

On a Country in Captive: A Review on Aruni Kashyap's *There Is No Good Time for Bad News*
Book Review

Aruni Kashyap's *There Is No Good Time for Bad News*.
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Aruni Kashyap's poetry is an organic blend of powerful realities and raw emotions. While many of his contemporary poets devote their attention towards the technical nuances of poetry, Kashyap's focus beams on what he wants to say rather than the how behind it. The form never overpowers the ideas that he ardently tries to convey through the perfectly cut lines of his debut poetry collection, *There Is No Good Time for Bad News*, which depicts the plight of a state that was brought to nemesis by the insurgency. His poems offer a spatial tour through the unexplored regions of the Northeast to the streets of Manhattan, where numerous lives are entwined into a single destiny. It resonates with the traumatic experiences and suppressed voices of the survivors of the Assam insurgency alerting the world to the brutality inflicted by the authoritarian state which deprives the people of a happy and peaceful life. The poet draws deep from the turbulent personal experiences of the people around him which he then fine-tunes into the shared experiences of the narrator, narrated and the reader. These verses are stained with the everyday violence encountered by the people of his homeland and unquestionably create a lasting impact, with the conversational style of language that is astutely employed by the poet.

As a bilingual writer who writes in Assamese and English, Kashyap has successfully managed to translate the complex Northeast cultural and political experiences into English, thus widening its reach to a global level. His novel *The House With a Thousand Stories* and the short story collection *His Father's Disease* were well received. He is also the editor of the anthology *How to Tell the Story of an Insurgency* and has translated the prominent writer Indira Goswami's last work, *The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar*. His poetry collection, *There Is No Good Time for Bad News*, can be considered as a seminal contribution to postcolonial writing where the poems are arranged as a chronological record of the Assam insurgency. Kashyap's poems depict the harsh realities associated with the armed struggle between the state and the ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam) and vividly describe the pathos of life, the agony of the women who were brutally tormented by the militants, the endless wait of the mothers to receive the dead bodies of their sons and the trauma faced by the survivors. These poems thus lacerate the minds of the readers with the chilling imageries of violence and death. This poetry collection also found its place in the final list for the Levis Award and the Marsh Hawk Poetry Prize.

Kashyap's poetic voice emanates from the everyday horror that traumatizes the life of the people in a totalitarian state. The poems such as 'An Invitation to Murder Me' and 'August' frown at the notion of 'freedom' and mock Indian democracy for not fulfilling its promises to its citizens. For the children "... go to Independence Day / with the hope of eating sweets, / because / they love to sing patriotic songs / without knowing their meaning, / because Independence Day / is a holiday for them", says Kashyap. The callousness of the rest of the nation towards the struggles of Assam is severely criticised in many of these poems. Most of the narratives unveil

the repressed voices of the survivors, especially the women who suffered under the militant rule. The miserable existence of the women who were raped by the militants are discussed in the poem, 'My Aunt Talks About Being Raped by Soldiers' while the letter from a girl to her insurgent lover in 'Where the Sun Rises' juxtaposes the myths of the land with the insurgency. The letter reads: "Parashuram bathed there, and like blood, his axe descended, / but, still, he is the mother-killer. / Parashuram, there is blood in your hands— / your mother's."

The poem 'The Militant's Mother: A Letter' is yet another lament, of a mother for her son who has gone to join the ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam). Even though the son has decided to sacrifice his life for his motherland, the mother is still worried about him: "I want to know whether you are eating well / if you have lost weight." The title poem 'There Is No Good Time for Bad News' opens by saying, "This is the thirty-second time she has come to identify his body / This time I am sure it belongs to her son." This depicts the unfortunate predicament of a mother, where she must identify her son's body which was strewn apart in a spate of violence that occurred in Assam. Several such mothers had to endure the loss of their sons and identify the dead bodies of dear ones by their birthmarks. Here, the poet employs powerful metaphors such as a woman who crumbled like a house of cards, bleated like a frightened goat that saw a knife and that of a woman in labour, when she realises that it was the dead body of her son who went to participate in the revolution. The poet feels that it is the women who suffered the most during the insurgency as the political turmoil of Assam had left several women at stake with the death of their kith and kin. In the scourge of the violence that ensued, women became the prime victims of sexual abuse and the emotional upheaval left in its wake.

The poems also offer an insight into the diary entries of the survivors, the soldiers who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorders and the grandmothers who recollect the historical events. In a way, Kashyap's poems can be considered as a variant form of historical recordings that are untold by the mainstream history texts. At the same time, these verses become skilfully crafted memoirs that poignantly capture the real-life scenes of East India. In the poem 'The Prime Minister's Visit' the grandmother recollects the 'long nose', the 'hands' and the 'white cap' of the divine Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru who was regal and knowledgeable but always stood on a platform of eternal glory, away from the common man. It was during his grandson Rajiv Gandhi's rule in 1985, that the Assam Accord was signed. The state suffered from several issues such as the immigration of migrants from Bangladesh, the rise of ULFA and the invading Indian Army who enjoyed free reign in the state due to AFSPA (Armed Forces Special Power Act). These poems interpolate the political history of Assam and reprimand the denial of fundamental rights to citizens that largely went unnoticed by the rest of the nation. In another, the poem 'News from Home' the poet depicts the curbing of the freedom of the press by the totalitarian regime, where he says, "... how many days news from home / should take to reach where I live, / so that tears dry up, hence no TRPs."

Most often, Aruni Kashyap's poems are a site of cultural balance between the East and the West. The poet invokes the bardic tradition of Indian folk songs and infuses the poetic diction of writers such as Allen Ginsberg and W.B. Yeats. Some of his poems are dedicated to native poets of Assam such as Brinchi Bhattacharya, Hem Barua as well as to the poets like Paul Eluard and Ezra Pound. The poem 'Dear India: A Collage Poem' can be compared to Ginsberg's 'America' where Kashyap uses a sarcastic tone to criticise the indifference of the nation towards

the insurgency in Assam. The poem reads: “Dear India, go fuck yourself with your atom bomb / ... Dear India, why do you make me / feel ashamed so often? As if seizing the virginites / of fourteen-year-olds by Indian soldiers in the ‘90s / wasn’t enough”— echoing Ginsberg’s poem, the poet offers a direct linguistic attack on the totalitarian sensibilities of the ruling class where the people feel betrayed when the country celebrates its 50th anniversary of freedom. In 'Spring 1979', the poet juxtaposes the idea of "a terrible beauty is born" from W.B. Yeats's poem 'Easter 1916', to provide an understanding of the revolution happening in his homeland. It is to be noted that despite being political his poems are resplendent with the lush imageries drawn from nature and the indigenous culture of the people of the Northeast.

Kashyap’ poetry delivers a scathing attack on the idea of 'freedom' and 'nation' as a hollow promise that fails to deliver the people. His collection, *There Is No Good Time for Bad News*, brings to light the tales of people, whose lives are tinged with so much violence that it morphs into an inevitable part of their everyday reality. For them violence, bloodshed and trauma have become a ‘natural’ facet of their mundane lifestyle that leaves behind permanent stains on their minds. The horrors of war that Kashyap addresses in his words reminds me of the poem ‘Picture’ by Iraqi poet Bekes Jr (Sherko Faiq) where four boys; a Turk, a Persian, an Arab and a Kurd are seen collectively drawing the picture of a man that is complete only when “the fourth drew a gun on his shoulder.” Guns, bloodshed and violence have been integrated into the reality of these children as an essential aspect to the point that they are unable to conceive a world outside these horrors. Aruni Kashyap's poetry collection is thus an eye-opener to every reader who remains blissfully unaware of these disturbing situations that haunt the Northeastern people and becomes the voice of the people whose voices have been silenced for too long. I believe

There Is No Good Time for Bad News is definitely worth reading and it will take the readers on a journey that would awaken them to the buried past of Northeast India.

Bionote

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