

**ARTISTIC EXCELLENCE AND POLITICAL  
COMMITMENT IN SEAMUS HEANEY'S POETRY**

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**MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY**

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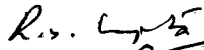
## CERTIFICATE

This dissertation entitled "**Artistic Excellence and Political Commitment in Seamus Heaney's Poetry**", submitted by **Antaryami Naik**, Centre of Linguistics and English, School of Languages, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy**, is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma in any other university.

This may be placed before the examiners for evaluation for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy.

  
Prof. Kapil Kapoor

Chairperson

  
Prof. R.S. Gupta

Supervisor.

*In*  
*Memory of my*  
*Late Mother,*  
*Indumati.*

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*Discovering the meaning through writing assigns an endless pleasure. The process could consign me throughout the year into a utopia and this piece of work is an outcome of that. Moreover, any sort of writing never does mean a closed text. Rather, it is open ended and have borrowed so much from monuments of previous intellectuals. So, I indebted to those "monuments of unageing intellect", as it said that "every text is the modified version of its pretexts". I hope, this piece of research outcome may find a place in the ongoing research network.*

*I bow down at the feet of my parents whose inspiration, affection and love could provide me with hpe to go ahead and presently to complete this dissertation. I pray to my late mother Indumati who passed away on 14th December, 1979, when I was seven years old. I ever search for her presence but fail. Her heavenly blessing is what I am.*

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## INTRODUCTION

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The dialectical relationship between an author and a genre or more precisely between an author and his surroundings i.e. "the burning issues of the day" vitalizes any artistic discourse at its core in the coordinated process of imitating, internalizing and expressing. Cognitive and ontological phenomena are dialectically interrelated and at times one tends to influence the other. Any sort of imbalance assimilation breaks up the parallel reconciliation of art and fact. However, an author has human limitations at every stage of his life. For instance, during his early age instead of influencing the environment he is being moulded by it.

As a literary persona, an author has to oblige for socio-cultural restrictions while writing particularly on the sensitive issues of the time. The writer as a human being is himself a product of history, of time and place. As a member of society he belongs to a certain class and he is inevitably a participant in the

class struggle of that time. As a writer in a given society, it does make a difference whether he is allowed to write or not; whether what he writes is controlled or not; and whether he is espousing this or that class outlook. Hence "every writer is a writer in politics".<sup>1</sup>

Being colonized and under the yoke of England, Ireland never had been refrained from sectarian violence and getting independence status by hook or crook. Although, Ireland became Independent in 1923, the internal disturbances that emerges from the hot temperament of religious whim does not allow a Republic of Ireland for peaceful governance. Every citizen of it could identify them either as a Catholic or a Protestant. Even, this religious divide led to the territorial settlement of a particular community. Nobody tolerates the abuse of his religious sect, rather every body is ready to lash out at the opposite religion. Thus, religious dicision accompanied with the cohabitation of fellow believers has marred the peace process of Ireland ever since its inception as an independent state. Inheriting such a political legacy,

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<sup>1</sup> Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Writers in Politics. London : Heinmann, 1981, p.2



Seamus Heaney, was born in 1939 in the townland of Mossbawn, Count Derry, Northern Ireland, the eldest of nine children and the son of a Catholic farmer and cattle dealer. Undoubtedly, his political legacy along with his ancestry form a big chunk of the creative process of writing poetry.

What prompted me to work on Seamus Heaney is his ongoing contribution to English literature and his achievement of Nobel Literature Prize in 1995. Never did Heaney expect for a world famous and so prestigious award as he has assumed : "At the time I am thinking of such an outcome was not just beyond expectation; it was simply beyond onception".<sup>2</sup> He excells in assimilating Catholic ancestry with world religion; political legacy with decolonizing nations; rural circumstances with metropolis and his political participation with artistic creation in a coherent manner through his lyric art. These factual proliferation mars his early poems and consequently he relies on the traditional mode of writing poetry. He had been influenced by Wordsworthean nature poetry and

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<sup>2</sup> Seamus Heaney, "Crediting Poetry : The 1995 Nobel Lecture". World Literature Today, Spring 1996. p.253

Georgian mode of writing poetry. Sometimes a harsh note of nature could be heard in his poetry. In this respect, he adheres to the portrayal of Nature by Thomas Hardy. Thus, he has acquired the reputation of being a simple, straightforward, readily accessible writer whose methods and ideas owe more to the nineteenth century than to the twentieth. Deviating from the main currents of contemporary European and Anglo-American intellectual tradition, he establishes a direct link with the literary authorities of 19th century, giving a new thrust to it, and is admired for not being "modern".

The innovative thrust linked with the traditional mode excels in his lyricism - a flexible mechanism in composing poetry to combine real with imaginative, past and present and life and death. What he owes to his contemporary literary tradition is his shared consciousness of the modes of post-war Anglo-American poetry which came after the 1950s' "rationalism" of Larkin, Gunn, Davie and Roetheke on the one hand, and the 1960s "extremism" of Hughes, Plath, Lowell and Berryman on the other, borrowing something from both camps while moving forward into a new domain. His

preoccupation with language and with questions of authorial control makes him part of a still larger modern intellectual movement which has emphasized that language is not a transparent medium by means of which a writer says what he intends to, but rather self-generating, indefinitely productive, exceeding us as individuals. That is why, Heaney assumes that the poet does not so much master language as surrender to it. It might look like a romantic theory of "inspiration", but it also bears surprising resemblances to recent structuralist discourse. There is the shared notion of language working through the medium of the author rather than the author through language. However, in reconciliation of language and concept, langue and parole. Heaney has employed different modes of poetic devices like lyricism, elegy, terza rima, etc.

At the backdrop of Heaney's poetic achievement lie complex matters of his ancestry, nationality, religion, history and politics. The ambivalent concern of Heaney is his response to the recent history of Northern Ireland, the crisis of which has placed poets under a compulsion to "respond". He has written poems

directly about the troubles, as well as, elegies for friends and relatives who have died in them. Heaney ever endeavours to discover a historical framework in which to interpret the current unrest. He has often taken on the mantle of public spokesman in allegiance to his political commitment. At the same time, he has shown signs of deeply resenting this allegiance, defending the right of poets to be private and apolitical and questioning the extent to which poetry, even though "committed", can influence the course of history. Therefore, history and any sort of literature are dialectically interrelated and can never be isolated. so are the author and the genre. In this regard he admits : "Whatever success I've had has come from staying within the realm of my own imaginative country and my own voice".<sup>3</sup>

The point, is how far does an author succeed in reconciling the contradictory elements of creative literature. The tussle between poetic subjectivity and political commitment augurs ambiguity in a work of art. Therefore the binding force behind every creation is accumulation of different warring factions which often need to coexist in

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<sup>3</sup> Seamus Heaney, Interviewed by John Haffenden, Viewpoints, London : Faber, 1981, p.69.

equilibrium. This sort of balancing quality must be preceded by any work of creation. Having affiliated so much with the antagonistic forces in his native land, how does Heaney parallel them in his creative discourse is a matter of baffling question. However, nothing could obstruct him on his way to Stockholm where he was awarded with Nobel Literature Prize for 1995. This happens to be a reward for a man of mutual understanding and reconciliation who could see within himself an Irishness and non Irishness too.

Being an Irish Catholic, he never attempts to look at the others with contempt. Rather, respecting other selves could bring him fame as well as affirming his own self assigned a daunting task of mutual co-existence of warring factions. Believing in oneself is all right but that must not be at the cost of hampering the interest of other selves. That sort of extreme patriotism may lead to terrorism. Consequently, the distinguished entities of opposite factions never meet at any point and everywhere factionism reigns supreme. To get rid of this loophole of artistic assimilation, Heaney is quite aware of the fact that the

gulf between personal and public life must be abridged in a work of art ; and it is only possible through a work of art where imagination and reason could meet.

Thus, the artistic design of Heaney is an attempt to undermine the midnineteenth century slogan of poetry: "art for art's sake". In the case of Heaney, it is not only art for artist's sake but also art for people's sake that together constitutes a wholesome mosaic. The aesthetic value of his creative fabric lies underneath it. What surfaces is his desire to conceal bare facts by virtue of an art. Thus, technicalities of artistic kaleidoscope could provide observers with aesthetic pleasure, demanding a much coveted place among the disciplines of knowledge which transact with us pleasure as well as instruction.

Reading Seamus Heaney's poetry is an amusing affair in which a reader can find himself with such similar situations so as to feel as if they are his own. Thus, eliciting a reasonable response from the reader is the basic concern of his poetic art. The diminishing gap between the reader and Heaney in

the process of responding and recalling respectively is a rare phenomenon in literature. Whosoever succeeds in reconciling these warring groups of tentatively polar opposites in his artistry, his is a great work of art. Any sort of misunderstanding between the two may create a nostalgic reaffirmation of history and space. Therefore, an author tries to live beyond time and space.

Heaney's creative adventure engulfs every perspective of a great work of art. He could chat with his readers by providing them space and column to get feedback. A reader like character may haunt throughout Ireland or the world to get solace and peace. Even if his Catholic stance seems to be a universal stance as everybody assigns with such other stand points in the principle of live and let live, he sings for the community cause and that does not, too, lash at the other communities. Rather he could convince each and every communitarian singer to sing for their own cause. If so happens, then only can mankind realize what peace is all about.

Such is the universal and aesthetic appeal of Heaney's poetry. By the force of affirming the self and respecting the otherselves, a unification can be brought about. For this common cause Heaney's poetic art is a dedication not only to the Irish people but also to the whole humanity at large.

Seamus Heaney is currently employed one term a year at Harvard University. Since 1989, he has been Professor of Poetry at Oxford. He is also a director of the Field Day Theatre Company in Ireland. He has been awarded with Nobel Literature Prize for 1995. After this award, his next collection The Spirit Level, just recently published in 1996 by Faber and Faber publications, London. For that, he got British Whitebread Award for 1996. Throughout his life career, awards have been repleted with his versatile genius. He had been employed as a teacher at St. Thomas's Secondary School, Belfast from 1962 to 1963 and lecturer at St. Joseph's college of Education, Belfast from 1963 to 1966 when his first collection Death of a Naturalist came out. Then he moved to University of California, Berkeley in 1970 as a guest lecturer. On his return to County Wicklow in 1972, he



resigned his teaching job and participated in Irish politics. In 1976, he settled in Dublin where he works part-time at a Catholic college of education. He is the recipient of Eric Gregory Award, 1966; Cholmondeley Award, 1967; Faber Memorial Prize, 1968; Maugham Award, 1971; Denis Devlin Memorial Award, 1973; American-Irish Foundation Award, 1975; National Institute of Arts and letters E.M. Foster Award, 1975; Duff Cooper Memorial Award, 1976; and Smith literary Award , 976.

His publications in poetry are Death of a Naturalist (1966); Door into the Dark (1969); Wintering Out (1972); North (1975); Stations (1975), Field Work (1979); Selected Poems (1965-75); Sweeney Astray (1983); Station Island (1984); The Haw Lantern (1989); Seeing Things (1991); The Spirit Level (1996); The Rattle Bag edited with Ted Hughes, New Selected Poems 1966-1987; and Sweeney's Flight edited with Rachel Giese. His prose collections are Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-78; The Government of the Tongue (1988); and The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures and a play The Cure at Troy.

I have categorized his poem collections into three chapters. First chapter entitled "The Making of the Poet" analyses his early but immature nature poetry in 1960s in Death of a Naturalist and Door into the Dark. This chapter focuses on the formative stage of a poet like Heaney who has been affiliated with the traditional mode of writing poetry and the troublesome Irish politics. Out of these influential factors, he inaugurates his poetic career.

The second chapter entitled "Enfranchising Poetry" glances over his political participation on the one hand, and his artistic creation on the other. How Heaney succeeds in combining both in his artistry is the thrust area of concern. The texts included largely are Wintering Out; North, Stations and Field Work in which Heaney exposes his political participation in artistic creation.

The third chapter entitled, "Narrating the Nation" highlights the controversial debates over nation vs. narration. Heaney attempts at a reconciliation between artistic paramountcy and realistic portrayal of

society at large in Station Island; The Haw Lantern  
and Seeing Things.

Although, Heaney has always been involved with Irish politics, he has succeeded in reconciling it with his artistic excellence. The fusion of art and fact; real and imaginary; concept and concrete; langue and parole, signifié and signifiant is the significant contribution of Heaney's poetry to the world literature.

## CHAPTER-I

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### THE MAKING OF THE POET

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The articulation of self through artistic creation is a mental discourse. As the self is defined and redefined by the others in a societal milieu so also are the others by the self. The dichotomous notions :

*"I think, therefore I am"*

*and "I am, therefore I think"<sup>1</sup>*

constitute a long standing debate. No doubt, the cognitive formation depends on ecological setup, its constraints or favourableness, for restricting or paving the way for conceptual discourse ; but sometimes a long-formulated mental artifact may mould or remould the environment. The much debated doctrine about the author : "The author is dead"<sup>2</sup> can narrowly be appropriate in respect of a creative personel who actually tries to be reputed behind his creation. If we are left with a text which was composed of two centuries earlier by an author at that time, how can the meaning be inferred without referring to the then

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<sup>1</sup> R. Descartes. Discourse on Method. Tr. by John Veitch. London: J.M. Dent, Everyman's Library. 570.

<sup>2</sup> Roland Barthes. "Death of the Author".

existing environment which provided raw-materials to be manipulated in a literary transaction by a mediator i.e. the author ? None of these three i.e. author, text and environment cannot be lived in isolation.

To add to this trio, a fourth agent i.e. the reader could provide the fuel for a complete discourse of any literary creation. Those who have strongly argued that readers are the sole interpreters of a text, the meaning of which may vary from reader to reader, must have ignored that the intended message, supposedly universal, by the author in a text, is in the process of distortion. If a text has been written in a spatio-temporal purview, how can a reader place it in his own situation. This reader response meaning of a text may create a fragmented but chaotic analysis of a text. If a text has not been read since long, it is a dead letter which can be enlivened through the readers' response. In this respect, an author rests in a dock because of not conveying a universal message to the world around and to the future generations. That is why an author should ever try to be reputed by dint of his universal message through his text. And this universal

message is artistic excellence which often tends to be subjectivised at the cost of realistic portraiture of the circumstances. This is in short, what Heaney achieved in his latest works.

Ideal or real, if isolated, departs to be at the extreme ends, and not a worthy literary discourse can be made out of it. A purely subjective articulation by an author through his text gives vent to the reader for distortion of the meaning. And a purely realistic description of a text is no more than an history. So, at the extreme ends both fail to be worthy of creation. To escape this maladjustment, an author must reconcile in his creation both poetic subjectification and objective neutrality - not to be dead or ignored by the readers.

Neither is an author like Seamus Heaney politically isolated nor a propagandist "We are born free but everywhere we are in chains".<sup>3</sup> This exemplifies the predicament of the poetic career of Seamus Heaney, on whom political whip has been imposed. It not only restricts the reality to be exposed by a writer, but also

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<sup>3</sup> J.J. Rousscau.

suppresses the creative subjectification. However, Heaney's artistry has a balanced but dynamic coherence if not in his earlier volumes, certainly in his later writings.

Seamus Heaney, such an eminent poet, has ever been forced to be politically silent as he belongs to a particular community i.e. the Catholic National in Northern Ireland. In his cinematic poem "Digging," cut in these lines-

*"The cut cuts of an edge*

*Through living roots awaken in my head"<sup>4</sup>*

is the slashed throat of the bog man ; and a slashed throat which cannot speak. This poem is about the difficulty of writing poetry within the problematic of injustice which determines the situation of the poet and his poem; both live in a terrain marked by a savage cut or critical space which lodges them in history rather than in place. If people have no clearly demarcated terrain within which to identify them-selves, they must turn to time and live in it. But the time is "out of joint" in the sense that the history of Ireland is itself "cut" or slashed, interrupted by a long colonial

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<sup>4</sup> Seamus Heaney. "Digging". Death of a Naturalist p.16

sojourn. These are Heaney's "living roots" which quicken or come to life in his head. This slashed throat raises the question of justice and revenge.

Therefore, choked silence never does mean muteness to Heaney. A voice in silence can reach faster and farther than a voice aloud. Ever since he has been championing the cause of the Catholics. Through his weapon of "squat pen", he is "digging" to reveal the truth of life. In fact, he is a successful poet as his pen is mightier than any sword. The political upheaval of Ulster has appeared in his first two volumes directly as "that kind of things". Being a passive observer of Ulster troubles, Heaney started his poetic career in mid-1960s, giving a passive reference to it. But his fiery images, employed by digging the Irish social setting, sparkle flames to revolutionize the much suppressed ideology. Provocative words could be dug up by his pen to compose poetry. Poetry to him is orally militant. It can sow revolutionary seeds among the people to be united for a common cause. So, at the root of Heaney's ideology, poetry serves as a weapon. The history of Ireland is full of struggle between Catholics



and the Protestants. It is very often a regional and ideological than religious battle. When in 1922, Ireland became independent of England, its internal trouble reached a pinnacle that still remains an irreconcilable turmoil. To fuel the past injuries of Catholics, to whom Heaney belongs, Orange Order has very often been observed. In this situation, Ireland is destined to be divided on religious lines i.e Catholics and Protestants. Therefore, any Irish national must either be a Catholic or a Protestant. Such a compulsion provides Heaney a platform to wage a silent battle against the Protestants through his poetry.

His active silence baffles the imagination of the readers as Heaney has successfully made use of his artistic sovereignty for better understanding with his readers: "The fact is that poetry is its own reality and no matter how much a poet may concede to the corrective pressures of social, moral, political and historical reality, the ultimate fidelity must be to the demands and promise of the artistic event."<sup>5</sup> The ambiguous title of his prose work, The Government of the Tongue, bears out the conflict between art's isolation and

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<sup>5</sup> Scamus Heaney. "The Government of the Tongue 1988"

dependence, and more so in particular between poetry and public life. It asks, should the tongue ( in the sense of the poet's individual talent as well as the common linguistic recourse) be governed or should it be the governor ?

His prosaic use of language with blank verse device, best suited to his style, renders flexibility, leaving space for a sizable discourse combining concrete and the abstract. The images, he used, are fiery, derivative of the socio-political milieu of his Ireland. He makes use of imagery and inarticulacy to speak for his Catholic emancipation in protest of the Protestants. By using imagery effectively, he recreates a sense of life in Ireland, through images of darkness, violence, nightmare and clamped speech :

"..... Our unfenced country  
Is bog that keeps crusting  
Between the sights of the sun"<sup>6</sup>

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Heaney's Bogland, a symbol for Ireland, is deprived of social justice; its national identity is at stake being endangered by the Protestants and England's encroachment :

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"They've taken the skeleton  
Of the Great Irish Elk



<sup>6</sup> Scamus Heaney. "Bogland", Death of a Naturalist .p.21

*Out of the Peat, set it up*

*An astounding crate full of air* <sup>7</sup>

Nothing can compensate Northern Ireland except regaining what has been eroded out. The geographical division of the Republic of Ireland on the basis of religious line gives supremacy to the Protestants, aligned with England's national politics, where a poet like Seamus Heaney is left to find himself alone, rhyming :

*".....I rhyme*

*To see Myself, to set the darkness*

*echoing".* <sup>8</sup>

Such enforced isolation best exemplifies a poetic subjectification of artistry, redefining the subjectivity at the disposal of the author.

However, it is quite difficult for an immature poet, as Heaney was in 1960's to raise a voice openly in defence of a deprived cause ever since in hurdle under the yoke of the Protestants. Therefore, Heaney, initially, left with options for imitating his predecessors and combining history with the present Irish national scene. The second Irish war of Independence of 1919-1921 not only failed to win a

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<sup>7</sup> Seamus Heaney. "Bogland". p.21

<sup>8</sup> Seamus Heaney. "Personal Helicon". Death of a Naturalist .p.27.

United Ireland, but resulted in a form of self government in Ulster. This history was overpowering Heaney when he started writing. Although 'the politics of polarization' and the 'agony and injustice' of events, increasingly compelled him towards adopting a Catholic stance he struggled for a long time to restrain his feelings of "race and resentment". Rather than focussing directly on incidents from the present, he concentrated primarily on the origins and hinterland of the conflict in Wintering Out through elegiac poems celebrating the American identity, history, territory and tongue of his people, the Northern Catholic Irish.

Heaney's experiences in America accelerated the politicization of his poetry. For him poetry could become a force, almost a mode of power, certainly a mode of resistance. In his poem "Bogland", the bog is a symbol of the long Irish memory and he contrasted it with the frontier as a symbol of the wide-open spaces of the west: "I set up-or rather laid down-the bog as an answering Irish Myth"<sup>9</sup>. No doubt, the political setup of the Republic of Ireland was dominated by the Protestants, but the Catholic nationals of Northern

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<sup>9</sup> Seamus Heaney. Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-78. London: Faber & Faber, 1984. p. 38.

Ireland were not silent; a talk which finds a space in  
Heaney's writing :

*"Our pioneers keep striking  
Inwards and downwards  
Every layer they strip  
Seems camped or before"<sup>10</sup>*

The land, language, religion culture and "like minded  
people around" are the subject matter of Heaney's  
poetry. Land has been identified with a woman,  
particularly with a woman's womb in his poetry. In  
praise of Ireland Heaney muses:

*"The ground itself is kind, black, butter  
Melting and opening underfoot,  
Missing its last definition  
By millions of Years"<sup>11</sup>*

As two cultures, two religions, two languages & two  
races cohabit in Ulster, the tussle between them  
heightens the poetic imagination of Heaney. As a  
representative poet of the Catholics of the Northern  
Ireland, Heaney writes :

*"I feel closer to the natives, the  
geniuses of the place".<sup>12</sup>*

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<sup>10</sup> Scamus Heaney. "Bogland". p.21

<sup>11</sup> Scamus Heaney. "Bogland". p.21

<sup>12</sup> Scamus Heaney. "Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-78. London: Faber & Faber. 1984. pp.34-35.

By identifying himself with the native rebels of the present century, Heaney makes clear his current allegiance in the ongoing conflict between the privileged and the persecuted.

By admitting quotations into his poetry, which carry along their own tone and occasion, Heaney is allowing politics into his poetry. It is an ambiguous tactic. While, on the one hand, quotation enables Heaney to engage in politics indirectly, on the other hand, by the act of quoting, he manages to detach himself personally from the politics, since the very volume of his borrowing effectively substitutes the language of others for the poet's own speech. Through the abundant use of quotations, Heaney effectively silences his own voice. By this technique, he keeps himself away from politics, allowing a space for artistic discourse :

*"The creative mind is astraddle silence"<sup>13</sup>*

Outwardly silent and inwardly talkative, Heaney best reveals the artistic utterance by internalizing the objective neutrality in the process of poetic subjectification. Thus, he brings an equilibrium between

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<sup>13</sup> Seamus Heaney. "Preoccupations :Selected Prose 1968-78. London: Faber & Faber. 1984, pp.34-35.

silence and speech, art and politics, abstract and concrete. Infact, the striking feature of his first two books is their mediation between silence and speech.

Heaney's bogland is somewhat like Yeats' "Byzantium". While Byzantium is a Utopia-a poetic world at the disposal of a poetic frenzy, bogland is a tragic world of fury and violence that has been earnestly longing to be like the frontier of America :

*"We have no prairies  
To sliu a big sun at evening-  
Everywhere the eye concedes to  
Enchroaching horizon,  
Is wooed into the cyclop's eye  
Of a tarn."*<sup>14</sup>

In his early works, Heaney refers to the provincial tension not by lashing out at the privileged but by musing, and praying, for the uplift of the deserted lot. For bringing back relief to an under nourished folk of the British-ruled Northern Ireland, he employs his writting- poetry as a means of consolation at the behest of long cherished, earthly and possessive achievement, e.g. American prairies. Thus, adherance to the spaces in comparision, past and present in

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<sup>14</sup> Scamus Heaney. "Bogland", p.21

combination, protest and console in elevation of a slashed throat, redeems the gap for furthering the close link for his creative thought with the world around.

His first book, Death of a Naturalist (1966) evoked comparisons with Thomas Hardy and Robert Frost, high company for a beginner, but it was the voice of the Irish farm boy that was most distinctly heard. His early poems are reputed to be in opposition to "idealized" Georgian treatments of nature because of its emphasis on the harsh, actual, predatory and corruptible aspects. The really memorable poems in that volume were the opening poem "Digging" and the closing poem "Personal Helicon". The first was clearly autobiographical since Heaney, having grown up on a farm County Derry, portrayed himself in this poem as following his father, who dug for potatoes, and his grand father, who dug for peat, he "digging" for words with his pen. It is a homely metaphor, but it suited his style well, signifying strength, skill and earthliness:

"Digging", in fact, was the name of the first poem I wrote where I thought my feelings had got into words, or to put it more accurately, where I



thought my feel had got into words. Its rhymes and noises still please me....I wrote it in the summer of 1964, almost two years after I had begun to "dabble in verses". This was the first place where I felt I had done more than make an arrangement of words : I felt that I had let down a shoft into real life."<sup>15</sup>

Initially, Heaney was left with his Catholic ancestry and Irish nationality, a companion of predecessors including his compatriot, Yeats- a powerful ghost under which he could thrive best, an eventful history of emancipating Northern Ireland from the yoke of England and a tumultous political setup in the Republic of Ireland. All these could mould the poetic career of Heaney occupying a colosial space in his first two volumes. But the immaturity of exposition, at the outset, does no defame Heaney as he was then being identified a national but representative poet of the Catholics which brought back his fame in his later book North in 1975.

Heaney emerged in his fourth and most distinctive volume as a poet who had a special

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<sup>15</sup> Seamus Heaney. "Preoccupations : Selected Prose 1968-78. London: Faber & Faber. 1984. p.57

perspective on the stormy scene of Northern Ireland that came from the light of the remote past-not simply from the Irish past, though he knew it well, not simply from western literary and historical past, which also he knew, but from the truly ancient, the ancestors, distant kinsmen connected to him in imagination only, as Homer was connected with Troy, Virgil with Greece or Dante with Rome, a kinship of the spirit more than of the blood, a vital link with the whole heritage of his race. Especially by transforming the Irish bogs into a symbolic landscape, Heaney has performed a feat of imagination which can justly be compared with Yeats' achievement in making a symbolic landscape of the countryside around Sligo, the world of his childhood, so that readers far removed from Ireland could inhabit it and feel at home there. With his Irish bog poems Heaney has created a symbol of human memory and imagination that goes far beyond Ireland in its significance, reestablishing the link between man and natural world that we seem to have lost by single-mindedly pursuing a purely technological mastery of nature.

Early Heaney poetry startled with its physicality.

The imagery is bluff, masculine and dead-on:

*"All year the flax-dam festered in the heart  
Of the townland ; green and heavy headed  
Flax had rotted there, weighted down by huge  
sods.*

*Daily it sweltered in the punishing sun.  
Bubbles gargled delicately, bluebottles  
Wove a strong gauze of sound around the  
smell"<sup>16</sup>*

These lines heavily laden with assonance, alliteration, imagery of touch, taste and smell, and with synesthesia as the flax is with sod. Extensive description of a static scene can lead Heaney into confusion, despite a Ted Hughes-like vividness.

Heaney is a folklorist, recalling old customs that survived into his native Londonderry of the nineteen-forties. In "Digging", supposedly an effective manifesto, the poet recalls his father, like his father before him, expertly cutting turf on Toner's bog and says :

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<sup>16</sup> Seamus Heaney, "Death of a Naturalist", Death of a Naturalist p.21

*"But I've no spade to follow men like them"<sup>17</sup>*

The ex-peasant, newly urbanized, middle-class poet proclaims his alternative :

*"Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests  
I'll dig with it".<sup>18</sup>*

Thus his early poems, "Digging", and "Thatcher" are about the use of tools- the churn-off, the bill-hook, the spade, the hammer - they themselves are verbal mimics of tool- making.

The recuperation of the Irish national movement and the second Irish war of independence of 1919-1921 bears imprints in Heaney's poem. In "Trout", the fish has been portrayed as a "fat gun-barrel" a curious cartoon image and as a tracer-bullet, a volley and a ramrod image, vivid in themselves. This sort of animal images, quite often found in Ted Hughes, have triggered the meaning in Heaney's writing.

Due to self government in Ulster, Catholics have remained poor, politically powerless and alienated from

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<sup>17</sup> Scamus Heaney. "Digging", p.1.

<sup>18</sup> Scamus Heaney. "Digging", Death of a Naturalist, p.16

the government. The Docker of the poem "Docker" is a laconic Belfast docker and therefore a Protestant and a Celtic cross, supposedly in conflict with the Catholics and this proves to be prophetic in Heaney's words :

*"That fist would drop a hammer on a  
Catholic-  
Oh yes, that kind of thing could start again  
The only Roman collar he tolerates  
Smiles all round his sleek pint of porter"<sup>19</sup>*

Another poetic device, Heaney uses in his poetry. suitably enhances its intended meaning, is objective correlatives-digging, ploughing, drawing well-water, taking, soundings, fishing and divining. These are at the helm of his enfranchisement of Irish politics in the form of artificial of jargons to augur the circumference of artistic excellency.

Thus, during the formative period of his poetic career, concretizing artistry found a big space to cojoin with the readers' inference and assessment.

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<sup>19</sup> Seamus Heaney. "Docker". Death of a Naturalist. p.21

## CHAPTER II

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### ENFRANCHISING POETRY

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The beginning of the 1970s assigns Heaney with a passion for writing poetry at the command of history in making. It is no more the past history, but the present troubled life of Ireland that could provide raw materials for his prolific writing. Hence, he is a poet in time and on demand. The events of 1968-69, in Derry, Catholic Civil Rights marches campaigning for "One man one vote", there upon the formation of IRA influenced him so much: "There was an energy and excitement and righteousness in the air at the time, by people like myself who had not always been political"<sup>1</sup> that he changed his notion of poetry :

"From that moment the problems of poetry moved from being simply a matter of achieving the satisfactory verbal icon to being a search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament."<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, the enforced propagandist exposed himself at the behest of the political turmoil, then

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<sup>1</sup> Scamus Heaney. Rambles in Ireland (interview), p.165.

<sup>2</sup> Scamus Heaney. Rambles in Ireland (interview), p.56.

prevalent in Ireland. This phase marked an openly political exposure for Heaney. If, during his first phase, he is more or less an imitator of the situation, ancestry, predecessors, and later phase of 80s and 90s a matured poet of genius, this decade of ontological supremacy keeps overpowering his cognitive formation. A writer cannot isolate himself from the burning problems of the time. But, it is a matter of debate that how far an author is free to portray the national scene as he thinks it to be. Otherwise he may be an exile like Salman Rushdie. In case of Heaney, the cause of a community which could defend him for portraying the native land predicament suggesting the would be betterment measures. That is why in his visionary aspects of poetry, representing a race and community in a geographical territory, the voices of humanity could be heard.

Perhaps, Heaney is unconsciously dragged into politics both physically as he joined the civil rights march in 1968, and mentally. Although, the happenings of situation made him political, he pretends to be apolitical, showing at the same time, catholic solidarity

as he dared not publish and did not put his name to this poem :

*Come all ye Ulster Loyalists and in full chorus join,  
Think on the deeds of Craig's Dragoons who strike below  
the groin,*

*And drink a toast to other turncheon and the armoured  
water-hose*

*That mowed a swathe through Civil Rights and spat on  
Papish clothes.....*

*O William Craig, you are our love, our lily and  
our sash,*

*You have the boys who fear no noise, who'll batter and  
who'll bash.*

*They'll cordon and they'll baton charge, they'll  
silence protest tunes,*

*They are the hounds of Ulster, boys, sweet William  
Craig's Dragoons".<sup>3</sup>*

A freedom fighter-turned poet can never sacrifice the national solidarity and identity at the behest of universal thematizing. That is why, provincialism, parochialism and the sound of barrel-gun are very often heard in his poetry. Sound becomes the major thematic concern and ultimately the chief symbol of political interest in Wintering Out (1973). In it he maintains his political participation with the establishment of the UDA, increased violence of the IRA, the induction of

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Karl Miller's, "Opinions", The Review Vol 27-28. (Autumn-Winter, 1971-1977), pp.47-48.



internment, a worker's strike in Derry, bloody Sunday and the imposition of Direct Rule. Unlike his earlier works, he struggles to break through silence towards utterance to dislodge "the slashed tongue." The dominant imagery, embraces the ear and tongue, as he has mentioned the tongue directly seven times in Wintering Out. In this volume, the poet is explicitly political as he concedes :

*"The tongue's  
Leashed in my throat."<sup>4</sup>*

Still, in this phase, he continues to employ the device of silence. Direct speech is virtually non-existent, the poet checks it with quotation, recitation and repetition. Such artistic techniques demonstrate Heaney's unwillingness to use his poetry as a medium for political discourse. Therefore, he is political without being apolitical.

Many quotations have been appended as epigraphs or cited within the body of the poems in Wintering Out. Heaney prefaces "The wool trade" with a quotation from Joyce's Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man; "The Shore Woman" with a Gaelic proverb;

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<sup>4</sup> Scamus Heaney. "Midnight" Wintering Out, 1973. p.17.

"A northern hoard" with a line from Coleridge's Rime of the Ancient Mariner and "Bye-child" with a newspaper report. In "Traditions" he quotes both MacMorris from Shakespeare's Herry V and Leopold Bloom from Joyce's Ulysses. The intention behind these quotations is certainly politically motivated in a trouble-own Northern Ireland, for example in "Bog Oak", Heaney cites Spenser's view of the present state of Ireland:

*"Perhaps I just make out  
Edmund Spenser,  
dreaming sunlight,  
encroached upon by  
geniuses who creep  
out of every corner  
of the woodes and glennes  
towards watercress and carrion"*

*- Bog Oak.*

Therefore, at the cost of voices, uttered by others, Heaney exposed his political intention maintaining an artistic silence at a distance.

This intention has also achieved by using repetition persistently in Wintering Out. As a literary device repetition assumes two different forms: the recitation of place-names and the doubling of words and phrase. The poet asks the sound of a place-name

like Derrygarve or Bruges to replace speech, to communicate an unspoken message of its own. He names Anahorish, Moyola, Toone, Broagh, Derrygarve, Castledawson, Uperlands, Bruges, Lagan, Kildare, Aarhus, Grauballe, Nebelgard, Jutland, Burren, Ballyshannon, Donegal, in a kind of oral litany. Such recitation, often silences speech and prevents any verbal engagement of politics. The very sound of these place-names supports Heaney's emphasis on pronunciation which substantially bears political significance in this volume.

Like recitation, verbal doubling- a form of repetition also blocks speech. For example, this verbal doubling "scald, scald, scald" and "my name, my name" in the poem "Summer Home", "Roads unreeled, unreeled" in "Westering" ; "Toome, Toome" in the poem "Toome" and repetition of "sounding" in "Gift of Rain" have rendered an ambiguous meaning of concealed speech. This verbal doubling embodies the plurality of the modern Irish consciousness as Ulster is cohabited by two cultures, two religions and two languages. Not only a postponement of speech, but doubling technique also creates a sense of stammering as Heaney wrote in

Wintering Out, "A stagger in air/as if a language/failed. Thus, inarticulacy and silence openly convey his inability to put the Ulster problem into words. The inability to speak, addressed in his first two books, combines with the uncertainty of what to say in Wintering Out.

In the poems like "The Servant Boy" and "The Last Summer", Heaney dramatises the oppression of the Catholic into silence. The silent resentment against the loss of Irish tradition in "The Last Summer" explodes his violence. Thus, Heaney's poetry suggests that speech is a privilege not granted to Catholics in Ulster.

Language itself bears sectarian signals underlining the division between Protestants and Catholics. Therefore, in Wintering Out, Heaney insists upon the inadequacy of language for bridging sectarian differences in Northern Ireland. Dialect, like one's surname, identifies and segregates Irish from British. Therefore, politics turns out to be a matter of language. As British possession of Ireland was linguistic as well as territorial, to Heaney language embodies the land. Thus, by making language the subject of

many of the poems in Wintering Out, Heaney, too, implicitly incorporates politics into it.

Moreover, Heaney does not hibernate from Ulster politics. He prefers a subtle resistance to public rhetoric in his poetry. For combating verbal subjugation by the English, he undertakes the Irish Catholic dialect by loading his poems with such ammunition as Irish place-names, words of Gaelic ancestry, references to Irish ballads and proverbs, crafts and customs. The poetry is militant in nature and that runs orally to enliven the lethargic heart :

*"But now our river tongues must rise  
From licking deep in native haunts  
To flood, with vowelling embrace,  
Demmesens staked out in consonants"*

*- A New Song*

Language is the carrier of culture. As a channel of communication, it sets in motion the dominant cultural ethos, emphatically sustained through generations. In Wintering Out, Irish speech has the power of territorial repossession and cultural redemption. The very first line of the collection, "Or, as we said," raises pronunciation as a sectarian banner. The first word "Or"

immediately establishes Heaney's resistance. As Heaney himself points out that "etymology, vocabulary, even intonations.... are all active signals of loyalties, Irish or British, Catholic or Protestant" in Wintering Out. Therefore, language is a means of cultural self-preservation, a way of forbearing absorption by the overwhelming majority. Quoting Stephen Dedalus, Heaney marvels at how different words sound on Irish and British lips. In Wintering Out, Heaney preserves these differences insisting upon the distinction between moss and bawn, wool and tweed. Therefore, in this collection, if quotation, the recitation of place-names and a sense of stammering enact verbally the Northern Catholic's oppression into silence, it is Heaney's linguistic interest that makes the silence politically vocal.

In Stations (1975), Heaney allows politics to rise to the surface of the text, but then he imposes an external silence upon the book. Marginalisation of politics in North (1975) invokes internal silences- a voice which expresses a political interest only in the subtext.

The noise of politics silences his poetry, as he concedes in the preface of Stations, that having returned to Belfast from California just after the introduction of internment, "my introspection was not confident enough to pursue the political direction towards which the book turned. Stations is a collection of prose poems which the poet himself describes as "pieces", never poems. This distinction suggests a coordination between the public world of politics and prose, and the private world of emotions and poetry. Speech and silence meet each other at the opposite ends of such a system.

Speech reigns over silence in Stations as poems are filled with direct, and simple talk in correspondence to politics- the dominant subject matter of the volume. Here, the poet has concerned himself with sectarian confrontations, Protestant bigotry and Catholic resistance. Substances such as lambs' drums, graffiti, William of Orange, the GAA and toy battleships decorate the poetry with political symbolism. But Heaney's political irresolution, his quandary over what to say and how to say it, infuses Stations with a disturbing ambivalence.

As an ambivalent attitude, Heaney's political silence has often been criticized. While submerging protest beneath a silent surface in *North*, he censors his own voice in Stations. This augurs his ambiguous stance towards politics. His commitment to politics comes rather spontaneously as he has been residing in a trouble-own territory of rival factions on religious grounds which could turn the political wheel upside down. Hence, he was destined to join politics by resigning his teaching profession. Accordingly, his poetry has been coloured with the tentative teachings of politics.

Heaney has said that from the moment of the onslaught of violence in Belfast in the summer of 1969, "the problems of poetry.... (became) a search for imagery and symbols adequate to our predicament"<sup>5</sup> So, poetry for Heaney could have served a greater purpose i.e. targetting the politics to mend fences with self-interests. In response to the political turmoil of the Northern Ireland, he mythologises the real violence of contemporary Ulster in Part-I of North by disclosing a barbaric Viking past. He engages the conflict between

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<sup>5</sup> Seamus Heaney, Preoccupation, : Selected Prose 1968-1978. London : Faber & Faber. 1984. p.56.



Hercules and Antaeus, as the myth of colonization. Allusions to Gunnar, Diana Actaeon, Hercules and Antaeus, Thor, Atlas, even Hamlet thrust contemporary politics ever deeper underground. That is why, "Poetry of any power is always deeper than its declared meaning." <sup>6</sup>

However, Heaney is not directly concerned with politics. His political silence in North is guilt-ridden. To the victims of ritual violence, whether past or present, he confesses :

*"I....would have cast, I know,  
the stones of silence."*

Thus, he admits of being "stood dumb" in the face of violence rather than shouting in civilized outrage. In the poem "Ocean's Love to Ireland," strangled speech has been used to symbolize Heaney's inability to articulate the political reality of Northern Ireland. Thus silence is represented by the bog people themselves, many of whom were strangled or had their throats cut. They could only image the violence of their age, not speak of it.

In part II of North, Heaney openly confronts the contemporary Ulster of Bogside and Orange drums. That

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<sup>6</sup> *ibid*, p.186.

is why reviewers often labelled this portion of the collection as "political poems" Abandoning the mythology of Part I, here the poet uses the silence of prose and the unanswered question to voice the vulgarity and the uncertainty of life in Northern Ireland.

The manipulation of silence is a political tool as Heaney envisages in "The Ministry of Fear":

*"Catholics.... does speak  
As well as students from the Protestant  
schools."*

This significant but implicit distinction has been sustained throughout his poetry. In this way, speech takes on a sectarian dimension. The Protestants own land and language; but for the Catholic, Ulster is the "land of password, handgrip, wink and nod."

Towards the later part of 1970s, Heaney turns to be more pastoral than political. His Field Work (1979) is replete with meditative and intimate tone of pastoral celibacy. But the dream vision in it embraces political analogy e.g. the poem "Ugolino". In "The badgers", he envisages the events around :

*"How perilous is it to choose  
not to love the life we are shown"*

The Badgers are a kind of analogue for IRA activity. As Heaney concedes "the poem is really about the relation between yourself and shadow self: the question of political solidarity with movement becomes an extension of that".<sup>7</sup> The conclusion of the poem has been loaded with political identification as Heaney compares the soldiers of the badger with him. It seems that his activity as a poet is badger-like. Therefore, beneath the reticent exterior of his poetry scuttles a secret but resolute political voice. In this way, Heaney voices his experiences of the duplicity of Ulster life in poetry. Through the oral tradition of literary discourse, Heaney allows his poetry to confront politics.

In Sweeney Astray (1984), a translation of the medieval epic, Heaney continues his political commentary on Northern Ireland. Sweeney's suffering is born out of political and religious turmoil. His exile stems from the threat of dispossession. The pagan Sweeney conflicts with the Christian Ronan over the cleric's territorial invasion. The offending noise of Ronan's bell triggers Sweeney's anger to be vocal against the oppression. His transformation into a bird and banishment to hedge and treetop, the result of

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<sup>7</sup> Beisch, "An Interview with Seamus Heaney", The literary Review (29) Winter, 1989, pp.168.

Ronan's curse, leads to his acceptance of God. At the same time he accepts the role of the poet inspired by nature who prefers bird song to human speech. Comparing Sweeney's situation with his own, Heaney explained in an interview with Robert Druce: "It was after the battle of Moira that Sweeney had been turned into a bird, a roamer of the countryside, after the noise of battle. So I had the notion of how, out of the clash of arms in the North, I was living among the hedges myself, here in Wicklow." Thus Sweeney's flight from the world, his quiet life as a hermit-poet, sketches out Heaney's own existence at the time he took up the translation.

The whole 1975 of troubled Irish larger drama of politics could occupy the private imagination of Heaney. Though at times geographically distant from the bombs and bullets, for the poet they were always close at hand. Hearing the reports of guns and of each new "neighbourly murder", he endeavoured to find perspectives which might enable him to face the horror. Although, the politics of polarization and the "agonies and injustices" of events, increasingly compelled him towards adopting a Catholic stance, he struggled

for a long time to restrain his feelings of "race and resentment". Without highlighting directly incidents from the present, he concentrated primarily on the origins and hinter land of the conflict in Wintering Out, through elegiac poems celebrating the indentivity, history, territory and tongue of his people, the Northern Catholic Irish.

In Ulster, the verb "to winter out" means to see through and survive, and thus an appropriate title for his third collection in response to political submissiveness. Being struck by the historical Crisis in Northern Ireland Heaney wrote :

"The fight was between a ruling class used to power and the exercise of power, who spoke a language of control and assumed their right to govern, and a submerged population activated by a sense of injustice and led by its more politicaly sophisticated representatives. At this confrontation the moderate retreats from pollitics, affirming the need for cooperation between all men of good will and rejecting the destructiveness of civil war as a means of however desirable an end.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Scamus Heaney, "Delirium of the Brave" The Listener, 27 November, 1969, p.759.

Prisoners of history, the Catholic minority embraces its familiar humble fate, hugging" our little destiny again." In Wintering Out Heaney explores the "little destiny" that constitutes a subtle act of resistance, an emotional, yet articulate response to centuries of military, Political, linguistic and cultural domination. The legacy of colonialism, mentioned in the poems- "The last Mummer", "Traditions" , "Anahorish", "Broagh", "Toone", "A New Song" and "Gift of Rain"-is the linguistic disposition of the Irish people. "Traditions" opens depicting the "rape" of the Irish language, "buled long ago by the alternative tradition."

At times, Heaney's rejection of Partisan Politics" holds the idealistic hope that "common ground" could be established between Catholic and Protestants. His attempt towards a ford between past and present, and between Nationalist and Unionist envisages that the Ulster Catholics and Protestants might one day learn to accept each other's traditions and acknowledge the rich diversity of their linguistic heritage.

America gave Heaney the idea that he would have to come back and say that Belfast is a kind of

disease preventing personality from flowering gracefully. Such was the condition of Ulster to stimulate Heaney who decided to resign from his post as a lecturer at Queen's University to purchase a career as a freelance writer.

For the protestant sensibility, the Troubles were an interruption and disruption of "the status quo"..... For the Catholic Writer, I think the Troubles were a critical moment, a turning point, possibly a vision of some kind of fulfilment. The blueprint in the Catholic writer's head predicted that a history would fulfil itself in a United Ireland or in something..... In the late 1960 and early 1970s the world was changing for the Catholic imagination. I felt I was compromising some part of myself by staying in a situation where socially land, indeed, imaginatively there were pressures 'against' regarding the moment as Critical"<sup>9</sup>

The North poems certainly embody a legitimate anger where the poet determines to seek out images, rich in energy to serve as a "binding force" for his community and provide him with some solace. Atrocities

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<sup>9</sup> Seamus Heaney, interviewed by Seamus Deane in "Talk with Seamus Heaney", New York Times

Book Review, (2) December 1979, pp.47-48.

have become such frequent and familiar events, whether next door or next street, that they merit the epithet, "neighbourly. His use of "we" and "our" and his later reference to "the whole country" indicate that Heaney's dream or of restoration embraces both communities. From the womb of words, he moves to the origins of conflict, which began with England's occupation of Ireland. In contrast to other rapes to be depicted in "Ocean's Love to Ireland" and "Act of union", his "invasion of England is a byrical affair, a gentle love-act, in which the partners "end up/Cradling each other.

Heaney tries in the poem "Kinship" to bring about the political and cultural repossession of Ireland after centuries of English occupation. The conscious endeavour to articulate the Irish Catholic identity has been overshadowed the poem. In part II of North, Heaney pinpoints two crucial moments in the historical conflict between Ireland and England, in order to account for the re-emergence of arche-typal patterns of human behaviour in contemporary Ireland. Both "Ocean's Love to Ireland" and "Act of Union" offer allegorical



versions of history, depicting "the rape of the territories of Ireland." and in "The Wounds of the Land of Fodla", Heaney anticipates Ireland's future under colonial rule: "Henceforth shalt thou be an unwilling handmaid to every withered band while every foreign churl shall have sucked thy breasts." The poem "A New Life" consisting of four sonnets, introduces specific reference to Ireland's colonial history, exposing the rawness of the wounds in the Irish mind, memory, tongue, body and landscape. In contrast to the colonial power the poem admits the "dark deeds" it has committed against Ireland.

The poem of the second part of North springs from a need to be explicit about the pressure and prejudices watermarked into the psyche of anyone born and bred in Northern Ireland.<sup>10</sup> However, Heaney employs his lyrical medium to resist oppression. Members of the Protestant majority might still control the roads and most of the territory of Ulster, but Heaney proclaims to the English lyric by making "full chimes" in his own tongue, he could defeat "the ministry of fear". Thus, his lyric intensity could defy the provocative rhetoric of the governing elites.

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<sup>10</sup> Seamus Heaney. "An article for the P.B.S. Bulletin", (85), Summer 1975.

The recurring concern within Field Work is the tension between song and suffering. With the all-pervasive context of violence in mind, Heaney dramatizes his anxieties over the morality, justification and efficacy of poetic experience in contemporary Ireland. The first poem, "Oysters", sets the agenda, and asks whether it is appropriate for the poet to exercise the gift of his lyric art, his freeness, in the midst of the unfree, the oppressed the dying. While innocent children, men and women are being crushed, shot or blown to bits, might not song constitute "a betrayal of suffering"? In "Triptych", Heaney acknowledges the grip history retains on his Island "of comfortless noises" and upon his way of viewing events. The opening image of "After a Killing" - a poem written after the murder in Dublin of Christopher Ewart-Briggs - picks out the shapes of two gun men on a hillside. In a deeper note of sadness, Heaney asks:

*"Who's sorry for our trouble".*

Christian values might be restored if the people and the poets are given the grace and have the courage to speak

out in favour of tolerance and the helmeted tree,  
the symbol of political liberty :

*"Unless forgiveness find its nerve and voice,  
Unless the helmeted and fleeing tree can  
green and open bud like infanats' firsts."*

(Sybil)

The elegies to his three murdered friends, Colum McCartney in "The Strand at Lugh Beg", Sean Armstrong in "A Postcard from North Antrim" and Louis O'Neill in "Casualty" similarly demonstrate Heaney's refusal to allow bullet and the bomb to have the final word. The appalling, unnatural circumstances in which these deaths occurred are powerfully recorded - 'the blood and roadside muck', the pointblank teatime bullet', the fact of being 'blown to bits'-yet, through the intercession of memory, art and nature, Heaney manages to assuage his sense of loss, and to strike sharp, clear notes in celebration.

Therefore, enfranchising his poetry triggers off his political participation in a big way. Nothing could reward Heaney as his poetry serving as a nursery rhyme to cure the healing injuries of the Catholics and more particularly his relatives in

Northern Ireland. Thus, being a Catholic citizen in a violence-ridden territory of sufferance and introspection, Heaney muses and at the same time demands legitimacy for the racial discrepancy.

## CHAPTER III

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### NARRATING THE NATION

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Portraying an history or narrating a nation enlarges the circumferences of any creative prospective at the disposal of an author, which tends to be assimilated with not only one but all other such creative worlds, thus, questioning the orthodoxy of the European "master narrative". But the fluidity of narration can never be possible without universalizing the subject matter with a world language. The confrontation of universalism and provincialism is, no doubt, at the helm of Heaney's poetry, but his lyricism accelerates infiltration of personal and impersonal elements, paving the way for generalization.

The entities of narrative and nation are always in formation and are so vast that they can not be seen in totality. It is the mind's eye that can realize their horizons because both nation and narration lose their origins in the myths of time.

Thus circulation of time engulfs everything which is to be renewed on a later date and new circumstance by a rather different mind. Such a spatio-temporal dimensions questions the significance of reality as such assuming whatever comes of late is right or good. Then nothing is in static. Rather flexibility of nature accelerates the emergence of a powerful historical idea which stands at the backdrop of a creative writer redeeming the separate entity of nation and narration both of which are in the process of making.

The nation's coming into being as a system of cultural configuration, as the representation of social life rather than the discipline of social polity, emphasizes that nationalism has to be understood with large cultural systems. It is this cultural nucleus around which politics of a nation has been rotating. The rationality behind politics is a conscious thought that comes out of adhering to the externality and constraints of the cultural ambivalances as "culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law,

custom and any other capabilities acquired by man as a member of society".<sup>1</sup>

A narrative is an embodiment of the thought process or ideologies preceded by the ethos of culture. But how do we preserve culture? Certainly through texts and that text, too, is an imprint of a written sign i.e. language. Therefore, language is a means of communication and a carrier of culture. In short, language is culture, or so also the collective memory bank of people's experience in history. In other words, culture is the product of history which in turn reflects the historical ideas by means of a language.

Therefore, language is an image forming agent mediating "between "I" and "my own self," between my own self and other selves, between me and nature. Language is mediating in my very being".<sup>2</sup> This mutual coexistence, between self and other selves is the basic concern of Seamus Heaney in his later days of 1980s and 1990s. It is at

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<sup>1</sup> E.B.Tylor. Primitive Culture p.1.

<sup>2</sup> Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Decolonizing the Mind p.17.

this stage of his poetical maturity that he could concretise his creative dictum :

*"The end of art of peace"<sup>3</sup>*

Nothing has brought Heaney fame but his desire to be among the people of the world by intermingling nationalism with internationalism as he has been revealed genuinely:

*"Two bucket is easier to carry than one.  
And I grow in between",*

The mediation between past and present; rural ancestry and royal dynasty; regional and national, national and international; life and death marvellous his artistic excellence at the command of combining Irish dialect with English language. A true man of understanding keeps open of his poetic sensibility fusing together imagination and reason in disposal of a lyric mechanism. The flexibility of lyricism could combine the chaotic regional scene of Northern Ireland with the suggestiveness of world peace. Here lies the innovative skill of a colonized mind for ever seeking freedom by penning down the sensitized spirit.

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<sup>3</sup> Seamus Heaney. "Personal Helicon".



The faithful longing for the world be betterment of Northern Ireland relying upon past history enlivens through the feeling and emotion of Heaney. And at the same time the poet is all set to muse upon rural antiquity.

*"The royal road were cow paths  
The queen mother hunkered on a stool  
and played the harpstrings of milk  
into a wooden pail."<sup>4</sup>*

The genuine revelation of an embattled soul keeps on going as long as it has not been settled at a trouble free circumference. This fighting lot of Seamus Heaney for achieving political equality, religious fraternity and poetic universality knocks at the heart of his collection *Station Island* (1984). Interestingly, the titular volume figures a place name in Northern Ireland which, perhaps, comes out of the patriotic spirit. In order to infuse the patriotism, parochialism and universalism in a linear fashion, the transformed but kindred spirit of Sweeney- a mask like character in search of peace in art - moves around the periphery of the world to be recovered from the clutches of orthodoxy. For Heaney, Sweeney represents, in the

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<sup>4</sup> Seamus Heaney, "The First Kingdom", *Station Island*.

poets words, a freed voice. " By speaking through Sweeney, the Poet is able to 'let fly' to loosen the "gag of time and place to dislodge the slab of the tongue". In "first flight", the poet proclaims, in Sweeney's voice: "I mastered new rungs of the air to survey out of reach their bonfires on hills". From this perspective Heaney seems to gain freedom from political pressure. He declares that freedom in his own comments on Station Island- "In some ways, artistically and imaginatively speaking, the political tragedy in Northern Ireland is ashes now. It is eternally distressing as a political problem, but as a stimulant to the imagination it is almost nil".

Station Island, the island of the title, is situated on lough Derg in country Donegal and known as the lake of the cave. There, according to tradition, in a cave, during a fast that lasted forty days. St. Patrick had a vision of the other world and actually experienced the pains of purgatory. This "St. Patrick's purgatory" propels Heaney to name his collection for renewing his writing during 1980s. The motive force behind this purgatory is political rather than religious as has been highlighted in the poems of the

volume like "An Ulster Twilight". In this poem, Heaney portrays, for the first time, a protestant figure Eric Dawson in contrast to his Catholic stance. More so, a Protestant and a Catholic has been communicated through artificial pleasantries. This sort of speech allows the poet to overcome the symbol of political violence.

Although political uncertainties annoy the poet, in Station Island this does not receive linguistic representation. In "Away from it all" Heaney openly weighs active participation in history against contemplation. Unlike the earlier collections, here the poet is more vocal allowing speech and voice in place of silent resistance. Within the first poem, Heaney announces :

*"The silence breathed  
and could not settle back"<sup>5</sup>*

Station Island is, as Heaney commented, "full of voices" with direct speech, organized as it is around conversations between the poet and ghostly personages he meets on a dream pilgrimage. Having mobilized direct speech, Heaney allows political concerns to rise to the surface of the poetry, and the

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<sup>5</sup> Seamus Heaney, "The Underground", Station Island.

poetry consequently becomes less politically intense. As Kevin Barry says, Heaney's poetry is "most effectively political when an explicit politics cannot be found in it."

Three of the poet's encounters on Station Island are with political victims, but here he abandons the form of the elegy used in Field Work and faces his ghosts openly. In the poem "Shelf Life", Heaney enlists simple speech to dramatise the random sectarian killing of a shopkeeper. The poet questions the victim directly and simply.

*"Did they say nothing ?*

*Were they in Uniform ?*

*Not masked in any way ?*

His apology to the victim, "forgive my timid circumspect involvement" echoes from the bottom of his heart. These confessions expose the rationale behind Station Island. The poet validates his apology for past silence through his present use of speech. The process of atonement culminates with the words of James Joyce in the final poem of the sequence. Joyce advises the poet :

*"Let go, let fly, forget*

*It's time to swim  
out on your own".*

Therefore, Station Island writes a message in suggestion of freedom at will and thus a proclamation of setting free from any sort of bondage.

Heaney not only internationalize the Catholic predicament of troubled Northern Ireland, but also universalizes his poetic spirit. With its stress on the bond between the living and the dead, its emphasis on the path of renunciation and sacrifice, its reliance on dramatic metaphor and symbol, its use of repetitive, mantra-like prayer, practice of inflicting punishment on the body in order to cleanse the soul, the experience on Station Island seems to enshrine quintessential features of Irish Catholicism. Many of these modes of thought and feeling have surfaced in the language and actions of such men as Padraic Pearse, Terence Mcswiney, and Bobby Sands.

If the sectarian violence engulfs the time span of Northern Ireland through Protestant processions, much to the astonishment of Catholics,

then nothing could dissuade a Heaney, to turn down the matter, ignoring his own suffering and sacrificing his religious cult from his writing. The plurality of languages, culture and religion makes up of a nation and very often readers could find little difference between nation and narration. That is why it is difficult to decide whether nation or narration comes first. As nation is an embodiment of the diversities so also narration is of the contractions. This double standard of nation and narration often loaded with ambivalences, confuses the demarcation of one from another which tend to be aligned in a coordinated manner. The variations of a nation state, like sectarian misinterpretation in Ireland, prescribe, in the words of Edward Said, an "analytic pluralism" for an imitation of reality through the contradiction of language out of which a text emerges. At the same time, if language is insufficient to express emotion and feelings in toto, as said by Lacan, then how can Seamus Heaney portray the entire Irish scene by dint of a dialect. Again, the controversy of dialect and English language mars the perspective of

Heaney in narrating the highly conflicting nation, i.e. the Irish Republic. Even though, language partially could imitate the ideas, still it fails to express them in written signs. In this respect, Derrida is quite right by assuming that in language there are only differences without positive terms.

What I intend to say is that along with the maturity of Heaney, his poetry matured. The ideas that environment reigned supreme in his artistic reconciliation with the concrete objects. In his poem sequence *Haw Lantern* (1987), the translated and personified hawk embodies strength, persistence, maturity and integrity which has been considered as a classical, golden mean against which the poet measures himself.

Though Heaney's frequent need to cross from the Irish Republic into the North and vice versa provided the occasion for the poem, he described the situation with such detachment and immediacy that it is understood to be universal. Poems like "Parable Island", "From the Republic of Conscience", "From the Land of Unspoken", "From the

Canton of Expectation", "The mud vision" take place at the intersection of the real and surreal, the concrete and the abstract, public and private spheres. Previously Heaney had employed myths and metaphors as a way to examine political realities, here he turns that process on its head, using political realities as metaphors for the troubles faced by the writer.

The transcendental meaning in Heaney's later poem sequence is very often associated with real and imaginary contexts. The little sequences like Seeing Things (1991) and The Spirit Level (1995) are highly sensitive rhythms of embattled spirit. Soaring high and at the same time involved in real but experienced native politics stimulate Heaney into writing poetry which could bag him Nobel Literature Prize for 1995 and British White Bread Award for 1996.

As its title suggests, Seeing Things means how we perceive any reality by the custody of over glance and consequently how we portray that



in our own language. This is what we mean by narrative. And, very often, a narrative comes out of the dialectical relationship between the self and its surroundings. Heaney not only confines himself within the Irish national scene but also opens up his poetic vision towards American experiment of decolonizing nations from the clutches of invaders and past monumental works of Virgil and Dante as role models. That is why his ninth volume *Seeing Things* is a "book of changes", translations of ancient great poets and visions. Between the fine renderings of Virgil and Dante, which open and close the book, there are innumerable magical transformations of ordinary experiences and celebrations of instances loaded with circumstantial happenings. Confidently bearing the golden bough of metaphor before him, he combs the underworld of memory for "clear truths and mysteries", and ascends into the "upper air".

However, Heaney's skillful artistry could transform the perceived reality into a metaphorical meaning of generalizing inference. It is only of that artistic level that a poet can be mused with

universal theme of humanity. Then, the demarcated line of narrative or nation would lose their identity trailing towards a unification of narration, universalization and globalization for the common cause of humanity, particularly, Heaney's portrayal of Ireland does not come out of the patriotic bias, from communitarian "we feeling" of the depressed lot.

The titular poem of Seeing Things starts with an experience in Heaney's life. Referring to a place-name, Inishbofin, very often found in his poems, the poet explores the difficulties undergone not only by the Irish but also by the whole humanity residing over the planet earth. Starting from a particular occasion, rather gloomy :

*"Inishbofin on a Sunday morning.*

*Sunlight, turfsmoke, seagulls, boatship.diesel".*

he could manage to escape the personal hurdles of life by unifying them in an impersonal manner using "we" and "us" like:

*All afternoon, heat wavered on the steps*

*And the air we stood up to our eyes in wavered*

*Like the Zig-zag hieroglyph for life itself"*<sup>6</sup>

In the field of art, contradictory elements like personal and impersonal, national and international, regional and global, self and otherselves, life and death narrative and nation can be combined amicably together to facilitate the transaction of meaning. This happy reconciliation of antagonistic features immaculates any literary authority for transending the criticism around him. That is why Heaney is writing history and at the same time his own work of art is making a literary genre. Although he has been involved with Irish politics since his childhood, that political matter, too has turned into globalizing the native phenomenon which surfaces on his artistic world in miniature. If Station Island and Inishbofin are located in the Northern Island, they have also been transformed into an artistic world of inference where everybody can reside. Not only did the death of Heaney's parents create a vacuum in his mind for composing songs on them it also reminds the reader of the reality behind losing one's parents. Thus,

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<sup>6</sup> Seamus Heaney, "Seeing Things" Seeing Things

impersonalization of personal facts and globalization of regional disparities, imbalances, privileges, and exploitation through a work of art could transform an author's message into universal. Therefore, Heaney spoke of his desire to create a poetry which resembled "window glass" rather than "stained glass".

It is a matter of debate how far Heaney has succeeded by sacrificing his personal but sectarian interest to universalize the causal consequence of Protestant ethics. No doubt, he has treated the Protestant characters with contempt and his fellow religious sects in an amicable manner, but his protest against exploitation through the state machinery and oppression of Protestant majority over Catholic minority represents a voice of resistance which ever has become a universal cause for mankind. Employing poetry as resistance is more powerful than writing poetry on governance, exploitation, sufferance and oppression as the majority of people the world over come under the yoke of a minority ruling elite. When a

universal cause of mass exploitation has been portrayed in a sequence of poem, nothing can please a reader except the song on his own identification. In this way, Irish place-names and characters have been made to transcend the particularising barrier of the phenomena for furthering the scope of Heaney's creative activity at large.

Identifying Heaney in a particular race and sect never can dislodge his universal appeal to mankind. He is an artful writer of reconciliation mediating between art and fact. His perception of seeing things has often been reconciled with what others perceive of it. This universal understanding brings in fame and reputation around the globe. Every bit of Irish landscape has been transformed into perceived notion of meaning and there upon conveying a message quite often acceptable to the others. Land, water, sea have got a refined meaning of artful utterance which can persuade a passerby if ever has been asked so. Such is the universal preaching of his artistic poetry. Heaney

could summarize in these words: "*The end of art is peace*". The artistic skill of Heaney muses over the pathetic divide of antagonistic forces. His lyric art ever tries for an amicable reconciliation employing natural imagery. How beautifully Heaney has combined land and water in the poem "A Retrospect":

*"The whole country apparently afloat  
Every road bridging or skirting water  
The land islanded, the field still as moats".*

However poetry is a current of force, a universal means of expression to appeal to mankind from the corner of a heart for understanding the others. This sort of via media channalized by Heaney would be ever aligned in the heart of every Irish as well as in the mind of humanity. Heaney has achieved this by employing his poetic composition for the cause of nation and vice versa, thus, finding out the happy ending of reconciliation in his poetry.

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## CONCLUSION

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The wide open perspective of Seamus Heaney is still alive as he is 58 now. At this age, he has been felicitated with so many awards by virtue of his sizeable creation. He is not only now a Catholic citizen of Northern Ireland but also the professor of poetry at Oxford. A literary figure renowned the world over is still at work. Relatively much affiliated with Irish troubles, he endeavours to equate it with world politics. A haunted Heaney cannot be at peace as long as world peace has not been established. For this reason, his poetry is a resistance to oppression and exploitation, a force to awaken the sleeping giant of deprived masses.

Nothing could restrain Heaney from portraying the nation as he perceives it to be, which has been recognised the world over. Ever since the inception of society, the circulation of dialectics in the process of thesis, antithesis and synthesis, as propagated by Hegel and adopted by Karl Marx, has been gyrating and man is

a cog in that regular wheel. This has been true in Irish politics out of which an history does emerge. Heaney muthologizes Irish history at the behest of present situation. However, history and narrative take their own course. Jumbling them together is a daunting task. Then, are they move in parallel? Certain not because in one form or another a narration is nothing but an imitation of reality. Although it could resemble reality, but it is an approximation of that. Every narrative reflects a partial approach to reality, because the narrator is only a part of the vast reality and he is unable to see and thereupon portray reality in toto. Moreover, nothing is reality in this world as it can only be subjectively defined. Then, subjectification of reality is not the portrayal of it as such; rather an imitation of reality. The point is how far does narrator succeed in narrating the reality. So within the vast gamut of reality every author is a partial receiver and preacher.

As reality is what one perceives it to be, the sundry facets of it may appeal differently to different observers. What we mean by the universalization of reality is none other than the realization of the sameness



of a certain defined but prescribed reality by likeminded people in a spatio-tempored dimension. As a conscious thinking being a writer may narrates partial, or core of reality, artistically, putting forward his "personal worries", for a mutual understanding of subjective and objective perception. Hence, to objectify the subjective reality, and vice versa, is the motto of every narrative mode and Heaney is in the process of "being". Not only Ireland but also the world is there to provide him with a new mental process for furthering the ambit of his creative discourse.

No ideology has a beginning or an end. This is due to the fact that ideologies have been enforced among themselves at a time, each trying to surpass the others which happens to be at the maturity stage of every ideology. As there is no compartmentalization of ideology, the exchange moves in the manner of dialectic in one form or other very often being moulded by and moulding the environment. Although, the 1960s, were the so called "beginning" of Heaney's poetic career, he was more at the beck and call of the circumstantial and traditional pursuits. Instead of influencing he was

being influenced by the ecological factors. Accordingly, his writing style has been equipped such a limitation of established tradition that his identification may not find space in his poetic composition. The making of the poet depends more upon imitation than realization of the gamut of reality. As a passive observer of Irish troubles, and imitator of Irish history, he composes his early poem series by following the then existing poetic tradition. At this stage of early beginning he dare not to expose his politics. In the mean time, artistic approach is not perfected enough to contour the contemporary issues within the ambit of it. Rather, the artistic fabric was being moulded by the factual information of the day. It is obvious that narrative and societal prospectives are being dominated and dominating each other in succession. The flexibility of their coexistence often beam imprints of artistic maladjustments.

Any sort of misinterpretation of reality, though act and vice versa may lead to the choking of the authorial voice in the process of textual discourse. Although a narrative, often employed by Heaney, comes to the rescue of the writer, still that is not the

complete version of authorial articulacy. No doubt, this classic realistic discourse facilitates the literary transaction of meaning well, but the multiplicity of voices within the purview of a text or poem confuses the intended message, which is supposed to be communicated. The middle phase of Heaney's literary activities is replete with such ambivalances of meanings. Politicizing the artistic ability and prebending to be a political putting in between a third character as a narrative never does make the poet free of political commitment. The conflict reaches a climax during 1970s when Heaney personally participates in his political arena of Ireland. If a writer ever shoulders a gun to shoot the opponents in order to free the motherland or to rescue the oppressed class from the yoke of foreign invaders or have infurled the national flag in front of the lathi and gun of the neo-colonial ruling ruling elites. There is a little difference between gun and pen; both are their to serve the purpose of the common cause of uplift of the poor, deprived lot. Heaney could find little difference between his gun to fight for right and his pen for proclaiming the minority right for peaceful coexistence.

Politicizing poetry is the brief appearance of Heaney's literary affair. Still, at the moment, he denies the fact that he is political. However, this is not because of artistic willingness but because of situational compulsion and personal worries that convert him from passive observer to active propagator for protecting and demanding the fundamental rights of each and every citizen. This sort of motive force is the undercurrent of his middle phase writing. In fact, when a literary art is being deployed with armour of resistance to enforce fundamental rights for a Catholic minority or artistically any group of minority that suffering the oppression of the religious majority group and political elites, nothing can debar the very purpose of that art to appeal to the minority group around the globe to unite and fight. This sort of literature is so popular now a days that it could challenge the colonial supremacy of writing under the banner of neo-colonial. I think, the popularity of neo-colonial literature is responsible why most of the nobel literature prizes are bagged by the neo-colonial writers now a days.

Artistic frenzy due to contradictory and extravagant elements of mental conflicts keeps Heaney away from the national scenario of active politics during 1980s and 1990s. He is more of an artist than politically committed citizen. But, his artistic portrayal dominating over the political commitment without failure of appealing to the people for preserving and protecting the basic rights and ethos of culture through crafted messages of art champions the cause of humanity. The latest poem series never fails to attribute to the nation the necessary virtues of doing right. The art in perfection can guide a humanity for never gone wrong. The moral preaching behind a perfect art is much worthier a guide than any medium of instruction.. This superstructure of Heaney's art has been substantiated with the political structure of Ireland and in a sense of the entire world. However, structure and superstructure have to succeed each other in succession and the supermacy of one does not mean the extinction of the other. Of one forms the background, other provides for the surface structure. But both are being overlapping in every moment of creation. If one cancels the other, that is due to the ephemeral

supermacy of one over the other which may be turned upside down.

Heaney is now a professor of poetry at Oxford. Still he can not ignore the Catholicism of an Irish rural setting and ever growing Irish political game plan between protestants and the Catholics. This knocks at the brain of his poetic maternity, not to undermine his via media success of Stockholm Nobel prize ceremony. "A thing of beauty is a joy for ever". But, what is beauty to Heaney?, Beauty is that which could have attributes of self-identification in objectifying the subjective realization. That is what love meant to Plato. Love is what one does not have and he wants to have it. This sort of objective reality combined with subjective one forms the core of his poetry. Hence, "Beauty is truth, and truth beauty" comes true in the artistic excellence of Heaney's literary discourse which never gets freed from political commitment.

The ever increasing desire to find a place in the world over literary fabric is the reason behind his success. For achieving this noble identity. Heaney has

been backed by his rural ancestry and Catholicism, Irish landscape and violence-ridden site of antagonistic religious forces fighting for prevailing upon their own ideology. From personal 'fury' to compulsions of objectifying the Irish troubles monitored by his long cherished intention of being a literary giant consigns his Irish self abroad.

Maintaining an artistic but aesthetic parameter of value-laden space might accelerate celebrity of preaching ideology, no matter whether it is politically committed or not. The creative mosaic of Heaney demands a kaleidoscopic interpretation as he is a man of regional, national and international repute. I hope, the forthcoming days of Heaney would be replete with ever increasing monuments of literary transaction to fascinate us for reassembling on his worthy contribution to world literature.

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