

# MENTAL ILLNESS - AN ILLNESS TO WELL-BEING TOWARDS CHILDREN: REFERENCE TO SOCIO-POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN LITERATURE

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## ABSTRACT

This research paper explores the adverse impact of socio-political turmoil that has long been in existence in Assam society on the psyche of children with reference to Aruni Kashyap's *The House with a Thousand Stories*. The ethnic conflicts between the natives and the immigrants from other parts of India have caused several problems: loss of life and property, extra-judicial killings, and their resultant adverse impact on the socio-economic, cultural, and psychological spheres of the social lives of weaker sections in Assam.

This research aims to identify and understand the various psychological issues that children are subject to in a society when it is afflicted with socio-political turmoil and its consequent violence unleashed on people due to the armed struggle of the ULFA and the repressive administration of the state. The objectives of this research are (i) to study the characterization of Mamoni and Mridul, (ii) to understand and analyse the impact of socio-political turmoil on the psyche of children with reference to the above-chosen characters, (iii) to explore the connectivity between the narrative and the author's political inclination in the novel, and (iv) to understand how objectively the historical incidents were reflected in the novel. The research is carried out by studying the chosen primary source against the pragmatic concepts of psychologists, journalists, social activists, and significant historical facts that appeared in reliable data sources such as journals, web studies, newspapers, and other publications. In conclusion, this research sheds light on the profound psychological repercussions experienced by children in Assam society amidst socio-political turmoil, as exemplified in Aruni Kashyap's *"The House with a Thousand Stories."* By delving into the characters of Mamoni and Mridul, analyzing the intricate interplay between narrative and political inclinations, and objectively examining historical incidents reflected in the novel, this study not only enhances our comprehension of the multifaceted impact on the psyche of children but also contributes valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and communities striving to address and mitigate the enduring consequences of such tumultuous environments on the younger generation.

## KEYWORDS

Ethnic conflict, socio-political turmoil, psyche of children, psychological trauma, historical incidents, weaker sections

## INTRODUCTION

A wide variety of mental health conditions—disorders that impact human emotions, thinking, and behaviour are referred to as mental illnesses, sometimes known as mental health disorders. Depression, anxiety disorders, schizophrenia, eating disorders, and compulsive behaviours are a few examples of mental illnesses. Many people occasionally experience problems with their mental health. However, a mental health issue turns into a mental disease when persistent symptoms lead to persistent stress and impair your capacity to perform. Even wars and violence lead to heavy mental disorders in both men and women. The socio-political turmoil causes psychological trauma among people, and the impact of this trauma is worse in children. Children's conditions are heart-rendering when they live in a place where armed conflict scenarios provide enormous challenges, including threats to their personal safety [1]. Aruni Kashyap is an Assamese writer who witnessed various chaotic socio-political circumstances in Assamese society and recorded the terrible social realities in his novel *A House with a Thousand Stories* in a realistic manner. The social life of the Assamese during the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s was mirrored 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" [2]. The direct and indirect characterization of the characters tells us in which way people are obsessed with the fear of uncertainty under some circumstances. The purpose of the author is to reveal the atrocities conducted by the armed forces of the Government of India against the Assamese, resulting in various physical and mental traumas manifest among the people of Assam, especially children. Aruni Kashyap's novel is chosen for its cultural insight, contemporary relevance, realistic representation, characterization, historical reflection, and literary merit, all of which make it a compelling and relevant Assamese work for the research project [3].

In the story, Mamoni and Mridul are the victims of the socio-political turmoil as a result of the conflicts between the state and the ultra-political forces, resulting in ethnic problems. This aspect symbolizes the existing horrendous social reality - violence against the people.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Mental illness, or mental health disorders, encompasses a broad spectrum of conditions that impact one's mood, cognitive functions, and behaviour. Instances of mental illness encompass depression, anxiety disorders, schizophrenia, eating disorders, and addictive behaviours [4].

The consequences of war encompass enduring physical and psychological damage for both children and adults, alongside a depletion of material and human resources. Individuals commonly experience occasional mental health issues. However, these concerns escalate into mental illness when persistent signs and symptoms lead to frequent stress and disrupt one's ability to carry out daily functions. The World Health Organization (WHO) has stated that in situations of armed conflict, "Around 10 percent of the people who experience traumatic events will have serious mental health problems, and another 10 percent will develop behavior that will hinder their ability to function effectively" [5]. Encountering armed conflict in childhood and adolescence presents significant hazards to mental well-being and jeopardizes a child's developmental progress [6]. The establishment of PTSD as a recognized diagnosis was shaped by various social movements, including advocacy efforts from groups such as veterans, feminists, and Holocaust survivors. Throughout human history, exposure to traumatic events has been a common aspect of human experience, whether it encounters with saber-toothed tigers or modern-day acts of terrorism. Similar psychological responses are likely to have occurred in survivors of violence across different time periods. The earliest depictions of what we now recognize as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can be found in literary works. Notable authors such as Homer (*The Iliad*), William Shakespeare (*Henry IV*), and Charles Dickens (*A Tale of Two Cities*) explored traumatic experiences and the ensuing symptoms. The diagnosis of PTSD has played a crucial role in psychiatry by attributing its cause to events suffered by the individual rather than a perceived personal weakness, addressing an important gap in understanding and treating mental health issues [7]. Over the past fifty years, numerous wars and conflicts have unfolded, with several persisting to this day. Examples include the Israeli occupation, the Kashmir dispute, the Iraq invasion, the

Somali civil war, the Syrian civil war, the Yemen civil war, the Libyan civil war, and the ongoing Rohingya Crisis in Myanmar, all of which remain prominent subjects of conflict in contemporary media coverage. The UN mentioned in their website that, "In contemporary conflicts, up to 90 percent of casualties are civilians, mostly women and children" [8]. Subsequently, women and children have been identified as displaced individuals or refugees, as many regions affected by war and conflict have become unsafe for sustained habitation. The world has observed an unprecedented surge in the number of displaced people. Due to global warfare and conflicts, over 70.8 million individuals have been displaced, with a significant majority carrying refugee status [9]. Numerous children experience displacement, being separated from their families as their homes and schools are obliterated by bombings, and their parents and siblings fall victim to fires or other forms of destruction. Numerous children are born in war zones or refugee camps during times of conflict. These children are raised without enjoying the rights typically afforded to children and find themselves labelled as victims of war in a world that often prioritizes self-interest over their well-being. Children observe and absorb information from their surroundings, similar to how they learn a new language [10]. Children, being highly sensitive, are deeply affected by their emotional experiences, including feelings of joy or loneliness, which in turn impact their psychological well-being. Scientific studies on child development have established that low levels of peer acceptance or high levels of peer rejection have a negative and unbalanced effect on a child's psychology and behavior [11]. It is not unavoidable for children to be specifically targeted during conflicts, nor is it a natural consequence that indiscriminate attacks on children occur as a result of conflict. Frequently, parties engaged in warfare obstruct and refuse to provide essential assistance that could save children's lives. UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund) is making the nations aware of the seriousness of the situation. It is urging to stop violence and brought several demands to rescue them. Cease deliberate and indiscriminate attacks causing harm and injury to children. Put an end to assaults on education, encompassing threats to students, teachers, and schools, as well as the military use of educational institutions. Terminate attacks on healthcare, including health personnel, hospitals, and health facilities. Eliminate assaults on water and sanitation facilities and their personnel. Refrain from deploying explosive weapons in densely populated areas due to their disproportionate and particularly harmful impact on children.

Adhere to global commitments to establish a world free from the menace of landmines, explosive remnants of war, and improvised explosive devices. Discontinue the recruitment and deployment of children by armed forces and groups, along with the detention of children allegedly linked to such entities. Facilitate the release of children associated with armed forces or groups to protective services, aiding their reintegration into communities. This includes safely repatriating foreign children to their countries of origin when deemed in their best interests [12]. Bring an end to the abduction of children during conflicts. Combat all forms of sexual violence and other gender-based offences against children. Cease obstructing vital humanitarian assistance to children during emergencies and terminate attacks on humanitarian workers.

## METHOD

This research employs a multi-faceted methodology that combines literary analysis with insights from psychology, journalism, social activism, and historical data. Here, multifaceted involves the study of the diverse lens that includes theories that "recognise the diverse cultural, historical, and social contexts in which they were created" [13]. The primary focus is on Aruni Kashyap's novel, "The House with a Thousand Stories," which serves as a literary lens through which the adverse impact of socio-political turmoil on the psyche of children in Assam is explored.

Literary Analysis has taken place in the primary source for this research which is Aruni Kashyap's novel. A detailed examination of the characters Mamoni and Mridul is conducted to understand their direct and indirect characterization. "The analysis revolves around how 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" [14]. The narrative structure and storytelling techniques are scrutinized to uncover the author's portrayal of the psychological impact of socio-political turmoil on the chosen characters connected with the psychological concepts. The study incorporates psychological concepts related to trauma and mental health. Insights from psychological literature are used to analyze the impact of socio-political turmoil on the psyche of children, focusing on trauma and related disorders. The next step connected with the Historical Context incorporates historical facts related to the socio-political situation in Assam during the

1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. Reliable data sources, including journals, web studies, newspapers, and publications, are consulted to objectively understand the historical incidents reflected in the novel which "according to the popular beliefs, is more reliable and holds more referential integrity than any other realist representation. But in the post-modern academic circles, historical documents are often scrutinised for its authenticity in representing historical facts" [15]. The author's Political Inclination is also carried out to explore the connectivity between the narrative in the novel and the author's political inclination. This involves an analysis of how the author's personal experiences and political views are reflected in the fictional representation of socio-political turmoil. The findings from the literary analysis are compared and contrasted with insights from psychologists, journalists, and social activists who have studied the impact of armed conflict on mental health, particularly in the context of children. The keyword analysis incorporates a keyword analysis, focusing on terms such as ethnic conflict, socio-political turmoil, the psyche of children, psychological trauma, historical incidents, and weaker sections. This aids in categorizing and contextualizing the research within relevant themes.

Overall, the methodology involves an interdisciplinary approach, combining literary interpretation with insights from psychology, history, and social sciences to comprehensively examine the adverse impact of socio-political turmoil on the psychological well-being of children in Assam, as depicted in Aruni Kashyap's novel.

## THE SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT OF HISTORY

Assam, a state in the northeastern region of India, is one of the most turbulent states in the country. Assamese identify as a separate ethnocultural community, believing that migration from other parts of the country will weaken their community. "This issue of illegal immigration has also given rise to the formation of various insurgent groups", thus resulting in the formation of the 'Assam movement in 1979' [19]. As a result, some Assamese felt insecure in their own state due to this social phenomenon. While these clashes took place in 1979, "the Assam Movement provided the platform for the growth of a secessionist force like ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam)" [12], which is an armed separatist group active in the northeastern Indian state of Assam. Its objective is to achieve the creation of an independent sovereign nation-state for the indigenous Assamese population through armed resistance as part of the Assam conflict. Rather than settling this issue through peace talks, the Indian unitary government has prioritized

law and order and national integrity. This unjustifiable manner resulted in conflicts in Assam to extreme levels. Perhaps the violence has shaken the grounds of Assam and led to violent attacks during the general elections. Singh recorded that the "2009 parliamentary poll was one of the bloodiest in Assam's political history" [13]. Even though violence has reduced in Assam, the problem still persists.

The government of India has deployed armed security forces in response to ULFA's violent behaviour against immigrants from other regions. Security forces unleashed their atrocities against innocent people brutally. Several incidents have taken place around the state. They raided people's homes and plundered their money and valuables. According to the report of the People's Union for Democratic Rights (India), the central armed forces were directed "to destroy any structure, to arrest anyone without a warrant and to search any premises" [8]. They killed innocent citizens and accused ULFA executives of crimes. Men were killed, and women were kidnapped and sexually abused. According to a 2010 Hindustan Times report, Hiren Gohain, the convenor of the Citizens Forum, sought to regulate harmony between ULFA and the state government. It was on "October 21, 2010", that "he met the ULFA members in Guwahati central jail negotiating the settlement of the issues" but in vain [18]. People's lives were terrible in the late 1980s, and this environment of social and political turmoil was reflected in Aruni Kashyap's, *The House with a Thousand Stories*. The devastating consequences of the ULFA's armed struggle, as well as the government's subsequent suppression, were vividly depicted in this novel.

## THE HARMFUL IMPACT OF SOCIO-POLITICAL TURMOIL ON THE PSYCHE OF CHILDREN

Mamoni and Mridul are the characters in the novel who are subjected to psychological trauma against the backdrop of the ULFA movement's resurgence and the government's subsequent repression. Even if the socio-political turbulence greatly influences all residents, it impacts children more. Pooja Priyamvada opines that "sustained political violence may have long-term mental health effects" [17]. These two children experience uncertainty, fear, and anxiety 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 state perceived cultural, social and political persecution, is not immune to a mental health crisis" [19]. The depiction of the characterization of the two child characters mirrors this fact.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### THE PSYCHOLOGICAL PROBLEMS AMONG CHILDREN

#### Mamoni

Mamoni is the sister of Brikodar, who is the friend of Pablo, the narrator. She is the only girl-child in her family. She is a joyous girl and never felt misery in her life before the armed forces sexually assaulted her. She used to be very happy playing all the time in the village. This sexual assault remains her half-dead. The military men conducted raids to shut down the ULFA. ULFA terrorized the illegal immigrants by killing them, while the armed forces threatened the native Assamese by taking violent activities such as killing men and molesting women. This sort of socio-political turmoil is reflected in the life of Mamoni. These horrendous effects were happening everywhere in Assam during the 1990s. The Journalist of Assam Preview, Choudary, 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" [8].

Several extra-judicial killings and sexual assaults among children and women have occurred due to the state's policy of protecting law and order. This became a threat to civilians as they were frequently subjected to physical harassment and their lives haunted by the armed forces. Human Rights Violation in Assam reported that – in 1993, the "rapes of family members are common. The primary goal of these raids appears to be to frighten villagers into identifying suspected militants" [237]. This socio-political turmoil was reflected in the episode of the assault on Mamoni narrated by the author.

As Mamoni goes to the Pokoria River to wash clothes, the armed forces kidnap her and commit sexual assault. 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" [24]. This type of sexual assault left the victims with mental trauma. Karthiki Keshkamat, the psychologist, says that "all types of sexual abuse can lead to mental health issues" among women [19]. Mamoni undergoes undepictable mental stress due to the presence of the man (who sexually assaulted her) in the same vicinity where the victim lives. Furthermore, like many rape survivors, they may suffer from anxiety and depression and frequently experience symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)" [25]. Psychologists diagnose these as the symptoms

of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). This problem sometimes affects physical growth in children, "but emotional and psychological symptoms have long-lasting effects" [26]. She used to recollect those painful scenes when she was about to see the military men around her place. Though this happened two years ago, it continues to haunt her life. "This horror affected people physically, and their name or the sound of their shoes was enough to go crazy" [22]. The psychological trauma of Mamoni is undepictable.

"Children who have experienced sexual abuse show behavioural and emotional changes"; post-traumatic stress disorder is another consequence of sexual abuse in children [22]. These haunting traumatic events extreme Mamoni's physical reactions and impact her mental state. The report 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 [17]. The psychological condition of Mamoni is depicted heartrendingly through the narrator of the story, Pablo. To quote to Pablo "she wouldn't stop, she kept screaming like a lunatic until she fainted" [24]. The author created a character of this kind out of his own knowledge.

#### Mridul

In another context, the author depicts behavioural abnormality, which is contagious in the backdrop of the socio-political crisis. Oholya-jethai is an elderly unmarried woman who is indirectly poorly affected by the upsurge of the Assam insurgency and the counter-insurgency repression by the Government. The unemployment, irrational education system, lack of technology, and land issues between natives and immigrants made the native people migrate to nearby regions. This again leads to severe problems such as "endemic poverty, malnutrition, disability, economic/social decline and psycho-social illness" and so on [30]. She undergoes anxiety and depression as her loved one cancels the wedding after their betrothal due to her family's poverty. She cannot accept this bitter truth as he immensely loved the doctor. This drives her into mental trauma.

The abnormality in Oholya-jethai due to socio-political turmoil, causing immense trouble, affects the psyche of Mridul, a young boy, cousin to the narrator, Pablo. His father died of some health problem. She shows her anger towards Mridul and shouts at them for wasting time when he plays

carroms and music with his guitar. She always scolds without any reason. As he is the only child in the family feels very lonely in the house, and her words increase his sorrow. Oholya-jethai's rude behaviour and aggressive nature "irritates him and makes him cry and blow out in front of Pablo"; therefore, the young, parentless child, Mridul, suffers from mental trauma [24]. The psychologist, Mohammad Freh, 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" [31]. In this context, the children Oholya-jethai and Mridul reflected victims of the existing tumultuous social and political ambience in Assam. According to Freh, the conflicts through which undepictable brutality happens may fundamentally affect children. These unpleasant occurrences remain everlastingly in their oblivious personalities, exposing them to mental ailment [29]. Through the portrayal of Mridul, the creator passes on his concern that the generations coming would be victimized by the continuous conflict between the local Assamese supported by the ULFA and the Government, which continually neglects to solve the issue.

## CONCLUSION

Aruni Kashyap, who wishes for Assam to be one of India's states, scathingly criticizes the government's laxity when counter-agitation armed personnel commit crimes against 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 Mamoni and Mridul, especially child children. 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 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 Mamoni and Mridul heartrendingly. Although the characters are fictional, the characterization has historical authenticity asserted by necessary recorded evidence. This novel objectively and creatively reflects the violent activities of the ULFA and the counter-violent agitation of the Government's armed forces. 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. Death, injury, sexual assault, famine, sickness, and disability are among war's most deadly physical consequences, while post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), despair, and anxiety are among the most dangerous mental consequences. People and communities suffer emotional suffering as a result of the fear and misery caused by war's savagery, which disrupts lives and shatters relationships and families. 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 children.

The impact or learning from this paper, especially for health leadership and management, includes:

1. **Understanding Mental Health in Conflict Zones:** The paper sheds light on the psychological consequences of political turmoil and armed conflicts on individuals and communities, emphasizing the mental health challenges faced by people in Assam. Health leaders and managers can learn about the importance of addressing mental health issues in conflict zones and developing strategies to provide support.
2. **Recognition of Socio-Political Determinants of Health:** The draft paper highlights how socio-political factors can significantly impact the mental health of populations. Health professionals and leaders can gain insights into the broader determinants of health beyond traditional medical issues, enabling them to develop more comprehensive and effective public health strategies.
3. **Importance of Trauma-Informed Care:** Given the emphasis on PTSD and emotional suffering in the context of violence and conflict, health leaders may learn about the importance of trauma-informed care. This involves understanding the impact of trauma on individuals and communities and tailoring healthcare approaches to be sensitive and supportive.
4. **Interdisciplinary Collaboration:** The paper integrates elements of literature, history, and recorded evidence to convey the socio-political context. Health leadership professionals can learn about the value of interdisciplinary collaboration, recognizing that health issues often intersect with broader societal issues that require a holistic approach.
5. **Advocacy for Vulnerable Populations:** The focus on the impact of violence on ethnically and economically weaker sections of Assam society, especially children, could inspire health leaders to

advocate for vulnerable populations. This may involve promoting policies that address social determinants of health and ensure access to mental health services for those most affected. 6. Ethical Considerations in Healthcare: The criticism of the government's response to armed personnel committing crimes underscores the importance of ethical considerations in healthcare during times of conflict. Health leaders may reflect on the role of healthcare professionals in advocating for ethical practices and ensuring the well-being of the population.

### ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES AND LIMITATIONS

- a) Alternative Perspective: Literary works are often open to interpretation, and different readers may perceive characters and themes differently. The interpretation of Mamoni and Mridul's characters and the connection to socio-political turmoil may vary among readers.
- b) Limitation: The paper relies heavily on the interpretation of specific characters and events in a novel. Literature is subjective, and different readers may derive various meanings from the same text.
- c) Alternative Perspective: Focusing on one novel may lead to a narrow understanding of the broader socio-political context in Assam. The experiences of characters in a work of fiction might not accurately represent the diversity of real-life experiences during conflicts.
- d) Limitation: The research may be limited by its exclusive reliance on one novel, potentially overlooking the complexity and heterogeneity of the impact of socio-political turmoil on children in Assam.
- e) Alternative Perspective: Aruni Kashyap's personal views and biases may influence the narrative, impacting the portrayal of characters and events. The novel's political inclination might not objectively represent historical incidents or the perspectives of all affected parties.
- f) Limitation: The paper should acknowledge the potential bias in the novel and recognize that it may not provide a completely objective or comprehensive view of the socio-political situation in Assam.
- g) Alternative Perspective: While the paper draws on psychological concepts and historical facts, the lack of empirical studies or direct interviews with affected children might limit the depth of understanding regarding their psychological issues.
- h) Limitation: The research might benefit from incorporating more empirical evidence, such as interviews, surveys, or psychological assessments, to enhance the validity and reliability of its findings.

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