Seamus Heaney: A Voice from Northern Ireland

Dr. Tapati Baruah Kashyap*

We are very happy to publish an article related to literary sphere in this issue of Ishani. The author teaches English at a prominent college in Guwahati. She has also published books on poetry. There are women writers and poets in each State of the region. Some of them have made their mark and earned appreciation from the literary circle of the country. We are indeed very happy to publish a small write-up by Madam Tapati Baruah Kashyap on the Noble laureate Seamus Heaney. It will be our attempt to publish the work of other women writers from other States of the region from time to time.

Seamus Heaney is perhaps the most important living Irish poet after WB Yeats. Winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995, Heaney belongs to Northern Ireland where till recently violence was the order of the day. So as the author rightly points out, it is quite natural for Heaney to refer to that turmoil through his writing.

The author, herself a poet and writer of some standing, has done her doctorate on Heaney and Yeats’ poetry, so it is only to be expected that she is able to do justice to the topic of her article. She points out that Heaney, from his early collections, tried to combine in his work personal memories with images of Irish heritage and the landscape of Northern Ireland. There are also references to English-Irish and Catholic-Protestant conflict.

Author

Seamus Justin Heaney, who is known as Seamus Heaney is one of the living, major and well-known Nobel Prize winner modern poets who has not only created new space for Irish literature and folklore in the contemporary literary world, but has also put it in a unique position after WB Yeats. Seamus Heaney is also the representative of the Irish tradition and culture. His poetry reflect his love for Irish Culture and his first volume of poetry is about ‘digging’ in the sense that the act of writing is for him an unearthing of his past and the historical roots of his nation. By taking his own materials and myths from his Irish background, he has also been able to achieve universality as modern interpreter of ancient myth as significant for the modern age. In 1995, Heaney was awarded the Nobel Prize for his works composed during what he called, in his Nobel Lecture, ‘a quarter century of life waste and spirit waste.’

Heaney belonged to a place called Northern Ireland where till recently violence was the order of the day. So, it is quite natural for Heaney to refer to that turmoil throughout his writing. Heaney’s Irishness was made strong by the sense of his own place.

Seamus Heaney was born on the 13th April 1939, at Mossbawn, near Castledawson, county Derry in Northern Ireland. His father, Patrick Heaney, a Roman Catholic was a cattle dealer.
and his mother was Margaret Kathleen McCann. Heaney was the eldest of the nine children. Margaret Heaney, along with her sister-in-law, Mary, who lived with the family, formed a special bond with the eldest child. The family as well as his birth place Mossbawn helped form young Heaney’s personality.

Heaney's father Patrick Heaney was a cattle-dealer who owned a forty-acre farm. He also served as a member of the rural council. The two poems in Heaney's first volume of poetry — 'Digging' and 'Follower' refer to his father. 'Digging' is discovering the poet's connection between his vocation and his inherited traditions. Although he has come away from his father's ways of living, yet he does dig on with his pen. Moreover, in his memoir, Preoccupations, Heaney laments — “When I was learning to read, towards the end of 1945, the most important books in the house were the ration books — the pink cloths coupons and the green points for sweets and groceries.” So, Heaney from his early childhood, made it a promise to dig with his pen.

“Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I will dig with it.”
(Digging, The Death of a Naturalist.)

His first volume explores the transformation of the boy into man; farmer into poet and the whole volume is digging in the sense that the act of writing is an attempt to explore the poet's past and the historical roots of his society. The other poem “Follower” is an apology to his father that he is not, nor can ever be, truly like him.

In the Irish psyche, ancestry is a potent force, steadying the individual and shaping his or her sense of identity. As Michael Parker had also said, “Ancestry, like history and myth, enabled Heaney to connect the current of past and present.” Heaney is always true to his own place and he had a special bond with his place and ground. In the community in which Heaney grew up, Protestants and Catholics “lived in proximity and harmony with one another” and generally showed tolerance and courtesy to each other, such as that displayed in ‘The other side’ in Wintering Out and ‘Trial Runs’ in Stations.

Seamus Justin Heaney

Heaney worked as English teacher at St. Thomas Secondary School, Belfast and at St. Joseph’s College, before being appointed Lecturer at Queen’s University. He was Guest Lecturer at the University of California, Berkley in 1970-71 and in 1976 settled in Dublin to
work as Part Time Lecturer at the Carysfort, a college of Education. He began teaching at
From 1989 to 1994, he was Professor of Poetry at Oxford University. Heaney who now lives
in Dublin drew on his farm childhood and wrote about nature in his early poetry. In the
1970s he began writing about the political turmoil of Northern Ireland in such works as
North and Field Work and The Sunday Times of London described Heaney as ‘the finest poet
writing in English.’

Heaney has been writing extensively and it is his poems which have given a universal appeal
to the problems of Northern Ireland. Seamus Heaney drew his poetic inspiration from
different ends. It is clear that his ancestors as well as his neighbours helped him form his
poetic sensibilities. Heaney grew up in a community in which Protestants and Catholics lived
in harmony with one another. This can be ascertained from the poems like “The Other Side”
in Wintering Out and “Trial Runs” in Stations.

Mossbawn pump, Heaney’s birthplace, appears as the source for Heaney’s creativity. The
pump appears in “Rite of Spring” and “Mother” in Door into the Dark, in “Sinking the Shaft”
in Stations, in “A Drink of Water” and “The Toome Road” in Field Work and in “Changes” in
Station Island and in several poems of his other books.

Heaney’s spirit was always true to his own places and he always refers to them in his works.
Although he was away from his own hometown, yet his original home was always within his
heart. So, references to home and exile are found in large numbers in Heaney’s works.

Heaney published his first collection of poems, The Death of a Naturalist, in 1966. This
collection shows the influence of Kavanagh, an Irish poet whose faith was that the local could
articulate the Universal. Heaney’s own place Mossbawn provided Heaney a source for
creation in this path of poetry. Heaney, from his early collections, tried to combine in his
work personal memories with images of Irish heritage and the landscape of Northern
Ireland. There are also references to English-Irish and Catholic Protestant conflict. His
second collection, Door into the Dark, was published in 1969 and his early collections were
praised as nature poetry of the kind written by Ted Hughes. Wintering Out in 1972, North in
1975 established him as a more substantial writer, engaging with serious cultural and
political issues of Irish identity in a territory torn by dispute. With North he began to explore
themes of violent Irish history (Mother ground/sour with the blood/of her faithful) that he
confronted with a more urgent and autobiographical emphasis in Field Work. And Field
Work in 1979 is gentler in its approach but contains public and political poems of great
achievement. Heaney’s other published works are Poems 1965-1975 in 1980, Sweeney Astray
Things (Collection of Poems, in 1991), Beowulf (Translation from Old English to modern

The increasing violence from 1969 onwards and the sufferings of his community, however,
made it necessary for Heaney to probe more deeply and critically into his catholic origins
from Wintering Out onwards.

Heaney’s prose works are Preoccupations (Selected Prose, 1968-78), Government of Tongue
(Essays, 1988), The Place of Writing (Richard Ellmann Lectures, 1989), The Redress of

The most powerful symbol Heaney used in his poems is – the exhumed bog bodies in North.
Heaney in his book Preoccupations says, “Mossbawn lies between the villages of
Castledawson and Toome. I was symbolically placed between the marks of English influence
and the lure of the native experience, between ‘the demesne’ and ‘the bog’... The bog was a
wide low apron of swamp on the west bank of the River Bann, where hoards of flints and
fishbones have been found, reminding me that the Bann Valley is one of the oldest inhabited
areas in the country. The demesne was walked, wooded, beyond our ken; the bog was rushy
and treacherous, no place for children. They said you shouldn’t go near the moss-holes because ‘there was no bottom in them’.

In his North, Heaney says—
I step through origins
Like a dog turning
Its memories of wilderness
On the Kitchen mat.
(Kinship, North)

Heaney, from his early collections, tried to combine in his work personal memories with images of Irish heritage and the landscape of Northern Ireland. There are also references to English-Irish and Catholic-protestant conflict. Heaney’s works are rooted in Northern Irish rural life and show the use of myth from his unique Irish experience. And his reflections on his childhood have given way to darker aspects of the social and political problems of Northern Ireland. In his The Government of the Tongue (1988), Heaney examines the role of poetry in modern society. The central symbol in his work is the bog, the wide unfenced county that reaches back millions of years.

So, the bog is the starting point for the exploration of the past and in several works Heaney has returned to the ‘bog people’, bodies preserved in the soil of Denmark and Ireland. Michael Parker in his book says — “While from Door into the Dark onwards Heaney was to elevate the bog into a symbol of Irish identity, this poem renewes a received symbol, the humble potato, as an emblem for his race’s suffering.” P.V. Glob’s The Bog People influenced Heaney to a great extent.

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**Irish Bogs - A Natural Heritage**
(from http://www.ipcc.ie/bogflorafauna.html)

by Pat Friend

Ireland’s bogs, or peatlands, are a beautiful natural resource that have been an integral part of Irish heritage over the millennia. Technically classified as wetlands, along with Ireland’s marshes, rivers, and estuaries, bogs are delicate ecosystems that rely on a natural balance for preservation and rejuvenation.

Ireland’s cool, wet climate is a natural incubator for the bogs. Over two-thirds of the average annual rainfall of about 1,150 mm (45.3 inches) remains after evaporation. Of that “effective” precipitation only 65 per cent is removed from the land surface through river drainage. That leaves a large part of the landmass as poorly draining soil that has turned into peat over the last 10,000 years. The peat forms when partially decomposed plants accumulate on top of one another in those waterlogged environs.

A telltale sign of bog conditions is continuous land cover of Sphagnum moss amidst other stunted flowering plants. The nature of the peat formation in the bog means that the plants do not have access to nutrients from the soil beneath, so those that have evolved and thrived are of a type that can extract most of the nutrients they need from rain water, the only source available to them. The moss becomes a key component of the peat, which is generated at the rate of about 1 mm per year in an active bog environment.

Few animals are able to survive in the highly acidic bog environment. Insects abound and the peatlands have become home to the Giant Irish Deer. Fish aren’t in residence but occasionally otters and badgers raid for eggs and chicks of the ground nesting skylark and meadow pipit.

One of the bogs’ most enduring contributions to the Irish people has been fossil fuel. While in its natural state the peat, or “turf,” is about 90 per cent water and 10 per cent solid. Its location near the surface means that it can be harvested and dried, a readily available economical fuel. The process of harvesting is an arduous task that was traditionally part of the annual cycle of life in the agricultural communities. A week’s digging, followed by drying through the summer months, would provide
enough fuel to last a family until the next year. This pace of harvesting was slow enough to allow regeneration to occur without risk of depleting this national resource.

The 1940s, however, brought inventions that mechanized the peat harvesting process. Reclaiming the bog at a much higher rate and other activities that compromised the peatlands means that there has been a significant loss in the amount of Ireland’s land surface that is covered by healthy, intact bogs.

Another contribution made by the bogs to the Irish culture has been bog wood. After the last Ice Age melted away, Ireland was covered with a dense forest of pine, yew and oak trees. The forests were eventually overcome by the bog plants that preserved the wood they covered in peat. The wood would eventually be uncovered in the process of harvesting the turf. In keeping with a simple agricultural way of life where everything had a useful purpose, the recovered pieces of wood were turned into roofs, furniture, looms or milk churns.

In modern times, the artist Fergus Costello has used the ancient timbers in works of liturgical and secular art. Ronnie Graham is another sculptor who moulds this wondrous wood. Through their hands the bogs’ beauty takes on new forms.

Conservation efforts are underway by both the government and private organizations to protect the bogs. The Irish Peat Conservation Council is leading the way with information and lobbying efforts on behalf of these delicate ecosystems. The Republic of Ireland Government’s part includes the designation of Natural Heritage Areas, with protection under the Wildlife Act of 1976. Progress is being made, so there is hope that the peatlands will continue to be a living, growing part of the Irish world.

Although the first of the well-known Bog poems appeared in Wintering Out, Heaney continued the sequence in North, published in 1975. Michael Parker also says — “Heaney’s bog poems, according to Murphy, trace ‘modern terrorism’ back to its roots in the early Iron Age, and mysterious awe back to the ‘bonehouse’ of language itself…. At our funeral rites and our worship of the past… the central image of this work, a symbol which unifies time, person and place, is bog land; it contains, preserves and yields terror as well as awe.” Thus for Heaney, bog is an answering Irish myth.

Heaney in his *Preoccupations*, says “My first literary frisson, however came on home ground. There was an Irish history lesson at school, which was in reality a reading of myths and legends.”

Irish culture and history had a major impact on the works of Heaney. The condition of Northern Ireland forced Heaney to become a poet of public as well as private life. His poetry has reached a large public as well as private life. Indeed, his poetry has reached a large public in Ireland and abroad and that public extends to all classes. “It is a poetry in which readers can recognize profound family affections, eloquent landscapes and vigorous social concern,” says Helen Vendler.

In his *The Government of the Tongue* (1988), Heaney examines the role of poetry in modern society. Poetry, Heaney states, is essentially an answer to the conditions of the world given in poetry’s own terms. Heaney again in his *The Redress of Poetry* illuminates his view on poetry by saying ‘Poetry is a force capable of transforming culture and the self.’ Like W.B. Yeats, Heaney’s poetry has also a political strain but in both of them, we see that poetry transcend politics. In his Nobel Lecture, Heaney declares his belief that: “Poetry can create an order, which is at once true to the impact of external reality and sensitive to the inner laws of the poet’s being.”

Heaney’s political poems take several distinct forms, of which the three most important are — the poems that directly refer to the political situation in Northern Ireland, the poems that refer to the situation by implication, and poems about linguistic imperialism, the problem of the Irish writer forced to use the English language as his vehicle of expression.

The bog poems of Heaney are overtly political. This series of poems from Wintering Out and North was suggested by the discovery of a number of ancient bodies preserved in the peat
bogs of Denmark. At the time scientists speculated that the bodies, some of which had their throats slashed, were those of sacrificial victims. The bog people offered Heaney various possibilities for poetic treatment.

We give below a sample of the author Dr. Tapati Baruah Kashyap’s poetry from her book, “Peace of Silence” which is a collection of her poems published in Guwahati in 2001.

My Life and My Time

‘I’ and ‘my life’
Both are dissimilar,
as I am a person of my time.
My life swings
in between horror and
uncertain hope.
I feel and see everything
the murder, the bloodshed and
the loss of innocent lives.
I know the truth
yet I seldom react to it;
I have ousted all the truth,
become dumb
as it is the only way
to live a life in my time.

(The Eastern Clarion, October 27, 1992)

When Heaney was at St Columb, his political consciousness pours over his being. He also came to realize the pitiable conditions of the Catholics. Michael Parker in his book says — “Together his teachers at St. Columbs and in the Gaeltact did much to deepen the sense of his Irish Catholic identity.” Heaney’s poem “From the Canton of Expectation” records this attitude. Another important aspect was that Heaney’s love for the poetry of Kavanagh helped ignite his own sense of Irish Catholic identity. Kavanagh’s famous book The Great Hunger, which was mostly the record of the great famine in Ireland in 1840, attracted Heaney very much.

Although Heaney writes from a unique Irish tradition, he still manages to avoid writing pure propaganda. Instead of writing a poem about a specific group of people who were wronged by one side or the other, Heaney always describe the scene without party affiliation or with equal blame spread to all practitioners of violence. In his Nobel Lecture, Heaney says — “A group of workers were returning home in a minibus when they were held up at gunpoint by armed and masked executioners who said to then ‘Any Catholics among you, step out here?’ The group included only one Catholic and the general assumption was the ‘masked men were Protestant paramilitaries looking for revenge by killing the lone Catholic in the group.’ The one who would have been presumed to be in sympathy with the IRA and all its action. The man started to step forward when he felt the hand of the protestant worker next to him take his hand and squeeze in a signal that said, ‘No, don’t move, we will not betray you. Nobody
need know what faith or party you belong to.’ The Catholic man stepped forward anyway and the masked men opened fire killing all the Protestants.”

The story is like Heaney’s poetry. It is political but at the same time above politics. His poetry tries to reach both sides of a conflict in almost the same way.

A perfect example of Heaney’s poem above politics and political influence is ‘Digging’.

“Between my finger and thumb
The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.”

Here Heaney compares his pen to a gun. Heaney says that his ancestors used their strength to fight their battles. Heaney, however, must fight the battle in a different way. Heaney intends to fight the battle with his pen. The only way Heaney can have a relationship with the land is through his writing. Another very important aspect of Heaney’s poetry is that he tries to write for the benefit of all of Ireland, Catholic and Protestant alike. This is very much explicit in his poem, ‘Whatever you say, say nothing.’(North) In this poem, Heaney delivers a strong political message for all of Ireland without supporting either side.

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Irish Luck

His name was Fleming, and he was a poor Scottish farmer. One day, while trying to make a living for his family, he heard a cry for help coming from a nearby bog. He dropped his tools and ran to the bog.

There, mired to his waist in black muck, was a terrified boy, screaming and struggling to free himself. Farmer Fleming saved the lad from what could have been a slow and terrifying death.

The next day, a fancy carriage pulled up to the Scotsman’s sparse surroundings. An elegantly dressed nobleman stepped out and introduced himself as the father of the boy Farmer Fleming had saved.

‘I want to repay you,’ said the nobleman. ‘You saved my son’s life.’

‘No, I can’t accept payment for what I did,’ the Scottish farmer replied waving off the offer. At that moment, the farmer’s own son came to the door of the family hovel.

‘Is that your son?’ the nobleman asked.

‘Yes,’ the farmer replied proudly.

‘I’ll make you a deal. Let me provide him with the level of education my own son will enjoy. If the lad is anything like his father, he’ll no doubt grow to be a man we both will be proud of.’ And that he did.

Farmer Fleming’s son attended the very best schools and in time, graduated from St. Mary’s Hospital Medical School in London, and went on to become known throughout the world as the noted Sir Alexander Fleming, the discoverer of Penicillin.

Years afterward, the same nobleman’s son who was saved from the bog was stricken with pneumonia. What saved his life this time? Penicillin.

The name of the nobleman? Lord Randolph Churchill. His son’s name? Sir Winston Churchill.

Someone once said: What goes around comes around.

Work like you don’t need the money.

Love like you’ve never been hurt.

Dance like nobody’s watching...

Sing like nobody’s listening...

Live like it’s Heaven on Earth.

(Received by e-mail from Amrit Goldsmith [goldsmithamrit@gmail.com])