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ISSUES AND THEMES IN THE POEMS OF SEAMUS HEANEY AND NILMANI PHOOKAN:
THE SEARCH FOR A COMMON GROUND

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ABSTRACT

It has largely remained unnoticed that the Irish poet and Nobel Laureate in literature Seamus Heaney (1939-2003) and the Assamese poet NilmaniPhookan (1933-2023) bear significant resemblance in their poetry. While Seamus Heaney is deeply rooted to his Irish identity and Irish milieu, the Assamese poet NilmaniPhookan deals with the themes and issues that concern Assamese social life. Both the poets have very deep reverence for the rural life and the common man. Both the poets were equally sensitive to the crisis of humanity that occurred due to the political unrest and violence that has erupted in their own lands. While Seamus Heaney epitomized the Irish ethos and culture, NilmaniPhookan gave expressions to the Assamese ethos and culture in a much similar way.

Keywords: Seamus Heaney, Irish poetry, NilmaniPhookan, Assamese poetry, the celebration of rural life, response to the social and political realities

Introduction

The present paper intends to make an intensive and in-depth exploration into the poems of NilmaniPhookan (1933--2023) from Assam and Seamus Heaney (1939--2013) from Ireland in order to demonstrate that both of them have created a poetic world of their own having much in common. Both of them made their best effort in responding to the social tradition, cultural heritage and the folk elements of their respective native lands—in case of the former it is Assam and in case of the latter, it is Ireland. Their poetic sensibilities were shaped and nourished by the broad social and cultural elements rooted in their own native landscapes. Both of them responded to their local landscape, history, culture and politics in a way that have significant commonalities. The present paper seeks to explore those commonalities in order to place the two poets from two very distant corner of the earth on the same pedestal. While discussing the poems of the Assamese poet NilmaniPhookan, the critics have made references to numerous celebrated poets and poetic tradition of the world, but there has been no attempt yet to read the poetry of NilmaniPhookan in conjunction with the poems of the celebrated Irish poet Seamus Heaney.

Discussion: Seamus Heaney and NilmaniPhookan

The first common thing about the two poets—Seamus Heaney and NilmaniPhookan—is that both of them belong to the same historical period and their literary works were also produced almost in the same period, that is, the second half of the twentieth century. They were two contemporary figures of world literature, particularly

poetry. The Irish poet Seamus Heaney was born in 1939 and died in 2003, while the Assamese poet Nilmani Phookan was born in 1933 and he died in 2023. Seamus Heaney began his poetic journey in the 1960s and his first anthology, *Death of a Naturalist*, was published in 1966. Similarly, the Assamese poet Nilmani Phookan wrote his first poem 'JarualirGaan' in the 1950s when he was a student of Cotton College and his first volume of poems, *SurjyaHeno Nami Aahi Ei Nodiyedi*, was published in 1963. The number of the total volumes of original poems by Heaney is 15, while the number of poetry collections by Phookan is 11. Both of them were accomplished translators as well and each of them several volumes of translated poems as well. The most celebrated translated work by Seamus Heaney is the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf* while Phookan translated poems of many countries like Japan, China etc and poems by many poets like Lorca, Vasko Popa etc into the Assamese language.

The poetic career of Nilmani Phookan is spread over several decades starting in 1950s and continuing upto the twenty first century. *Sahitya Akademi* of India published a small volume of the English translation of his selected poems. Phookan's poetry has received serious critical attention in Assamese as noted critics like Hiren Gohain, Bhaben Barua, Harekrishna Deka and Late Kabin Phookan have written extensively and elaborately on his poetry and recognized him as one of the foremost poets of Assam during the postcolonial period. Phookan began his journey carrying forward the Romantic legacy of the past and then comes into contact with the poems of different countries of the world like Federico Garcia Lorca of Spain and Vasco Popa of erstwhile Yugoslavia. His wide reading enriched his poetic insight and he became capable of responding to diverse and variegated experiences of human life. The essence of Phookan's poetry is the universal feeling of humanity in its simple pristine form found in the traditional rural life of Assam. His poetry represents the Assameseness through its rootedness with the Assamese landscape, ethos, history, emotional make-up as well as the lyricism and softness of the Assamese language. Some of his poems are embedded in the rich folk tradition of Assam in such a manner that a literal translation of those poems simply fail to communicate. Like any sensitive poet, Phookan too responds to the contemporary social and political upheaval and unrest in Assam in the later phase of his career. As Ireland is found, heard and smelt in Seamus Heaney's poetry, so does Assam remains ever present in Phookan's poetry. Both of them lived and wrote during a similar historical period. However, Heaney was more prolific than Phookan. Heaney's powerful poetic response to the specific historical condition of Ireland and her never ending political trouble made him the most famous Irish poet after W B Yeats and eventually he won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995. In comparison to that, Phookan wrote less number of poems in a language which is confined to a small and remote state of India. The lack of successful translation of his poetic oeuvre has kept him confined to a limited readership. However, the richness of Phookan's poetry demonstrates that his place in world poetry needs to be revaluated and he deserves to be placed along with the great poets of the world like Heaney.

There exists a lot of common ground between the two poets, Seamus Heaney and Nilmani Phookan, which goes much deeper than the mere external similarities.

In his poem 'Digging', which is more often cited as Heaney's poetic manifesto, the poet declares his intention to dig deep into the soil of Ireland with his pen while his father and grandfather used to dig the soil with the spade and other farming implements. This poem underlines the poet's complete identification with his ancestral past, cultural heritage and the native environment of Ireland:

Digging

Between my finger and my thumbs
 The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.
 Under my window, a clean rasping sound
 When the spade sinks into grovelly ground:
 My father, digging. I look down
 Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds

Bends low, comes up twenty years away
 Stooping in rhythm through potato drills
 Where he was digging.
 The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft
 Against the inside knee was levered firmly.
 He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep
 To scatter new potatoes, that we picked
 Loving their cool hardness in our hands.
 By God, the old man could handle a spade
 Just like his old man
 My grandfather cut more turf in a day
 Than any other man on Toner's bog.
 Once I carried him milk in a bottle
 Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up
 To drink it, then fell to right away
 Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods
 Over his shoulders, going down and down
 For the good turf. Digging.
 The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap
 Of soggy peat, the curt of an edge
 Through living roots awaken in my head
 But I've no spade to follow men like them.
 Between my finger and my thumbs
 The squat pen rests.
 I will dig with it. (Heaney pp 3)

This simple lucid poem very beautifully brings out the crux of the poetic world of Seamus Heaney. What is emphasized in the poem is that the writing of poetry by the poet is no different from the work of digging done by his father and grandfather, who were farmers or cultivators. His forefathers used to dig with a spade or used to cut turf or grow potatoes, and now the poet writes poetry with pen—the two tasks are equal having no fundamental difference. The poet, with his pen, also intends to dig deep into the history, heritage and culture of Ireland, and then intends to express them through his poetry. This shows that the poet is deeply committed to his motherland, its rich history and tradition. Another aspect of the poem is that the poet harbours in his heart a deep respect for the rural way of life and for the occupation of a farmer. Like Thomas Gray's *Elegy*, Heaney's *Digging* also presents a celebration and glorification of the rural way of life which is very sincere and spontaneous. It is obvious that despite being educated and cultured, the poet Heaney identifies himself with the common folks of his country, he never considers himself separate from them. One of the objectives of his poetic career is to project and present the history, culture and society of his Ireland to the world at large.

The Assamese poet Nilmani Phookan is no different from Heaney in this regard. Phookan was born in a village in Dergaon in Upper Assam where he spent his childhood in a beautiful world of nature marked by river,

valley, woods etc. Later he shifted to the city of Guwahati but he could never sever the umbilical cord with his rural roots. Like Heaney, he too continued to identify himself with his rural roots and cultural milieu. Like Heaney's *Digging*, Phookan has a poem which celebrates his childhood spent in the rural milieu of Assam:

'Sondhyar teje-tumroli sei gorokhiya loratu

Moiyei

Habitolia batere

Jili eta hator muthit loi

Nitow godhuli ghoroloi ubhotu

Chitika pati deu dorik dhoru

O' keteki

O' keteki buli

Chiyori furu

Gale mukhe chuma khau Lalitak

Kola jamu khai jibha

Kpla koru

Aitar maat buli

Deutihotor erabarit

Phutuka singu

Dihingot nau buri nomora

Loratu moyei

Habir pora ulai oha

Moi deu lora

Murot kutkura kaintor mukut

Mohor shinorpenpatumoi

Ketiyabaikorbatherualu

Nijanotnijokeetiya

Ringiyaimatu. (*Sagartalar Sankha*, pp 120)

(English rendering: I myself is that bloodstained cowherd boy returning home in the evening; I come along the paths through the woods with a cicada in my hand, each day I return home in the evening and I catch the small birds with the help of the handmade trap; I keep shouting like the bird keteki, I throw kisses on the face and lips of Lalita, I stain my tongue black by eating black berry, I visit the abandoned homestead of Deuti mistakenly following the voice of my grandmother and there I pick the rhododendron, I was the boy who did not die despite drowning in the river Dihing, I am a *deulora* (a boy possessed by a spirit) emerging from the woods, I have a crown on my head made of the thorns of *Kutkura*, I lost the flute made of the horns of buffalo, at times I lonely make a loud call to myself")¹.

Like Heaney's 'Digging' which makes the poet identify with the farming occupation of his father and grandfather, the above cited poem by Nilmani Phookan also situates him in the rural agricultural roots and milieu of Assam. There is also a strong element of nostalgia in the poem. A sadness grips the heart of the poem as his

relationship with his rural roots has become weak now (I lost the flute made of the horns of buffalo), although the poet yearns for that past, for that rural childhood.

Heaney's poem 'Digging' strongly evokes the vivid and sensuous images of Ireland, of her landscape, nature and rural farming, Nilmani Phookan's poem also succeeds in creating the same effect. The woods and forests, the plants and flowers, the rivers and valleys, the cultures and folk-beliefs of Assam have appeared in most vivid and lively forms in the poems of Phookan. It is said that every great poet is the spokesperson of the poet's own land, society, culture, civilization and heritage. What is best in the culture of a land remaining hidden and unexpressed is ultimately expressed by the most representative and articulate poet of that land. This is true for Heaney as well as Phookan. While Heaney has projected the Irish society, culture and history in his poetry, Phookan has done so for the Assamese society, culture and history through his poetry. That both the poets are of kindred soul becomes evident from the fact that both hold in high esteem the rural agricultural way of life and both want to identify themselves with that way of life.

The poetry of Seamus Heaney is replete with a deep sense of sympathy towards the common people and their sufferings and turmoil in life. His poem 'The Forge' presents the life and struggles of a blacksmith. The poem is based on a blacksmith of real life who was a friend of the poet. He was expert in making the horse-shoe and it was his principal occupation. However, with the passage of time, the horse-driven carts were replaced by automobile cars and this blacksmith faces an existential crisis as his wares no longer enjoy a demand in the market. His forge has now assumed the shape of a dark place and his instruments are lying scattered and rusted outside the forge. The poem ends with a deep sigh heaved by the blacksmith which is heart-touching.

The Assamese poet Nilmani Phookan also has some poems to his credit which deal with the life and sufferings of ordinary poor people. On such famous poem is "Muthimuthikoikati tor dhekiaraanguli" (cutting your fern fingers into pieces for making small bundles). This poem depicts the picture of extreme poverty seen in the countryside of Assam. It refers to an old poor woman who is waiting for customers to sell a few bundles of ferns in the evening hours. The old woman is so thin that her own lean fingers look like the small bundles of ferns that she has brought for sale. She has come to buy ferns as she has nothing else to sell. If she could buy those ferns she would be able to buy her daily bread. This is a situation of abject poverty in which the old woman has fallen. The entire poem is structured in some rhetorical questions and each question focuses on a particular aspect of her poverty. Thus a heart-breaking picture of her poverty is presented to the readers. While Heaney's poem 'The Forge' ends with a sigh, Phookan's poem concludes in a rhetorical question that focuses on another aspect in a poor person's life:

"Pindhone jetuka toi

Fati juwa kolijat?"

(English rendering: Do you apply henna/upon your cracked heart?)²

Here henna symbolizes the mirthful and festive aspect life. The poor people, despite living amidst poverty, hanker after the occasions for festival and mirth in order to find a temporary escape from their drudgery of life. The poet wants to know from the old woman if she also wants to forget her poverty in that way.

The poet Seamus Heaney belongs to Ireland which has a long history of political troubles. The Irish movement and the suppression of that movement have resulted in large scale violence from time to time and, at times, such violence takes the lives of the common people. As a sensitive poet, Seamus Heaney could not remain indifferent to such developments. He has responded to such incidents through poetry. One classic example of such poem is 'Casualty'. Here the poet weaves a heart-touching narrative around the death of an old fisherman and several others who were the innocent victims of the bomb blast and police firing that happened in 1972. The focal point of the poem is the casualty caused to the society through the loss of innocent lives due to state repression and political violence.

The Assamese Nilmani Phookan has also experienced similar situations in his home state of Assam in India. There has been political unrest in Assam since the late 1970s due to the historic Assam Movement, and the

movement for separate Bodo state, the insurgency etc. There has been increase in the violence in the forms of killings, arson, bomb explosion, rape etc. It is not possible for any poet to remain insensitive to all these upheavals and turmoil. Since 1980s, Nilmani Phookan's poems have become more and more socially conscious and politically informed. In 1983, during the peak of the Assam movement, the notorious Nellie massacre took place when, on a single night, more than two thousand men, women and children were butchered. In protest against this barbarity, Phookan wrote his celebrated poem "O mursapunorsuryormanuh" (O my people of dream and sun). Likewise, in response to the growing sense of division and alienation among the different ethnic groups and communities of the state, the poet Phookan wrote one of his most admired poems:

We were two families in a single dwelling
Under a leaking roof
Seasons passed
Passed nights soaked in rain
Now and then in dreams
A wagtail came for a perch
I wept when you smiled
You wept when I smiled
Thus we transposed each other...³

Similarly, in the 1990s the state of Assam witnessed military operation against various insurgent groups which sometimes resulted in the death of innocent youth too. On one such occasion five young boys were killed by the security forces, and their bodies, instead of handing over to the family, were burnt by using tyre as fuel. Needless to say that the incident evoked condemnation from all around and the poet Phookan wrote a few heart-touching lines:

"For quite many days now
Both at night and during the day
I keep hearing just one sound
The smell of the burnt tyre..."⁴

The Assamese has witnessed growing violence and also atrocities upon women over the years, the poet Phookan makes a poetic response to such atrocities and violence in his own unique way:

"Don't ask me how I am
I haven't asked myself either
Down the Kolong comes floating
The torso of a dead woman..."⁵

It has been observed that in their responses to the contemporary social and political developments of their times, both the poets, Heaney and Phookan, have primarily focused on the crisis of humanity. Both have dealt with such incidents from a broad humanitarian perspective. It seems that both the poets desire to arouse the sense of humanity through their poet. In one of his award accepting speeches, the Assamese poet Nilmani Phookan once declared:

"It is the goal of all art to make men good human beings. The poetry too has the same goal."⁶

Both Heaney and Phookan have endeavored to explore that realms of huminity through their poetry.

Conclusion

The above discussion was aimed at understanding and investigating into the issues and themes which have dominated the poems of both NilmaniPhookan and Seamus Heaney. What has come to light is that both the poets have responded to the native history, culture, tradition and socio-political developments of their locales. This comparative approach between the two poets have to a certain extent explored and reinvented the strength and greatness of the Assamese poet NilmaniPhookan's poetry as analysed from a critical perspective enriched by the reading of Heaney's poetry and thus the universal quality of Phookan's poetry has come to the fore for a wider audience. It is true that Seamus Heaney won the most coveted Nobel Prize for literature in 1995 and NilmaniPhookan was conferred the Jnanpeeth award for literature, the highest literary award of India. Yet, it can be safely concluded that if there is any Assamese poet who could match the stature of a Nobel Laureate like Seamus Heaney, it was NilmaniPhookan.

Notes

1. This English rendering is done by the present author.
2. The original Assamese poem is included *Sagartolir Sankha*, edited by Dr Hiren Gohain
3. Barua, Krishna Dulal (Tr.). *Selected Poems of NilmaniPhookan*, New Delhi, Sahitya Akademi, 2007, pp 78-81
4. Phookan, Nilamoni. *Sampurna Kavita*, Guwahati, Orthat, 2006 (Complete poems of Phookan in Assamese), pp 253 (The English rendering is done by the present author)
5. Ibid, pp 184 (The English rendering is done by the present author)
6. Gohain, Dr Hiren(ed), *SagortolirShongkho*, NilamoniPhookanorNirbachito Kavita, Guwahati, Lawyers' Book Stall, 1994, 1997 (A critical edition of selected poems of NilamoniPhookan), pp 132

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