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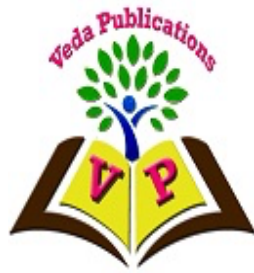
NEGOTIATING QUEER UNBELONGING: READING ARUNI KASHYAP'S *HIS FATHER'S DISEASE*

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ABSTRACT

The literature from the Northeast of India has often emerged as a crucial site of contestation for exploring diverse marginalised subjectivities and complex questions of belonging. Within this growing corpus of literature, Aruni Kashyap's short story collection, *His Father's Disease*, foregrounds the complex social realities of queer subjectivity and their ongoing struggles with feelings of unbelonging within the heteronormative social structure. Through close readings of three select stories from the collection, "His Father's Disease", "Like the Thread in a Garland", and "After Anthropology", the paper interrogates how the performance of "compulsory heterosexuality" prescribed by the heteronormative social order functions as a regulatory framework that marginalises non-normative identities, thereby producing exclusionary structures of belonging and social legitimacy. By situating the select stories within Sara Ahmed's theorisation of "affective economies", the paper examines how emotions such as shame, disgust, and grief function as social forces that reinforce boundaries of belonging, thereby relegating queer subjects to the margins of society.



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Aruni Kashyap's collection of short stories, titled *His Father's Disease*, serves as a significant literary text for examining how emotions circulate within social settings, generating various exclusionary configurations of belonging. Kashyap's collection comprises ten short stories that are not detached from one another but rather interwoven through characters, settings, and themes, giving it a holistic shape. Although the setting shifts back and forth between Northeast India and the US, Kashyap's intention to picturise the richness and flavor of Assamese culture, along with the prevalent violence in the area, remains intact. His narratives offer a dialogic space to challenge the various forms of preconceived notions that pigeonhole regional literature and representations, while at the same time combat stereotypes based on sexuality that exist in the literary and social worlds. In his review of the book, Amit R. Baishya states that three major thematic clusters loosely subdivide the ten short stories. These include "(1) living with political terror, (2) the complexities of intercultural encounters mediated usually via the perspective of a male, diasporic South Asian subject, and (3) representations of same-sex relationships and masculine homoerotic encounters" ("*His Father's Disease* by Aruni Kashyap)

Through *His Father's Disease*, Kashyap successfully journeys into lesser-explored and neglected areas to voice the feelings and emotions of marginalized or underrepresented subjects dwelling in the state of Assam and beyond. His collection includes stories that deal with same-sex desire or homosexuality, an area rarely explored within the context of literature from Northeast India. Kashyap's

attempt to represent the affective experiences of queer subjects dwelling within the Northeastern context is similar to Yao's decolonizing of affects to move beyond the "biopolitics of feelings" and accommodate the feelings of marginalized, racialized, or queer subjects. Yao attempts to decolonise affect studies by dissenting from the "biopolitics of feelings" and "hinting at other ways of organizing life that might be suppressed, overlooked, adjacent, incipient, insurgent, resurgent, or still to be imagined" (Disaffected 8). She uses the term "unfeeling" to move beyond dominant ways of feeling and to suggest alternative ways to incorporate "disaffected" and marginalised subjects. She defines "unfeeling" as:

A broad term for a range of affective modes, performances, moments, patterns, and practices that fall outside of or are not legible using dominant regimes of expression. The range includes withholding, disregard, growing a thick skin, refusing to care, opacity, numbness, dissociation, inscrutability, frigidity, insensibility, obduracy, flatness, insensitivity, disinterest, coldness, heartlessness, fatigue, desensitization, and emotional unavailability (Yao 11).

As Sarah Wright states, "work considering affective and emotional aspects of belonging, also, however, sheds light on that other side of belonging, what it means not to belong, to feel alienated, for attachments and desires to be thwarted" ("*More-than-human*" 8). In *His Father's Disease*, a persistent sense of unbelonging within one's own body is evidently visible in three short stories: "*His Father's*



Disease", "Like the Thread in a Garland", and "After Anthropology". These stories explore the different stereotypes and attitudes attached to homosexuality, not just in the Northeastern state of Assam but also in the liberal world of the United States. The paper explores how these queer experiences of unbelonging emerge from the circulation of emotions such as shame, disgust, and grief, which together constitute what Sara Ahmed conceptualises as "affective economies". According to Ahmed, emotions play a significant function in shaping the "surfaces of individual and collective bodies" (The Cultural Politics of Emotions 1). She notes, "emotions do things, and they align individuals with communities – or bodily space with social space – through the very intensity of their attachments" (Ahmed, "Affective Economies" 119). Instead of only considering the psychological implications of emotions, Ahmed draws her attention to study how emotions work "in concrete and particular ways, to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective" (Ahmed 119). Ahmed is trying to move beyond the psychological model to study emotions. She states that the psychological model internalises emotions far too much. Instead, she wants to oppose that to an "inside-out model" where the outside works on the inside and vice versa. Emotions are not just housed in the brain but also exist and circulate in social, cultural, and religious settings. Ahmed's emphasis on the circulatory nature of emotions between individuals and collectives, between people, places or things, etc, threatens the assumption that considers emotion to be a private affair that "simply belong to individuals and "come from within and then move outward toward others" (Ahmed 117).

However, it states that "emotions are not simply 'within' or 'without' but that they create the very effect of the surfaces or boundaries of bodies and worlds" (Ahmed 117).

The story "His Father's Disease", based on the title of the book, exposes the reality of a heteronormative society that often curbs the emotions, feelings, and desires of all those subjects that deviate from the ideals of heterosexual behaviour. It narrates the tragic end of a character, Anil, who fails to meet the demands of a heteronormative society. The title "His Father's Disease" symbolically represents the attitude of a society that considers any kind of deviation from heterosexual behaviour to be strange, an abnormality or disease that can be cured. The story begins with the revelation that Anil's father, Horokanto, is bisexual. It narrates the incident when Anil's mother, Neerumoni, discovers her husband, Horokanto, naked on the bed with her younger brother, Nilambor. The incident shatters her and fills her with hatred and disgust. Later, when she discovers Anil with other men, she is engulfed with sorrow and grief. She fails to acknowledge his homosexual nature and believes "he has acquired his father's disease" ("His Father's Disease" 118).

In The Cultural Politics of Emotions, Sara Ahmed states that hetero-coupling is the archetypal base for national reproduction, and those bodies showing any signs of deviation are shunned. This is what Ahmed and Judith Butler call "compulsory heterosexuality" (Cultural Politics 145). According to Ahmed, "compulsory heterosexuality shapes the body by the assumption that a body must orient itself towards some objects and not others, objects that are



secured as ideal through the fantasy of difference" (145). Hence, she states that:

Sexual orientation is not simply about the direction one takes towards an object of desire...Sexual orientation involves bodies that leak into worlds; it involves a way of orienting the body towards and away from others, which affects how one can enter different kinds of social spaces...Hence, the failure to orient oneself towards the ideal sexual object affects how we live in the world, an effect that is readable as the failure to reproduce, and as a threat to the social ordering of life itself (Ahmed 145).

Anil's homosexual behaviour is seen as a deviation from the ideals of "compulsory heterosexuality", which turns him into a stranger, a threat to the "natural reproduction of life". His desires and feelings are often thwarted as he fails to enjoy the comfort, space, and privilege that heteronormativity grants in a society. Ahmed also states that "Queer subjects, when faced by the comforts of heterosexuality, may feel uncomfortable (the body does not sink into a space that has already taken its shape)" (148). They feel "out of place, awkward and unsettled". She describes how queerness disrupts "normativity". It is not fitting to the norms and the model of a nuclear family. Hence, she states that "discomfort is not about assimilation or resistance but about inhabiting norms differently" (Ahmed 155). This suffices to explain Anil's lack of a sense of belonging in a heterosexual society. Anil's extension of his home to build a personal space for himself reflects his desperate desire to achieve a sense of belonging in a society that refuses to

acknowledge the emotions and feelings of homosexual people. The extension provides him with freedom and a space to express his repressed feelings and desires that are not acknowledged in the outside world. He also tries to achieve a sense of belonging by building emotional attachments with other homosexual characters, such as Gurmail Singh and Promod. Despite all these efforts, Anil meets a tragic end when he fails to satisfy the heteronormative demands that will not allow any disruption of "the idealization of the family form" (Ahmed 153).

The other story, titled "Like the Thread in a Garland," also reflects the hesitation of homosexual or bisexual characters to freely express their sexual orientation out of the fear of disrupting the "scripts" or ideals of a heteronormative society. They prefer to survive in a society with an absence of a sense of belonging rather than coming out with their sexual orientation due to social embarrassment. The story begins with Nishad's narration as he discusses Rubul's marriage with Anuradha. Although the entire story throws light on Nishad and Rubul's obvious attraction toward each other, they refuse to accept it wholeheartedly and enter into heterosexual relationships with others. Despite his attraction towards Nishad, Rubul marries Anuradha in order to hide his real identity in a society that considers gay men to be less masculine. Even Anuradha considers gay men to be "effeminate, and worked as choreographers, fashion designers, and make-up artists ("Like the Thread in a Garland" 135). In the story, Rubul's sexual orientation is not explicitly stated, but his denial of his wife and his attraction to Nishad point out the possibility of a liminal identity.



The possibility of a bisexual or even a homosexual orientation remains unexplored in Rubul owing to social stigma. As homosexual couples often face social ostracization, threats to life, and rejection in conservative environments, they prefer to suppress their feelings and hide behind the masculinist image expected of them.

Apart from that, Kashyap also exposes the hypocrisy of the Western liberal world that often sees itself as the opposite of Eastern conservative societies. In "After Anthropology", Kashyap includes the character of Tony to portray the homophobic attitudes of the Western world despite its constitutional acceptance of homosexuality. The character of Tony is not just homophobic but also racist. As Ahmed observes:

"The reproduction of life itself, where life is conflated with a social idea ('life as we know it'), is often represented as threatened by the existence of others: immigrants, queers, other others. These others become sources of fascination that allow the ideal to be posited as ideal through their embodiment of the failure of the idea to be translated into being or action" (Cultural Politics 144).

In the story, Tony is threatened by the presence of Raj, who is not just homosexual, but also an Indian or an "immigrant" other. Despite living in a liberal society where homosexual marriage is legalised, Matt's father, Tony, shows equal disapproval along with Raj's parents against their choice of partner. When Matt introduces Raj to his father, Tony's racist outlook is also exposed when he asks Raj about the presence of the Muslim population in India. However, Matt and Raj's visit abruptly ends when

Tony tries to humiliate and scare Raj by leaving a fake skull in the bedroom they are allotted for the night. Tony's attempt to frighten Raj is a strategy to undermine the latter's masculinity and display his own hyper-masculinity. By making Raj an object of ridicule, Tony also expresses his disgust towards Raj and everything that he represents.

According to Ahmed, no object is inherently disgusting. Ahmed proposes that an object's association with disgust is contingent upon its existence in an entire economy of disgust. Therefore, it circulates and maintains certain power relations insofar as it is associated with certain people. Interestingly, it also signals the vulnerability of the person who experiences disgust at the threatening other, as though they are under threat by the other's presence. Similar to Tony's disgust, Neerumoni in "His Father's Disease" also experiences a sense of disgust when she discovers her husband making love to her younger brother. Later, when she comes to know about her son's sexual orientation, she becomes overwhelmed with disgust for the homosexual other. Out of frustration and disgust, Neerumoni swims "from one end to the other, splashing in the water. She did not want to hear the lovemaking sounds" ("His Father's Disease" 118). Ahmed also argues that disgust contributes to the maintenance of some signs as "sticky" and, in a way, is performative. It attains a certain value through repetitive utterances and iterations, ultimately giving it a mould or shape through which it can perform and repeat more, attaining greater "stickiness" and cultural values. It gives rise to a certain kind of rage against certain sections of people (Ahmed, Cultural Politics 93). These emotions can generate inclusive or



exclusive belongings that can categorise certain sections of the population as 'the other'. This proves Raj and Matt's anxiousness in meeting the latter's father in "After Anthropology". Despite living in the US, where homosexual marriages are legalised, both Raj and Matt still feel as if they do not belong in a society where their own family does not accept their relationship. This "stickiness" of homosexuality with disgust prevents both Raj and Matt from developing any form of emotional attachments with the heterosexual world in order to gain a sense of belonging.

In "Queer Feelings", Ahmed also talks about the importance of grief within queer politics. She claims that queer bodies are not grieved like normal heterosexual bodies. Because queer demands break from the category of normative body and life, they become less than human in a heterosexual society. Therefore, they are not grieveable objects or are already considered dead. This is evident when Gurmail Singh sexually assaults Anil, Neerumoni, who, out of fear, stands like a statue without asking for any help to rescue her son. She does not scream and "let the whole village know, because if they knew, Anil would turn into an object of ridicule" ("His Father's Disease" 124). The fear of public humiliation and ridicule has also stopped Anil from expressing his trauma after being raped by Gurmail Singh at his own place. For Neerumoni and Anil, even grieving together is not comfortable, and hence they never speak about it. Another incident where the queer subject is not grieved is when Neerumoni chases out Promod from Anil's bed in a vulnerable condition. Not being able to digest the public humiliation of being a laughing stock, Promod commits suicide.

Even after that incident, Anil neither accuses his mother nor expresses his anger or sadness in front of her. He still grieves silently out of fear and embarrassment. Ahmed notes:

"It is not that queer lives exist as ungrieveable loss, but that queer losses cannot be admitted as forms of loss in the first place, as queer lives are not recognized as lives to be lost. One has to recognize oneself as having something before one can recognize oneself as losing something" (156).

According to her, queer losses are often excluded from the public culture of grief. She also discusses Freud's idea of melancholia and extends it, stating that "melancholia should not be seen as pathological; the desire to maintain attachment with the lost other is enabling, rather than blocking new forms of attachment" (Ahmed, Cultural Politics 159). According to Freud, melancholia freezes an individual, preventing him or her from moving on from a lost object. However, Ahmed believes that melancholia prevents an individual from moving on from a lost object only if he or she already has affects for the object prior to its loss. Ahmed then states that the potential of queer grief lies in the acknowledgment of the affects or impressions that the lost object imprints on an individual's life. Therefore, it is necessary to share queer grief with others. Ahmed believes that "the ongoing work of grief helps to keep alive the memories of those who have gone, provide care for those who are grieving, and allow the impressions of others to touch the surface of queer communities" (161).



Therefore, the paper illustrates how the selected stories from Aruni Kashyap's *His Father's Disease* offer a critical interrogation of the queer subjectivity within the intersecting frameworks of heteronormativity, affect, and belonging. Through close readings of the stories, the paper demonstrates how emotions such as shame, disgust, and grief function not merely as psychological states but as social forces that effectively produce and regulate structures of belonging and exclusion. Drawing upon Sara Ahmed's theorisation of "affective economies", the paper interrogates how these emotions acquire "stickiness" through their circulation between signs and bodies, thereby attaching to queer bodies and rendering them deviant, illegible, and socially precarious. In this manner, it foregrounds the internalising of these affective pressures by queer subjects, leading to their repression, marginalisation, and a persistent sense of unbelonging within the heteronormative social order.

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