changed into a green turtle and yearns to protect the corners of the island, even in his death.

The story of Majuli, is a unique story of survival in which centuries-old cultures and traditions have been trying to preserve themselves from extinction by water. The river eating away a land, as the aftermath of environmental changes caused by pollution and other anthropogenic activities, is the story that the poem hints at. The multi-ethnicity and multi-religiosity of the population of the island and the survival story of its river people amidst natural calamities, militant struggles, army brutality and terrorism are painted by the poet in hues so deep that ecological destruction and the resultant struggle for survival leave an indelible impression in the minds of the readers. And central to all these discussions, and warnings is the river and its terrible beauty. The river in its myriad manifestations also appears in poems such as “Journeys”(2008), and “Suicide Friend”(2019). The “Journeys” talk about the legends that flow in its waters, and the lives that are lost to its fury whereas “Suicide Friend” equates the criss-cross cut -marks resulting from a suicide attempt to the criss-crossed river routes across the map.

Nonfiction pieces such as “It Rains All Night Long in Teteliguri” and “Romancing the Rains” are also woven around the images of water, rain and flood. “It Rains All Night Long in Teteliguri” written for *Mint*, as part of a feature “Between the Showers and Sunshine” in which three writers from the North-east wrote about the summer showers in their hometowns, presents the rain as enticing. Teteliguri, the home of the writer’s

grandmother, a village that remains a constant presence in his writings, is the scenic landscape that the writer chooses to describe. The first rains are described by the writer as long-awaited and spectacular.”At first, the winds arrive, soothing the earth. This is followed by distant thunder, like the sound of gods growling and war drums. I watch the leaves fall from the branches and dance on the ground, the birds cawing in search of shelter, and I hear worried women summoning their ducks in nasal tones,” he writes. The beauty of nature drenched in its first showers, the growing intensity of rains marked by the sound of raindrops falling on the tin roof, the puddles of water with paper boats sailing in them, and the grandmother’s tale about the duration of rains being determined by the day on which it starts sums up the writer’s memory of monsoon rains, which lasts all night long in Teteliguri. The myths and superstitions surrounding the rains and the tales about the growling gods present the innocence of childhood as wedded to the pristine beauty of rains descending on the hills, plains and plateaus.

“Romancing the Rains” written for *The Hindu Business Line* describes the downpour as a “season of terror, [and] of trapped water breaking down a city.” From the childhood memories of “dream-like” rain in Teteliguri– its sights and sounds, through the memories of rain in Jalukbari—a part of Guwahati where the writer spent some years of his childhood to the waterlogging, electrocution and terror associated with present day rains in Guwahati, the writer traces how man’s selfish acts pave way for his own doom. The writer states that he, in his childhood, was unaware of how “Jalukbari was created by seizing land from the Deepor Beel and built on the graveyards of millions of ūshes, snakes, Dauk birds, crocodiles and wild ducks.” The destruction of the Deepor Beel—a perennial fresh water lake and a former tributary of Brahmaputra, for the construction of human

settlements as the reason for Deepor Beel swelling into the houses of the people living in those colonies during the rainy season was beyond the comprehension of the writer in his childhood. He recollects that he never felt threatened by its swelling currents and that it made his vacations more memorable with the added joy of fishing.

Nature as a source of nurture and an abode of pleasure is seen as being exploited by the human beings and their self-centeredness. The author proceeds to describe how the rains were never the same after he moved to Chandmari apartment. He describes the rains in Chandmari in terms of its aftermaths and concludes that the “rainy season or *Barisha* is the name of the latest terrorist outfit in the city I [he] grew up in.” This metaphor is interesting as terrorism and terrorist organisations are often a result of misguided human actions. The poet describes the present-day rains in Guwahati as marked by waterlogging, incidents of people being stranded for hours inside city buses, people wading through chest-deep water to reach their destinations, and stories of people being electrocuted or swept away by the water currents. The mention of floods as trapped water wreaking havoc in the city and not “the Brahmaputra invading the city,” highlights thoughtless urbanisation as the cause of these floods. The lost music of rains, the changing colour of monsoons, and the water trapped in today’s city are emblematic of the rampant destruction of the natural environment. The writer through his depiction of the changing face of rains through the years, and its impact on human life tries to raise an ecological consciousness. The rural life of Teteliguri with its inseparable bond between man and nature, the encroachment of Deepor Beel and the destruction of life and habitat of innumerable organisms, the thoughtless drive for industrialisation and urbanisation in Assam, and its aftermath are

presented in this eco-critical piece of writing. The all-engulfing rain, water and flood can be read as nature’s response to human destruction of the natural environment. The writer also expresses his exasperation at the disappearance of innumerable villages from the map of Assam owing to soil erosion and wonders if he still has the right to romance the rains.

Thus, we see that the writings of Aruni Kashyap are eclectic in nature and endeavour to portray the syncretism of Assam. Kashyap uses the image of the river, the rain and the flood, which signify the creative, nurturing and destructive aspects of water to signify nature and its role in creating, nurturing and at times, destroying life. Nature, like thread in a garland, binds together the various themes in the writings of Kashyap and plays the role of the creator, nurturer and destroyer with elan. The parallel between the rhythm of nature— as reflected in the rhythm of its rivers, rains and floods, and the rhythm of human life— as reflected in its traditions, tales, myths and legends is a distinguishing feature of the stories of Kashyap. Nature, as a literary motif, binds together the theme of conflict between the old and the new, the urban and the rural and the natural and the man-made. The conflicts in nature presented through the contrasting shades of the recurrent water imagery and its symbolic undertones that point to the troubled political climate of the region, elevate nature to an imposing presence in the writings of Kashyap. The depiction of the mythical, the historical, the personal and the political, as filtered through the lens of the ecocritical, endow the narratives with a thousand shades in sync with the colours of nature they portray.

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