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Discursive Formation of Reality: A Foucauldian Perspective to Aruni Kashyap's *The House with a Thousand Stories*

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One basic paradox about Foucauldian perspective is that apparently it seems to be intellectually very thought provoking, but a minute analysis and application of Foucault's methods reveals certain amount of obscurity, and sometimes one feels that the ideas overlap. But this methodically challenging aspect draws more critics and scholars towards that ghost named Foucault, and it is perhaps self-explanatory that the more we try to brush aside or get away from Foucault, the more the ghost ceases to get away from us. Foucault himself once said that the more people discuss something the more that thing becomes discursively real. We must not forget that Foucault is perhaps the first critic who is endeavouring to theorise everything from a humanitarian perspective. In other words, he was trying throughout his life to give a theoretical mould to sociology, history, archaeology, science, and perhaps every other thing that comes our way, and analyse them from the discipline of humanities. There is no gainsaying the fact that North-eastern part of India (Paul, 161)[1] is currently perceived to be insurgency-ridden, clash-trodden and torn apart by bloody violence. But we tend to forget that this strategically important area of South-East Asia, as B. Datta Ray, former secretary of North East India Council for Social Science Research, opines in the "Foreword" to *Ethnic Issues Secularism and Conflict Resolution in North East India*, "has a long tradition of secularism and conflict resolution". The interest in North-eastern part of India has recently gone up tremendously. Scholars across the world are taking more and more interest in this area which is richly fertile in terms of its ethnic mosaic, cultural diversity and topographical variations; even journals like *Asian Ethnology*[2] is publishing special issues exclusively focusing on this region.

Although Foucault hardly defines what constitutes reality, his 1969 book *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (first translated in 1972 by Sheridan Smith) delineates, among other writings, how the reality's discursive formation becomes more real and important than the actual real.

Before delving into detailed analysis let us first look at the term "discourse". Since Foucault, "discourse" is perhaps one of the few critical terms where many theorists and critics have tried to set their footprints. Hawthorne in his *A Glossary of Cotemporary Literary Theory* (4th edition) puts it thus:

> The work of Michel Foucault has been highly influential across a number of disciplines so far as the term discourse is concerned. (87)

Yet one feels the inadequacy of the realisation of the proper meaning and full implication of the term. This is perhaps because of the sheer variety of fields – academic or non-academic – that the term seems to embrace, and that is where the level of difficulty emerges from. However as far as the definition and discussion of the term "discourse" is concerned in Foucauldian oeuvre, two texts are of particular interest — *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and "The Discourse on Language" (which is included in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*), although his commentary upon discourse is scattered throughout his oeuvre. The best way to track down the evolution of meaning of the word "discourse" is to consult various dictionaries. During the period of Renaissance the term "discourse" was applied to mean a formal speech or writing, sometimes directly addressed to the audience. But over the years the term assumed cultural and social connotations.

Webster's *Third New International Dictionary* (1976) has an entry of "discourse" like this:

> discourse: (n) 1 *archaic* a: the act, power, or faculty of thinking consecutively and logically: the process of proceeding from one judgement to another in logical sequence: the reasoning faculty: RATIONALITY. b: the capacity of proceeding in an orderly and necessary sequence... 2 *obsolete*: progression or course especially of events: course of arms: COMBAT. 3 a: verbal interchange of ideas... b: an instance of such interchange... 4 a: the expression of ideas; especially formal and orderly expression in speech or writing... b: a talk or piece of writing in which a subject is treated at some length usually in orderly fashion... 5 *obsolete* a: power of conversing: conversational ability. b: ACCOUNT, NARRATIVE, TALE. C: social familiarity; also familiarity with a subject. 6 linguistics connected speech or writing of more than one sentence.

> discourse: (vi.) 1 a: to express oneself in especially oral discourse: talk in a continuous or formal manner... b: TALK, CONVERSE... 2 *obsolete* REASON. (vt.) 1 *archaic*: to expose or set forth in speech or writing: treat of: NARRATE, TELL, DISCUSS 2. PLAY, PERFORM... 3 *obsolete* to talk to: confer with: converse with. (647)

The third and fourth points are important so far as our discussion of the term "discourse" is concerned. From the narrow sense of being a formal speech the term began to gather more meaning and during the course of the 20th century it meant "verbal interchange of ideas" or "expression of ideas". *Collins Concise English* dictionary, 1988 edition, has an entry of the word like this:

> discourse: 1. verbal communication; talk, conversation; 2. a formal treatment of a subject in speech or writing; 3. a unit of text used by linguists for the analysis of linguistic phenomena that range over more than one sentence; 4. to discourse: the ability to reason (*archaic*); 5. to discourse on/upon: to speak or write about formally; 6. to hold a discussion; 7. to give forth (music) (*archaic*). (14th century, from Mediaeval Latin. *discursus*: argument, from Latin, a running to and fro *discurrere*). (qtd. in Mills *Discourse* 2)

What the entry is trying to emphasise on is that "discourse" is applied to mean a mode of communication. But nowhere in the above mentioned entries is given the cultural connotation or hidden ramifications that the term might entail, and it is perhaps with the advent of cultural

theories in the 20th century that the term takes a giant leap in expanding and proliferating its meaning radically. In its thus evolutionary process Foucault is perhaps the most important milestone. In the chapter I of Part III of his *The Archaeology of Knowledge* Foucault defines discourse thus:

> ...instead of gradually reducing the rather fluctuating meaning of the word 'discourse', I believe that I have in fact added to its meanings; treating it sometimes as the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualizable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for a certain number of statements; (80)

What Foucault is trying to pinpoint is the fact that instead of nullifying the meaning of the term, he has only added to the already existing corpus of meaning of the word. So, defining the term only increases its complexity. Now, let us look at the definition part by part, since it comprises three segments. The first segment is the "general domain of all statements". This is perhaps the most sweeping account of the term "discourse", since this part takes into account all the statements – written or non-written. In this context it is important to remember what Foucault means by the term "statement". Like the term "discourse", the term "statement" may incorporate utterances which may be grammatically well-structured or may not be so. For example, if one places the letter ASDFGH side by side it is not a statement, but if one finds the letters in a computer keyboard manual it does make a statement, because it readily conveys the idea that the manual is suggesting a computer keyboard feature. So, the context of making statement is also important. Secondly, Foucault describes "discourse" "as an individualizable group of statements". In other words, there are some statements which can be grouped together under some general themes or rules or principles. From this perspective any theoretical discipline, any speech on a particular topic can be regarded as discourse. In fact any seminars, conferences organised by university departments can fall into this category of discourse, because they are organised around a particular topic. The introduction of multidisciplinary nature into recent research attests to the fact that day by day new permutations among various disciplines are emerging to form new groups. But it is the third segment of the remark which, according to me, is the most important part. Here Foucault says that discourse can sometimes be regarded "as a regulated practice that accounts for a certain number of statements". This is the most significant part because it speaks about a controlling factor that works behind every statement, utterance, written or non-written material. It is, as if, a set of unwritten rules that come to influence and guide before any utterance is made in any form whatsoever. As Sara Mills in her *Discourse* opines, "It is this rule-governed nature of discourse that is of primary importance within this definition" (56).

Foucault's definition and description of discourse is scattered throughout the book. However let us see how far it is tenable to see literature as part of discourse. According to Foucault literature occupies a special status, a kind of privileged zone, because "it (literature) leads language back from grammar to the naked power of speech, and there it encounters the untamed, imperious being of words" (*The Order* 300). He further goes on to describe literature as

> ...a silent cautious deposition of the word upon the whiteness of a piece of paper, where it can posses neither sound nor interlocutor, where it has nothing to say but itself, nothing to do but shine in the brightness of its being. (300)

What he means by the "naked power of speech" is that in literature language has a free play. In other words language appears before us with all its unrestricted impulses, usually imposed

on it with all the grammatical rules and principles. Grammar is always descriptive, it can never be prescriptive, because grammar did not beget language; human beings for their own convenience structured language into grammatical rules and formulations. However, in the next quotation that is given above, Foucault seems to be describing literature as a muted entity. It is true that the printed words upon a page do not by themselves say anything, but are these words meant to be silent? Foucault also analyses the process of exclusion that is operational in institutions and universities, with regard to which texts should be read and therefore should be in circulation, and which texts should not be read, therefore should not be in circulation. Now if the notion of exclusion, which is an important notion in Foucault, is in operation in literary texts and its circulation, can we deny the fact that the printed words upon a white page are not ultimately meant to be silent? In other words, the notion of exclusion itself betrays the fact that literature is not a muted being.

So literature's role as part of a discursive practice is well established. To say it from Foucauldian perspective, human beings have access to reality only through discursive practice. Foucault as such did not deny the existence of reality as it exists by itself, but what he tries to come to conclusion at is that reality appears before us only through a discursive habit in which human beings love to engage themselves. For Foucault there is nothing like universal certainty, because that certainty exists as a sort of volatility. He is more interested in *how* instead of *what* or *why* of things. Now, through this discursive practice what ultimately happens is that the exact reality gets fermented, which sometimes overshadows the base reality and people start looking at only that fermented portion of reality and tend to overlook the base reality. This is where the notion of exclusion comes into effect. The moment one tends to look at something which everybody loves to look at, something goes unnoticed. In other words something is given importance at the cost of something getting excluded from that zone of importance. In his article "The Discourse on Language" (1969: 2010), which was originally delivered as an open lecture at the prestigious College of France where Foucault was obliged to give a public lecture once a year, he describes the three processes of exclusion which work as external system of "control and delimitation of discourse" (220). They include taboo or prohibition, the deliberate distinction between who is sane and who is insane, and the gap between what constitutes truth and what constitutes false.

In England during the Victorian period it was almost considered a blasphemous act to talk about sex publicly, and especially children were not allowed to come at all whatsoever any distance nearer to the discussion about sex (Mills, *Discourse* 58). But Foucault argues that this repressed mentality worked as a Freudian boomerang in creating ripples across the young generation. Instead of suppressing the matter, the repressive measures actually instigated the curiosity among the children. Rightly does Sara Mills in her *Discourse* comment, "Once a subject is tabooed, that status begins to feel self-evident" (58).

In *Madness and Civilisation* Foucault argues how mad people are deliberately excluded from the mainstream society and they are not heeded to. But the parameters of judging who is sane and who is insane change from one historical period to another. Galileo was once considered to be not adhering to the mainstream societal norms mainly propounded and propagated by the church authority, and he was deemed as an aberration to normal society. But with the change of time that same person was ensconced as a unique thinker. A similar case can be cited when Roger Bacon, scientist and monk, was sent to prison and his teaching was suppressed only because his suggestion of reforming the yearly calendar on new parameters did not fit into the line of thinking of the church orthodoxy. But later in the 18th century that same person's opinion were given importance and a new calendar was prepared according to

Bacon's findings. So the authority who can stamp a person mad and in which context this is done is very significant. They can be considered as excluding agents.

The bifurcation between what is true and what is false is the third exclusionary factory. Like the second factor what should be truth is determined by those who are in position to tell what truth is and what is not. The authorisation of something to be considered as true comes from a select group of people and the statements made by those persons who are not authorised to tell the truth will not be considered as true.

As is evident from the discussion of these exclusionary factors, "they concern that part of discourse which deals with power and desire" (*The Archaeology* 220). By this Foucault probably means, largely speaking, the delimiting agencies (men or might be some inanimate objects like institutions, etc.) operate according to the prevailing power politics of contemporary society and this power politics is inherently linked with desire of what to delimit and control, what to bring into focus, what to exclude, etc.

Now, if a particular type of discourse is given importance because it is in the inclusionary zone, we have to see how that particular type of discourse gets circulated in society, what are the factors which give impetus to the circulation and distribution of that discourse in almost every stratum of society. To look into that we again have to resort to what Foucault says in his "The Discourse on Language". Again he is specifically talking about some factors- the first one being the commentary. Foucault comments:

> ...commentary's role is to say finally, what has silently been articulated *deep down*. It must ...say, for the first time, what has already been said, and repeat tirelessly what was, nevertheless, never said. (221)

A text or an event gets circulated because it is commented upon and discussed by people. The more it is discussed the more it acquires the chance of getting circulated in society. But what prompts that commentary and discussion is very complicated, since it entails a kind of complex ideological relations. Since the inception of Christianity this particular religion is made the object of discussion than any other religion across the world; and with the flourishing of colonisation the circulation of Christianity with a presupposition and imposition of the notion that it is the only religion and no other religion of worth exists, only got fuelled up. Thus Christianity as religious grand narrative began to dominate.

Secondly, Foucault focuses on the "author" as another principal of rarefaction. Foucault's concept of author here is unique in that he does not see author as an individual who pens down his thought in black ink upon a white paper and the reader while reading the paper attributes everything to that individual; but rather he considers author as "the unifying principal in a particular group of writings or statement, lying at the origins of their significance, as the seat of their coherence" (221). This "unifying principal", by which Foucault probably means an element or catalyst in gathering all the bits and pieces of information that are readily available, plays different roles in different contexts. Whereas in the field of science the function of this author-principal "has been steadily declining" (222), in literature, as Foucault argues, "the author's function has become steadily more important" (222), because "(t)he author is he who implants into the troublesome language of fiction, its unities, its coherence, its links with reality" (222). This "links with reality" is what is crucial here, because Kashyap in writing his novel works as an author-function and he acts as an element or catalyst in bridging the gap between "troublesome language of fiction" and "reality", and in linking the gap the author-function intervenes with all the "interplay of differences"(222).

Thirdly and finally, Foucault hinges on the notion of "disciplines" as one of the regulators of discourse. This disciplinary affiliation somewhat determines what could be said and what could be given validity as truth. As Foucault upholds,

> ...disciplines are defined by groups of objects, methods, their corpus of propositions considered to be true, the interplay of rules and definitions, of techniques and tools: all these constitute a sort of anonymous system... For a discipline to exist, there must be the possibility of formulating- and of doing so ad infinitum- fresh propositions. (222-223)

An academic discipline is set up with a particular end in mind. Foucault argues that a person who works in an academic discipline cannot but serve the purpose of that academic discipline. In other words, that person is regulated by that academic discipline which has been set up as part of the larger discursive structure within society. The same event is interpreted from different angles from by different persons having affiliation to different disciplines; each version of the same event gets circulation and validity accordingly. Here again we see how a base reality is available to us through various circulatory processes. Does the base reality in that process remain uncontaminated in the end? We will see it in our discussion that follows.

Having established the theoretical framework let us proceed to the analysis of Kashyap's *The House with a Thousand Stories* using this theoretical framework. Before proceeding further this literary text which attracted much critical attention upon its publication (its reception in the critical arena is discussed a little later), needs to be put into context, because it is still quite a new text, published just a year back, written against the backdrop of an area which is relatively less studied. However, recently many writers from this region and writing about this region have come into limelight, supported by such international publishing houses as Penguin, Sage, etc[3]. The region "has a deep rooted tradition of literature and folklore" (Swami, Preface), but from 1990s there has been a resurgence in literary output. Some of these writers include Temsula Ao, Mamang Dai, Mitra Phukan, Dhruba Hazarika, Siddhartha Deb, Sanjoy Hazarika, Indira Goswami, Siddhartha Sarma, Anjum Hsan, Bijoya Sawian, and Jahnavi Borua. Aruni Kashyap, being the latest addition to this list, was invited by Asian Research Institute of City University of New York and Princeton Institute of International and Regional Studies, Princeton University[4] to deliver talks about his novel *The House with a Thousand Stories* vis-à-vis North-eastern part of India. So there is no doubt that this part of the world and its literary output is getting worldwide attention. Essentially any approach using Foucauldian method is anti-Foucauldian in nature, largely because employing Foucauldian methods tends to limit the thing, bind the thing in a structural skeleton – something which Foucault's philosophy prevents us doing. Kendall and Wickham in the "Preface" to *Using Foucault's Method* argue "there are no such persons as 'Foucaultians' and that there is no such thing as a 'Foucaultian method'" (vii). Although *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and "The Order of Discourse" do not develop a teleological knowledge of Foucault's argument they are somewhat methodological in that they develop key ideas about Foucault's whole project. However, Foucault's notion of exclusion is at work in the very fact that much of the literature written in English and set in locations from North-eastern part of India is not canonised as Indian English novel. Although a debut novel, Kashyap's book attracted much critical attention on its publication. It is a tale of a marriage ceremony that is about to take place, but the more the story advances the more the ceremony is delayed until at the last moment when it meets with a fatal tragedy. Having described the events that happen through the course of the novel thus risks at looking at the novel from a definite perspective. Is the novel only about that marriage? The sheer

complexity of intertwining events certainly dismisses that fact. Then is the occurring of the marriage ceremony overriding them? If so, why? What made the theme to take the central stage among so many other (although interrelated) events? At this point let us look at the book-reviews, blurbs of the novel. The Telegraph writes "Captivating narrative of a family set against the backdrop of insurgency..." The Assam Tribune writes "Aruni Kashyap's debut novel *The House with a Thousand Stories* is a poignant tale of human suffering in the backdrop of insurgency and draconian administration". "The sensuousness of Kashyap's prose makes you touch the pages of the book from time to time, for fear of the Brahmaputra making its pages wet, or fear of the blood sticking to them …" writes India Today.

Thus from the publication these reviews, comments act as part of how a certain thing gets circulated. These commentaries thus actually form a discursive practice in which human beings take part. For a non-reader of literary texts such as this, the text is accessible only through those commentaries. Foucauldian approach would hardly focus on the text as forming the real, rather it will zoom on how that literary text as real is available to a person who does not bother about reading literary texts such as Kashyap's. The process of availability is more important than anything else.

Making comments as one of the circulatory factors behind a particular discourse applies to the analysis of Anil Medhi's character. The omniscient narrator comments,

> Anil da had created this tense situation with his ability to inspire curiosity. He wanted people to ask him question. He wanted them to be afraid, to think that the wedding might not take place at all. (2-3)

Everyone in the Bishoya household is aware of Anil *da*'s uncanny knack of creating ripples of terror. Despite that everybody is struck by fear when Anil *da* brings some news which could impact the proceeding of the marriage ceremony, more so because the news has a contextual support. Foucault in chapter no.5, entitled "The Formation of Concepts", of Part I of *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, argues how a "preconceptual" level exists before a "conceptual" level is formed. After defining the "preconceptual" in negatives, Foucault finally states, "...the preconceptual ... is ... the group of rules that in fact operates within it (history)" (62).

He further says,

> ...the rules of formation operate not only in the mind or consciousness of individuals, but in discourse itself; they operate therefore, according to a sort of uniform anonymity, on all individuals who undertake to speak in this discursive field. (63)

The rules at the "preconceptual" level thus act from within. Now, the context or situation in which Anil *da* speaks comprises a "preconceptual" level. At this level spreading panic in auspicious ceremonies like marriage through the form of rumour constitutes one rule. The omniscient narrator comments, "Rumours arrive at a wedding like unwanted guests" (Kashyap 1).

Thus the "preconceptual", whose rules are formed "according to a sort of uniform anonymity", prepares the ground for the "conceptual" to emerge. Here in Kashyap's novel the concept that the rumour would ultimately jeopardise the marriage of the youngest daughter of Binapani Bishoya emerges. The way Anil *da* speaks, with "inky marbles reflecting sunlight" (1), bolsters the concept, and it creates a discursive field from which Anil *da* speaks. Hardly anyone is interested in verifying what Anil *da* produces, rather, on the

contrary, everyone gets enmeshed with it, "Anil *da*'s story was one such rumour. You couldn't avoid it, though you know that such rumour should be avoided." (2)

Thus it is rather of Anil *da*'s spreading of rumour that shapes the realisation of the real for the other characters in the novels, than the real itself shaping the entire proceeding of the ceremony. Anil *da* suspects that Binapani Bishoya's physical condition would only worsen if she ever gets to know about Prosanto Bishoya's love affair with Onulupa. Normally an auspicious event like marriage is postponed until a further time in an Indian household if something inauspicious like death happens in the household. Again this general unwritten norm works as a "preconceptual" and against the backdrop of this "preconceptual" the concept that Moina's marriage may cease to exist on the scheduled date because of Prosanto Bishoya's rebellious relationship with Onulupa who "has already slept with an army officer" (149-150) emerges. But this perception of Anil Medhi is only another bubble on the surface of the sea of rumour, because later in the novel we get to see that it is this same Binapani Bishoya who "was helped out of her room and she was sitting on the veranda now" (149) as her condition recovers; and also blesses her favourite son, who locked her womb, and her would-be daughter-in-law by placing "her hand on Onulupa's head in a symbolic gesture of accepting her into the family" (148). Anil Medhi's nature of creating ripples out of nothing only weaves another string in ever-expanding net of gossip, and in the entangling web of this is not caught only Anil *da*, but other characters like Oholya-*jethai*, Onima *borma* join to make it more complicated.

Of particular interest is the character of Oholya-*jethai* who "loved gossip" (3) more than anything else. She was, as if, "forever ready for gossip" (2). As soon as Anil *da* brings the news, Oholya-*jethai* is the first person to comment upon it, "Why wouldn't you tell us? Tell us what you've heard" (2).

Her voice was "loud booming" (2) bearing an authoritative tone. It is this Oholya-*jethai's* nagging tone which draws more people into this ever-expanding web of commentary upon that particular event of bringing rumour:

> Eventually, everyone started speaking. Women came out, sat on the freshly mopped-up front yard and contributed similar tales. They spoke of how marriages were called off even an hour before the groom came, or even two minutes before the groom streaked the girl's forehead and middle parting with the red vermilion powder. (212)

That's how an event gets circulated and is given importance because it is commented upon from all sides, and it is Oholya-*jethai* who takes the centre stage in formulating and attracting all the commentaries. Question may arise how come that Oholya-*jethai's* words are given more importance. How come the fact that she is abhorred in her absence, but is mysteriously respected where she is present?

Foucault in his *Power/Knowledge* argues that power cannot be possessed on a deliberate effort. Rather power is always already there, people only enter into that zone. As Kendall and Wickham put in their *Using Foucault's Methods*:

> (Power) is not possessed, but is practised. Power is not the prerogative of 'masters', but passes through every force. We should think of power not as an attribute (and ask 'What is it?'), but as an exercise (and ask 'How does it work?'). (50)

Apparently Oholya-*jethai* is hated because of her petulant nature, but she is in that zone of power within the Bishoya household. She wields her power when everybody pays heed to

what she says. Her deliberate effort to stick to old customs betrays her anxiety of a possible sudden lapse into something inauspicious. She is respected because almost everybody in the Bishoya household is caught somehow or the other in an anticipatory process of fearing something evil. The institute called Bishoya household is controlled and managed by Oholya-*jethai* who acts as a de facto head of it. Foucault in Chapter no. 4 entitled "The Formation of Enunciative Modalities", of Part II of *The Archaeology Knowledge,* talks about some strands of delineation of a particular discourse. He focuses on how a systematic structure operates "behind all (the) diverse statements". He raises question,

> Who is speaking? Who, among the totality of speaking individuals, is accorded *the right* to use this sort of language? Who is qualified to do so? Who derives from it his own special quality, his prestige, and from whom, in return, does he receive if not the assurance, at least the presumption that what he says is true? What is the *status* of the individuals who – *alone* have the right, sanctioned by law or *tradition*, juridically defined or spontaneously accepted, to proffer such a discourse? (Italics mine) (50)

Although Foucault formulated his theory against some broader fields of study, such as medicine, natural history, etc, it could be employed in analysing how his notion of the speaking-subject describes the nature of Oholya-*jethai* here in Kashyap's novel. Oholya-*jethai* acts here as a speaking subject, because she is "accorded the right to use this sort of language". She "derives from" this right her "own special quality, (her) prestige" as an elder family member, and she receives the assurance from other family members who obliquely validate what she utters. In "The Discourse on Language" also Foucault says, "...none may enter into discourse on a specific subject unless he has satisfied certain conditions or if he is not, from the outset, qualified to do so" (224-225).

In the absence of a domineering patriarch in an Indian household, the responsibility of controlling and managing the family shifts, generally speaking, to the matriarch. Oholya-*jethai* here in the absence of any elderly male member in the Bishoya household is the domineering matriarch, and that's why she is "from the outset qualified" to behave in such a fashion. Prosanto *da*'s judgement of Oholya–*jethai* is partially correct,

> ...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 himself. (Kashyap 161)

Prosanto *da*'s judgement is partly correct because Oholya-*jethai*'s endeavour to safeguard the societal traditional customs might be looked upon as an attempt to remain cautious against any possible mishap. Her holding onto this position of power is supported and strengthened by some external factors, such as everybody's fear that some evil might intervene, that Moina's marriage would cease to take place, etc.

The role of commentary as one of the factors behind circulation of discourse is as much important as the objects which are being commented upon. Let us first trace what are the objects which attract readers' attention in the text. The overall perception of the North-eastern part of India being insurgent-ridden, clash-prone is bound to reflect upon the contemporary literature set in the region. The rumour that Anil Medhi brings on the day of *juron* (the day before the marriage day) is tinged with the colour of insurgency. Like the coloured papers that he brings along, the news gets various tinge and shades on its way to reach people to ultimately form a multilayered discursive reality, which tends to be more real

than the actual ground reality. The structural complexity of the narration only tells about the rumour, but readers get to know about what the rumour is exactly all about only on page number 210 of the novel. That the groom's brother does not live in Delhi and on top of that he works as a member of United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) sends waves of shock across the household. But the same news could have ushered in streaks of hope, had it been in different time zone. The omniscient narrator states in parenthesis, "So surprising. A decade ago. The same people showed off to others that they had ULFA members in their family." (211)

What might have been a matter of pride turns to be that of shame and fear. Here Foucault's notion of circumstantial production of statements is relevant. In part III of *The Archaeology of Knowledge* he argues,

> The speech act is not what took place just prior to the moment when the statement was made...it is what occurred by the very fact that a statement was made- and precisely this statement (and no other) on specific circumstances. (83)

Anil Medhi's statement bordering on being rumour was made in the context when ULFA is banned by the Indian govt., and coming back to the mainstream society is patronised. The specific circumstance of Moina's marriage in which the statement of rumour is made becomes very crucial in producing endless ripples across the Bishoya household in particular and the entire society in general.

The point of a statement being produced in specific circumstances holds special significance so far as the "ring-finding" episode in the novel is concerned. The unexpected and unprecedented coming out of the golden ring from the courtyard adds another layer to the multilayered discursive reality. Men at the house are digging the courtyard even at night with a view to expedite the arrangement for the marriage next day. But a task intended for an auspicious event turns to be a prognostication for bitter old memory. Oholya-*jethai* had in her youth a love affair with a local doctor, but the doctor ultimately did not marry her because the doctor's family was very affluent, whereas Oholya Bishoya was from a humble background. When the doctor had come to tell that he would not be able to marry her, she furiously threw the ring away given by the doctor. He did not take the token of love back with him, and as it was raining at that time it got buried there in the courtyard. It is not particularly relevant here to discuss why the ring has to come out precisely at that moment, but a Foucauldian angle would take interest in how this ring revelation episode has an impact upon the proceeding of the marriage ceremony. In other words the context in which it is dug out becomes crucial. We may raise our speculations - could it have exerted the same amount of impact had it been found out any other time? Perhaps no. Having said that we should take guard against drawing any deterministic and definite conclusions in Foucauldian perspective. However, two things are important to note here. The episode gathers momentum as various commentaries are tagged onto it, and secondly, the incident is narrated to Pablo by Prosanto *da* who himself had heard it from others when he was a little child, "I was too young- a baby. But that's what I have heard from people." (Kashyap 161)

Thus the story concerning the ring and Oholya-*jethai* is available to Pablo and others present at that moment through layers of discussion, and as readers we have access to that reality through another layer – the layer of literature as part of discourse. The role of literature as part of discourse is well established.

From the proliferation of discourse let us focus on the process of exclusion. A particular type of discourse gets circulated in specific circumstance. In this text the particular

discourse of Assam state, an important state in North-eastern part of India, as insurgent-ridden, clash-oriented gets circulated, but this notion is circulated at the cost of some other notions getting excluded from that circulatory zone. The overriding theme of a marriage being under constant threat can be put into challenge by other love-affairs that develop simultaneously. Pablo's fascination with Anamika, Prosanto Medhi's love affair with Onulupa, Mridul's daring and bold attempt to marry Manju Mahatu -- all these events also develop, but they remain overshadowed by the events concerning insurgency. Any insightful analysis of Kashyap's novel would reveal that these budding love affairs in a way try to undermine the fact that Moina's marriage would face a tragic end. Not only so, Oholya Medhi, who has turned a stern purist and a vigil of the traditional societal customs, had once been a daring lover:

> Mai asked her not to go, but she would not listen. You know how headstrong she is. She went; the villagers were furious. They said they wouldn't come for the wedding and our family would be excommunicated. (161)

Even when these affairs are talked about people only highlight how perilous they could be because all these affairs involve other issues like marrying a girl from other community, or the family not permitting and sanctioning the marriage. But as stories have different dimensions, different facets, similarly events have multiple facets. The omniscient narrator puts it, "There are so many ways of telling the same story. It really depends on what you want to leave the listener with" (210).

To deconstruct the popular myth about the North-eastern part of India what is needed is to look at the other dimensions which are very much present in the text. The omniscient narrator puts it thus:

> ...we needed someone like him in this house, just as we needed a rebel lover like him in the village. A radical love story is the only device that makes the time chariot of a village, a city, a country gallop faster. Such a love story pulls the wheels of that chariot from murky, regressive past towards a spotlessly clean road under autumn blue skies. And for that chariot to move forward, to bring in the village, you don't have to be conscious of being a radical. You just have to fall in love. Head over heels in love. We needed someone like Prosanto-da in a wedding because I had seen what changes he could bring to a wedding. (115)

Bhagat Oinam in an article "Preparing for a Cohesive North-east: Problems of Discourse" ensconces the view,

> An understanding of the Northeast requires successful dismantling of the prevailing discourses that will help demystify the region. The foremost challenge is to deconstruct both the imageries cast on the region as well as the intentions and circumstances that have shaped those who have made these imageries. This is to be followed by a reframing of the content and the patterns of the narratives and associated imageries. (176)

The "prevailing discourses" of having separatist attitude, being violence-prone can also be impugned by upholding how a friendship between Pablo and Mridul gradually develops, so much so that Pablo feels betrayed when the latter does not share his little secret with the former. This bond of friendship is, as if, in a line of heredity, because Pablo's father and Mridul's father were friends also in their childhood. Pablo met Mridul for the first time when the latter went to Teteliguri five years before Bolen *bortta*'s death, in 1993, to attend the

funeral of Dalimi Medhi, Pablo's grandmother; and the camaraderie between them begins to coagulate when Pablo goes to Hatimura to attend the funeral of Mridul's father in 1998, and as young Pablo travels in a private car with his parents he listens to how his father was a bosom friend of late Bolen Bishoya along the journey to Mayong from Guwahati. Pablo's mother attests to the fact, "They were very close. They were not cousins; they were best friends" (6-7). Pablo's listening to the history of *their* friendship also instigates in the young boy an inquisitiveness — a curiosity to know in details about how the friendship between his father and his father's cousin was, and Pablo resorts to a self-interrogation to quench that thirst of inquisitiveness,

> Papa's best friend. What did that mean? Was their friendship like what I shared with Probal? Did they watch porn together? Did they even get porn during those days? Did they have wet dreams at night that made want to go to doctor? Who must have laughed then? (8)

Mridul's father is thought to be died of alcoholism, and Bolen Bishoya had also a love affair with a local Nepali wine brewer called Anjali Mahatu, who lived on the outskirts of the village. Mridul not only inherits from his father the attribute of making friendship, but also treads the same path as his father did to make love with that Anjali Mahatu's daughter named Manju Mahatu. So, the concept of making love with a girl belonging to a lower caste community is not a brand new thing in the Bishoya household, and Mridul does nothing but prolongs that tradition of being a rebel lover in the household. Bolen Bishoya's reputation after his death lasts not as a drunkard, but as a kind-hearted fellow who sympathised with other village folk. Oholya-*jethai*'s nagging tone and abhorrence towards Mridul who loves to engrossed in his own world of music and guitar does not hold much water because it is Mridul's late father who encouraged his son to music by gifting him the guitar. The image of Bolen Bishoya that Pablo wants to retain in his memory is the image of how much he was a good friend, a kind-hearted fellow, someone "who everyone in the village, despite the way he died, respected" (87). Pablo ponders,

> I would remember him as Papa's best friend, not an alcoholic ... what mattered to me was that he didn't have fights at home after he drank – didn't hit anyone, didn't raise his voice, didn't mumble or scream abuses at people he didn't like once he was inebriated. (86-87)

Although Bolen Bishoya used to drink, he did not behave like a typical drunkard. That's why we may question Oholya Bishoya's assumption that "a drunkard's son would be a drunkard" (86). And even if it holds an iota of truth, then accordingly Mridul might also turn out to be a good guitarist because he is a son of a person who patronised music.

Although Oholya-*jethai* creates a terrified atmosphere in the household, she along with other female members of the family such as Okoni-*pehi*, Onima-*borma* forms a kind of familial bonding, an atmosphere of group camaraderie. From one perspective it could be argued that Oholya-*jethai*'s nature of paying too much attention to the nitty-gritty of family matters creates a kind of claustrophobic atmosphere in the house which has seventeen windows but lacks a single ventilator to vent out the unbearable air. Seen from another perspective, can we totally gainsay the fact that whatever she does, it is only to safeguard the traditional family values and edicts from being eroded? The point is that her nature of being too much cautious has its root in her some personal experiences which become public in the particular circumstance that the Bishoya household vis-a-vis the contemporary society undergoes, and we tend to look at only the public impact of her personal experience. However, these

apparently neglected sides cease to come into limelight as they remain in the Foucauldian exclusionary zone. The circumstances are such that by default they undergo oblivion and the focus is zoomed in on the negative sides.

As Foucault kept himself distanced from describing what constitutes real, and put his focus more on the availability of the real to us through discursive formation, here also it is argued that the availability of the real regarding the North-eastern part of India is what matters most; and through that process of availability various layers are added to it making it a multilayered reality. Then people start looking at that fermented reality instead of the actual ground reality. Applying Foucault's arguments demands looking for contingencies instead of stable outcome and there always remains possibilities for new dimensions (Kendall and Wickham 5, 41). Similarly, this paper looks for various other contingencies that are very much present in the text and tries to look at the text from those 'other' dimensions to prevent a one-sided partial perspective.

Notes:

1. I here use the term North-eastern part of India, following an argument developed by Anindya Sundar Paul in the journal *Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal* (ISSN — 2278-9529).
2. Volume 72, Number 2 of this journal is devoted to the study of Northeast India. The journal (ISSN 1282-6865) is published by Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture and indexed in various directories, such as Arts and Humanities Citation Index, Bibliography of Asian Studies, Directory of Open Access Journals.
3. Sage Publications India has issued a special series called "Sage Studies on India's North East"
4. The talk at the Asian Research Institute of City University of New York was delivered on 18 May, 2012 and that at Princeton Institute of International and Regional Studies, Princeton University was on 15 October 2013. The video content of Kashyap delivering speeches at these institutes is available on YouTube and the addresses are http://youtu.be/9eTwE_TvgVo and http://youtu.be/c4UAVOtMhs0 respectively.

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