# Belonging and Identity in Aruni Kashyap's *The House with a Thousand Stories*

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Received: September 09, 2025 Accepted: September 11, 2025 Published Online: September 30, 2025

ABSTRACT

Home is where one can situate themselves and foster a sense of belonging. This idea of home is challenged in Aruni Kashyap's novel, *The House with a Thousand Stories*. This novel deals with Assam socio-political issues and the domestic dwellings set amidst it. The private space in the novel acts as a converging point where social life collides with personal life, making it both a safe space and a battleground. The ancestral house functions beyond being a physical structure. It becomes a non-physical entity that holds memory, identity and trauma. The home, the supposed safe space becomes an arena constantly challenging the identity and belonging of its inhabitants. The walls of the house fail to act as barriers from the social unrest, instead it lets the outside world bleed into the house making it a microcosm of the larger unit. The 'out there' space gets recreated within the private enclave. The house mirrors the society's system of exclusion and inclusion. Within the walls, this system is based on gender roles, relationships and personal histories. Considering the fleeting nature of home, this paper redefines home through Kashyaps's narrative, as a borderland. It is filled with constant struggles and forms a central site where the inhabitants find it difficult to embrace their identity and self. By bringing forth the idea of domestic space transforming into a conflicted arena, the paper challenges the conventional notion of home. It also uses home as the place where answers to the questions of belonging, identity, memory and survival can be found.

Keywords: Postcolonial Literature, Belonging, Domestic space, Home, Assam

The idea of home has often been portrayed as a place of stability, safety and belonging. However postcolonial literature contradicts this notion and crafts home as a site of conflict that continuously negotiates one's belonging. The idea of safety is frequently disrupted by historical violence, political instability and societal fragmentation. It emerges as a site of external or internal conflict rather than refuge.

Aruni Kashyap's *The House with a Thousand Stories* (2013), is set in Assam against the backdrop of insurgency and political unrest. The house which is the central site of discussion is the ancestral house of the protagonist, Pablo. He lives in Guwahati along with his parents while the ancestral house is situated in Mayong. This home serves not only as a shelter but also an emotional space where memories, identities and traumas collide. The occupants of the house perpetually negotiate their identity and belonging within the domestic arena.

Domestic spaces in the novel are constantly affected by the happenings of the society. Home, thus, does not remain a neutral space but is often shaped by power and politics. Kashyap's *The House with a Thousand Stories* reflects the unrest created by the dominant powers in the society. By painting a vivid picture of the constant struggles undertaken by the inhabitants, this novel questions the traditional notions of domestic space. The house becomes a condensed version of the society. This smaller unit reciprocates the dysfunction of the society within the house. The SULFA members (former members of the United Liberation Front of Assam that have surrendered to the Indian Government), are seen asserting power both through violence and wealth. Similar patterns of dominance can be seen within the household. Just like the political groups such as SULFAs that establish hegemony in the society by enforcing fear, characters like Oholya-jethai also exercise unchecked authority inside the house. The narrator remarks, "As usual, she had taken it upon herself to scream at all the wrongs, create panic and terror and be the centre of attention" (12). She assumes herself as the person responsible to point out everyone's wrongdoing and asserts her rules and beliefs on others. Her behaviour reflects domestic

authoritarianism. Just as politically powerful groups in Assam impose authority, Oholya-jethai also asserts her superiority by silencing dissenting voices and enforcing her will on others.

Kashyap makes it clear that home offers no escape from fear or terror. Mridul, Pablo's cousin, voices this despair bluntly: "I just want peace in this house. If you go out, it is the army's fear. If you stay in, it is Oholya-jethai's terror" (51). This line blurs the boundary between public and private lives, clearly proving that individuals inhibiting the household do not stay unaffected by the turmoil in the society. They must constantly face fear and dread in both public and private places simultaneously. The army's surveillance outside is mirrored in Oholya-jethai's oppressive authority. Through interpersonal dominance, the household space reproduces discontent rather than shielding its members from it. Oholya-jethai's supremacy not only enables her to impose her will on others but also creates emotional struggles and distress for family members who find themselves trapped between external political violence and internal domestic terror. The physical structures do not barricade the political anxieties, which destroys the very sense of belonging they are meant to provide.

Kashyap illustrates how domestic tyranny is asserted not only through speech but also through the policing of rituals and cultural practices. Oholya-jethai scolds Pablo's mother:

> Don't you know you shouldn't enter the bedroom during the day? It doesn't look good, and you should know that you must at least bathe if you have entered the bedroom in the day. You may not follow these rules in the city, but at least maintain some decorum in the village (Kashyap 39).

These lines demonstrate how she uses shame to establish her superiority and impose her personal views on others. Her insistence on abiding by these customs and practices, shows how private enclaves become a site of regulations and rules, just like the public sphere under surveillance and control. Oholya-jethai equates the failure of following rituals as a sign of disrespect and through it she belittles those who oppose or resist her. This shows that the ancestral house imitates the social

structure of Assam, where resistance to the powerful political groups is punished with exclusion and other harsh measures.

In *The House with a Thousand Stories*, Kashyap illustrates how the ancestral home becomes an archive of loss as the domestic space becomes soaked with trauma, fear and memories. Despite the common perception of home as a haven, Kashyap shows how social unrest and violence infiltrate private life, making it hard for the families to escape the unsettling past. "I didn't want to think about the smell of shit and blood, the cries, the heart-piercing wails" (17). The narrator recalls the lasting horrors of violence during his previous visit to his ancestral home. The line between the past and the present, between the public and the private, is blurred by the vivid image of it in his memory. Although the narrator does not want to recollect his horrific past experiences, the graphic images of it still linger in his memory. The immediate resurfacing of this memory when talking about his ancestral home echoes the deep scars it has left in the narrator's consciousness. The deeply embedded horrors in him are thus sub-consciously associated with home.

Fear becomes an everyday condition for the household, whether it is Pablo's home in Guwahati or his ancestral home in Mayong. The violence that takes place in the community disrupts the daily lives of individuals and induces fear in inhabitants of the household. *"*You will have to be careful. The army is there all the time—apparently they just beat up anyone, Pablo!*"* (Kashyap 28). The statement captures the acquired perception of the ordinary people about the government authorities and the fear inflicted by them. Violence in the community's regular life is not a rare phenomenon but an anticipated crisis. It gradually gets absorbed in the rhythm of ordinary life, nearly making it impossible to neglect. The fear the violence creates is not only seen in the public spaces but also pierces through the walls. It becomes an integral part of ordinary conversations of the household.

Fear becomes generational. It is passed down from one to another like memories. Individuals teach the younger ones not only to follow certain practices but also to avoid some. "…Mridul stepped out of the road like a meandering stream of water when he reached near the electric pole, to avoid

treading on the portion just below and around it" (Kashyap 47). The action echoes a deeply rooted behaviour shaped by the fear and memory of a past incident. Mridul passes this fear to the narrator as well and insists him to follow his actions. This reflects how traumas are passed through generations and preserved through memories. The way Mridul describes the appalling image of the dead body he saw, suggests the true intensity of the trauma and fear induced.

> But we saw the body first. Only in his red underwear. He didn't have legs. They had been chopped off. He didn't have fingers. They had been cut off too. His face was twisted—as if he was repulsed by a bad smell. It was such a horrific sight! Hanging from the electric pole like a dead, electrocuted bat (Kashyap 52).

In this way Kashyap illustrates how trauma induces perpetual fear and how it eventually becomes a constraint within generations, bringing individuals under the same roof, making them prisoners of the same unsettling memories.

The home in Kashyap's narrative does not merely absorb and mimic the social structure, dread and trauma, but also continuously shapes the identities of the inhabitants. The turmoil in the community acts as a barrier in personal growth for people residing in rural Assam. Through Prosanto-da, Kashyap brings forth the way aspirations are broken in the labyrinths of corrupted bureaucracy; he asks, "Is this a revolution? Will it help Assam secede from India?" (23). It shows how violence and dysfunction do no good to a society and its people. It only keeps them anchored in the vicious cycle of dysfunction. Here, Prosanto-da struggles to nationalize his own college but abruptly fails because of the corrupted system. "For the last five years, he had been trying to get Mayong College—the college he founded with some of his friends—nationalized, but their file would just not move through the labyrinths of bureaucracy" (Kashyap 23).

Kashyap suggests that such cycles prevent growth or healing, both in the state and in the household. The community and the household cannot move forward when fear and trauma shape their identity. Prosanto-da's struggle to establish his 'self' within the home, both in professional and personal

lives, goes in vain. He is criticised by his own family members for wanting to marry a divorcee he loves. Rather than respecting his desires and embracing it, his family puts forward the idea of social propriety. Such negligence among the members of the family corrodes their bond and creates disruption. Social judgement thus suppresses personal freedom and does not let individuals embrace their selfhood. It holds them back in the name of culture and tradition. The characters, who are the smallest unit in the social fabric, fail to realize that they constitute the society.

Pablo's first visit to Mayong is during the time of Bolen-bortta's funeral. During his visit Pablo notices his surroundings and the changes taking place within the house. The narrator reflects on the death of Bolen-bortta:

> The loss of Bolen-bortta was too much. It meant one less earning member. It meant Mridul's status in the family had come down from 'Son of the Earning Member' to 'Son of a Dependent'… He had to think, let go the demands of his heart, if he didn't want to etch himself in the memories of the people in that house, in that village, as the 'Selfish Son'. The designation of a 'Dependent Son' was much better, much nobler. 'Selfish Son' wasn't (Kashyap 60).

This passage depicts how identity within the household is not fixed but fluid. It is unstable and keeps shifting according to an individual's economic contribution to the family and social perception. In the ancestral home, belonging is measured less by affection and more by one's capacity to support the family. Mridul's position within the hierarchy changes drastically after his father's death, making him less worthy to the family as he had become the "Son of a Dependent" (60). He had to sacrifice his selfhood to not be perceived as the "Selfish Son" (60). by the society. It also demonstrates how family expectations suppress personal desires. Mridul falls in love with a girl from a Nepali tribe. Instead of expressing his desire to any of his family members, he confides with one of his friends, Brikodar. This reveals the limit of safety he feels among his family. He knows that his love for the girl, if known to anyone, would bring shame to his family. So, to preserve his identity, Pablo senses that Mridul will be

obliged to leave this love behind. It indicates how expressing one's own desires is seen as self-serving in society.

The rural community in the novel frames the acts of sacrifice and reliance as noble, whereas personal yearnings are considered selfish. The older generation's inability to acknowledge the needs of the younger generation, becomes a hindrance on the personal growth of characters like Mridul, Anamika and Prosonta-da. The absence of inter-generational dialogue widens the gap between the inhabitants of the home.

Women occupy a major role within the family in Kashyap's novel. They are dominant and are yet silenced by the cultural practices they take upon themselves to abide by rigidly. These rituals strip away their individuality. Marriage particularly changes the way women are perceived in the families, completely altering their identity based on marital status. As the narrator notes, "After the Juron, she would not wear anything given to her by her own family, she could not take anything to her husband's house either" (Kashyap 3). Juron (a pre wedding Assamese ritual) severs the ties of the woman with their natal family. This marks a point in their lives where they must reestablish their belonging and identity, in a new place. They will have to call a new confined space their home. The house they have called home so far until their marriage, will become a space they will not belong to. For women, home becomes a fleeting space, something that changes with their dwelling. The search for belonging becomes an endless cycle of identity crisis for these women. Juron thus questions the idea of belonging. Even birth, years of memories and relationships cannot anchor belonging to a single space.

In *The House with a Thousand Stories*, belonging emerges as an unstable, shifting construct that is shaped differently for men and women. For women, it is built upon their marital status and based on the role of their male partner. Whereas for men, belonging is often tied to the financial contributions they make to their families. In both ways, belonging is not fixed, but changes with the external circumstances. It becomes an idea that is repeatedly negotiated within the household, village and even

in the state. Within the domestic landscape belonging often deals with factors such as fear, trauma, memory and identity. These factors become inextricably intertwined to define belonging.

Kashyaps's *The House with a Thousand Stories* portrays home as a battleground. Despite the conventional idea of home as a site of safety and belonging, it is perpetually challenged in this novel. When set against the backdrop of Assam's socio-political turmoil, the domestic space is terribly unstable. Rather than providing security, it transforms into a site where private and public fear collide. The fear in turn constructs dreadful memories and traumas for a lifetime. The paper reflects the phenomenon of the house mirroring the society's dysfunction, while travelling along parallel tracks. Belonging is thus fragile within the household. The gruesome violence taking place in the society, the trauma instilled by them, the forced rituals and the suppression of individuality further strengthen the argument. Belonging is an abstract concept constantly influenced by external forces.

Identity in the domestic arena is closely related to one's belonging. It is altered by gender roles, hierarchy, social perception and state dysfunction. The thin line between the public and private is blurred in the novel. Drawing from this, the paper demonstrates that societal unrest does not stay confined to the 'out there' spaces. It infiltrates even into the most intimate regions of family life.

The home depicted in Kashyap's *The House with a Thousand Stories* resembles the concepts of home in postcolonial literature. With the help of the novel, the paper makes the readers reconsider the notion of home and its reliability. It represents home as a challenging area where characters must continuously strive to embrace their 'self', negotiate their belonging and withstand societal constraints. It thus becomes a locus of conflict rather than being a protected enclave. In this way, *The House with a Thousand Stories* situates the idea of home within the larger discourse of the postcolonial literature, showing that the struggle for belonging begins not in the streets, but within the very walls we call our own.

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