



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

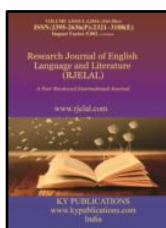
2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

ECO-SPACE IN THE POETRY OF SEAMUS HEANEY

Dr. E. KRISHNAN NAMBOOTHIRI

Associate Professor of English, S.D. College, Alappuzha, Kerala, India-688 003

Email: krishcheeravallil@gmail.com



ABSTRACT

Seamus Heaney is one of the pioneers of the 20th century English poetry. He belongs to the illustrious literary tradition of Ireland, which includes writers like W.B Yeats, James Joyce, Patrick Kavanagh and William Carleton. Seamus Heaney is grouped with the neo-Romantic tradition and the foundation of Heaney's poetry is the "eco-consciousness of the aesthetic of space". Heaney's view of poetry has been ecologically informed and he defines poetry in terms of the natural as well as divine images.

Key Words: Ethnic culture, Eco-space, Postcolonialism, Ego-centrism, Celtic tradition, Gaia.

Introduction

Colonial attitude of limitless progress at the expense of nature had redefined the cultural as well as the linguistic paradigms of Ireland for many centuries. The ecological attitudes of Ireland had undergone radical changes as a result of European invasion and settlement. Seamus Heaney tries to create an eco-space in his poetry firmly grounding his beliefs and attitude in the native ethnic culture Ireland. It seems that the cultural displacements as a result of the colonization have resulted in modifying his ecological sensibilities. The European rationality of mastering and exploiting nature is questioned by Heaney. A close analysis of his poems would underline the fact that instead of imitating the egocentrism of European modernity, he attempts to reinforce the ecological tradition of the old world order.

Discussion

Seamus Heaney belongs to the illustrious literary tradition of Ireland, which includes writers like W.B Yeats, James Joyce, Patrick Kavanagh and William Carleton. Heaney is grouped with the neo-Romantic tradition and the foundation of Heaney's poetry is the "eco-consciousness of the aesthetic of

space" (Docherty 207). Heaney's view of poetry has been ecologically informed and he defines poetry in terms of the natural as well as divine images. For Heaney, poetry is essentially a mystery, a whisper from darkness and a gift from the divine. In his prose collection, *Preoccupations*, the poet himself speaks about the nature of his poetic creation: "I have always listened for poems, they come sometimes like bodies come out of a bog, almost complete, seeming to have been laid down a long time ago, surfacing with a touch of mystery" (34). Poetic creation is not a mechanical process but a natural as well as spiritual one for him. Heaney believes in the intuitiveness of poetry and he perceives poetry as a re-discovery of the life force in nature. The poet has to be a passive receiver before he becomes an active creator. Heaney seems to have accepted the power of nature over the human world. It can be said that his poems are products of ". . . thoroughgoing irrationalism closely linked with the religious impulse. Heaney's organicism, reflected in his ubiquitous invocation of natural analogues for poetry and in his notions of the poem's autonomy and teleological unity, is fundamentally theological: the poet imitates the generative activity of nature or

the 'life-force', if not the creative act of God" (Andrews 16).

Heaney attempts to strike a balance between the attitudes of the natives and that of the settlers. But the effort fails and his poems present patterns of ecological validity through ethnic, earthly, pastoral and feminine images which stand in opposition to the European, urban and masculine overtones of colonialism. The outlook of the natives is pitted against the European stance that always recommends and promotes the ego-centric humanist perception of an active and attacking master. The poet brings to the fore the opposition between will and intelligence on the one hand and instinct, emotion, mystery and divination on the other. He develops this contrast in order to describe the conflict between English influence and Irish experience. The indigenous Gaelic reality is represented within a colonial framework. Thus the ecological moralities of Heaney's poems have their base in an ethnic ethical system, which moves against western rationality. Heaney likes to see the world in its totality and his preoccupation is with the sensuous integrity of the rural world. His poetic world evolves out of manifold objects and processes of his pastoral background.

Heaney's constructions of the feminine image of land derive from the concept of "the sovereignty goddess from early Irish literature and myth as well as *magna mater* figures from other European contexts, from a neo-Jungian 'feminine principle', and from images of 'woman-as-land-and-national-spirit popularized by nationalist political rhetoric"(Andrews128). Heaney depicts the Celtic Irish land as female. The metaphor of nature as female or *magna mater* in Heaney's works has its roots in the ancient concept of the Earth Mother, and more specifically in the native Celtic culture, the tradition and myths of Ireland. Heaney has been familiar with the native rituals and the motif of sacrifice to the Mother Earth. The goddess image of the earth in Heaney's poems has its root in the myth of Nerthus, the fertility goddess of bogs, who was worshipped by the Germanic people of the Bronze and Iron Ages. The myth has wide circulation in Northern Europe as well as Ireland. Thus the stamp of native tradition is discernible in Heaney's poems

which define his relationship with nature. It is quite evident that he wants to retain his native links in spite of his close contact with the European culture. Along with the Celtic tradition, Heaney has been influenced by the Catholic tradition of Ireland also, in developing his poetic sensibilities that carve out feminine images of nature. Heaney writes about the influence of Catholicism in creating his vision of nature as a female, in *Preoccupations*:

My sensibility was formed by the dolorous murmurings of the rosary, and the generally Marian quality of devotion. The reality that was addressed was maternal, and the posture was one of supplication . . . Irish Catholicism, until about ten years ago, had this Virgin Mary worship, almost worship. In practice, the shrines, the rosary beads, all the devotions were centred towards a feminine presence, which I think was terrific for the sensibility. (142)

Heaney's perception of the earth as goddess corresponds to the Greek myth of earth goddess, *Gaia* that existed in Greece prior to its transformation by barbarian invaders like Ionians, Achaeans and Drians who substituted the then extant feminine principles of the natives with patriarchal codification in seventh century B.C. Heaney's peasant world reclaims this feminine concept of *Gaia*. His notion of nature as a Goddess can be ecologically revalidated as it concurs with James Lovelock's contemporary ecological concept of *Gaia* hypothesis, which reiterates the concept of earth as a living organism. This concept of earth or nature as a Goddess has coexisted with great religious traditions of the world throughout history. Fritjof Capra, in his book *The Web of Life*, refers to the traditional image of the Earth goddess in ancient Greece: "Mythical images of the Earth Mother are among the oldest in human religious history. Gaia, the Earth Goddess, was revered as the supreme deity in early, pre-Hellenic Greece. Earlier still, from the Neolithic through the Bronze Ages, the societies of 'Old Europe' worshipped numerous female deities as incarnations of Mother Earth"(22). The Greeks believed that it was Gaia who brought the world and humans from the chaos and hence the image of mother attributed to the earth. When Heaney

presents the feminine image of nature, he is following the ancient ecological wisdom.

The pastoral background of Heaney's poems is ecologically significant as the contribution of the pastoral to the development of green thinking since the Romantic movement is substantial. The seminal text on contemporary ecological discussions, *Silent Spring*, has its foundation in the pastoral tradition. The pastoral trope thus plays a key role in ecocriticism and in problematising ecological concerns. It foregrounds the dangers posed by indiscriminate urbanization. The poems of Heaney belong to the category of pastoral in which the country is described ". . . with an implicit or explicit contrast to the urban" (Gifford 2). Heaney idealises the agrarian rural life of Ireland that ritualizes the labour of farming. Farming is not described as a mechanical process that treats the earth as an inanimate object. In his poems, Heaney emphasizes the farmers' metaphysical relationship with the land rather than projecting the harsh realities of the labor involved. Heaney is obsessed with the rural background of Ireland, which stands in opposition to the urban culture introduced by the Europeans. He upholds, as Patricia Coughlan says, "Irish ideology" which "tends to an idealization of rural life. This is often centred on female icons of ideal domesticity, especially mother-figures, who are associated with unmeditated naturalness"(187). The ecological validity of pastoral arises from its notion of portraying nature as a stable, enduring lively associate of human life. Quite contrary to the modern concept of farming as a mechanical process, Heaney spiritualizes the activity of farming. Sowing of barley seeds in the field is described as a sacred burial service led by a priest. In the poem "Requiem for the Croppies" Heaney depicts the growth of the seeds as resurrection from the grave. "They buried us without shroud or coffin/ And in August the barley grew up out of the grave" (*SHSP* 13-14). "The Wife's Tale" is a vivid expression of threshing work in a village. A series of pastoral images abound in Heaney's poems. "The Barn", "Blackberry-Picking," "Churning Day" all manifest the poet's close contact with rural Irish culture. "The Barn" symbolizes abundance of a village. He describes the barn thus:

Threshed corn lay piled like grit of ivory
Or solid as cement in two-lugged sacks
The musty dark hoarded an armoury
Of farmyard implements, harness, plough-
socks. (*DN* 1-4)

"Blackberry-Picking" gives a minute description of the joy and thrill of picking ripened blackberries. The poem also refers to the bounty of nature. The poem recreates an Irish pastoral experience:

Late August, given heavy rain and sun
For a full week, the blackberries would ripen.

--- You ate that first one and its flesh was sweet

Like thickened wine: summer's blood was in it

Leaving stains upon the tongue and lust for Picking. (*DN* 1-2, 5-7)

Another picture from rural Ireland is that of churning. The minute observation of the churning is effectively portrayed by Heaney. These pictures cannot be seen in the present world of widespread urbanization. The rhythm and effort of the churning work also find expression in the poem:

My mother took first turn, set up rhythms
That slugged and thumped for hours. Arms ached.

Hands blistered. Cheeks and clothes were spattered
with flabby milk. (*DN* 14-17)

The poem is a beautiful description of the process of churning and collecting butter from milk, by a rustic mother. Thus, through a series of poems, which are evocative of the rustic activities, Heaney is foregrounding the serenity of village life which can be contrasted with the noisy and restless urban life. Heaney's poems are combinations of contrasts between "...rural and urban, agrarian and industrial, active and passive, transitive and intransitive, weighing pros and cons" (Smith 226). His early poems are reminders of the fast disappearing rustic activities and trades in the wake of unbridled mechanization. The typical figures of the rural life like thatchers, blacksmiths, water-diviners, threshers, turf-cutters, ploughmen with horses, churners, hewers of wood, and drawers of water, find place in Heaney's poems. In "Thatcher,"

Heaney very accurately presents the common rustic figure of a thatcher on his bicycle who is fast disappearing in the rapid urbanization of villages:

He eyed the old rigging, poked at the eaves,
Opened and handled sheaves of lashed
wheat-straw.

Next, the bundled rods' hazel and willow
Were flicked for weight, twisted in case
they'd snap.

It seemed he spent the morning warming
up: (SHSP 4-8)

Fixing his roots firmly on the earth, Heaney tries to define and rediscover his own identity in his family tradition of farming. Though he has undergone modern education, Heaney acknowledges his attachment to farming, the hereditary work of his family. He digs out his history and identifies his tradition in association with the land. The first poem, "Digging", in the collection *The Death of a Naturalist*, bears testimony to this fact. Heaney presents the world of a "green farmer" who is in search of unity with the earth. *The Death of a Naturalist* can be interpreted as a cross-section of the rural society in Ireland that has lost its harmonious relationship with nature as a result of modernity introduced by the English. The poet himself is a victim of this social transformation and he is reflecting his own inevitable physical distancing from the rural tradition of his own family, which kept a bioharmonious relationship with nature. The poem "Digging" presents the picture of the poet's farmer father, who is working on the earth in his farm with a spade. The poet describes the sight: "Under my window, a clean rasping sound/ When the spade sinks into gravelly ground/ My father, digging" (DN 3-4). The picture of the poet's grandfather, who also held an inseparable contact with the mother Earth, comes to his mind: "My grandfather cut more turf in a day/ Than any other man on Toner's bog" (17-18). Heaney also was quite attached to the natural surrounds of his village in his childhood days. As a child the poet used to follow his father in the farm, closely observing the activities. He cherished the dream of becoming a farmer when he grew up. He writes in the poem "Follower":

I stumbled in his hob-nailed wake,

Fell sometimes on the polished sod;
Sometimes he rode me on his back
Dipping and rising to his plod.
I wanted to grow up and plough,
To close one eye, stiffen my arm.
All I ever did was follow
In his broad shadow round the farm.
(SHNSP13-20)

But the physical intimacy with nature is broken, as he has grown up amidst the social changes. Quite contrary to that ethnic tradition of earthiness, the poet has taken the role of a writer in English language as a result of his contact with English and literature. Heaney confesses that he cannot dig the earth with spade, but he wants to retain his link with nature through his writings. Hence, being an optimist, he says that he will dig with his pen. The poem "Digging" ends on a note of optimism: "Between my finger and my thumb/ The squat pen rests/ I'll dig with it" (DN 29-31). Though the poet is aware of the social change, he accepts it positively and tries to be part of his rural life in spite of his constraints. Also, the poet has often shown his displeasure at unbridled modernity.

Heaney very clearly expresses a sense of place which happens to be the link connecting him to the ethnic tradition of his homeland. His attachment to landscape helps him to identify his relation to his family, tradition, tribe and community. Thus, it can be said that nature becomes the medium through which the poet discovers his identity and revalidates his existence. He dedicates himself to nature, to personal feeling and experience. Nature, tradition and his self co-exist in his poems and form an organic wholeness. He prefers to present the earth mixed with water especially the bog land, mud, slime, mould silt and slick. Thus, the earth symbolizes fertility in his poems.

Heaney is rooted to the earth but his world is not devoid of the sky. His poems are constituted of all the four elements of nature, viz., earth, air, fire and water. "Honeymoon Flight" exposes in a single stroke the close association of humans with natural elements:

And launched right off the earth by force of
fire

We hang, miraculous, above the water
Dependent on the invisible air
To keep us airborne and to bring us further.
(DN 9-12)

Even when the poet flies high in air he does not forget to fix his roots to the bog of the land of Ireland.

Conclusion

Deep ecology as well as ecofeminism operates in the poems of Heaney and Bowering. The Irish poet represents nature as female and thereby he follows ecofeminist spiritual ideologies. The Western duality of separating nature from culture is absent in his poems. Seamus Heaney depicts humans as complementary essentials for the survival of the universe. The poet visualizes an earthly divinity, not a divine power who rules humanity from above. Moreover, participating in the reappraisal of age-old wisdom and indigenous knowledge, his poetic endeavour acquires a postcolonial orientation. His vision is vibrant, broad and universal, taking into consideration the whole of mankind, transcending rigid, narrow, regional perceptions that plague any single ideology or vision.

Works Cited

- Andrews, W.M. *Future Nature: A Vision for Conservation*. London: Earthscan, 2003.
- Capra, Fritjof. *The Web of Life: A New Synthesis of Mind and Matter*. London: Flamingo, 1997
- Coughlan, David E. "Arne Naess." Ed. Joy A. Palmer. *Fifty Thinkers on the Environment*. Routledge: London, 2001. 211-16.
- Docherty, Thomas. "Ana-;or Postmodernism, Landscape, Seamus Heaney." Ed. Michael Allen. *New Casebooks: Seamus Heaney*. Hounsmills; Macmillan, 1997. 206-22.
- Gifford, Terry. *Pastoral*. London: Routledge, 1999.
- Heaney, Seamus. *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*. London: Faber, 1984.
- _____. *Seamus Heaney: Selected Poems 1966-1987*. New York: Faber, 1990.
- _____. *Death of a Naturalist*. London: Faber, 1966.
- _____. *Seamus Heaney: New Selected Poems 1966-1987*. London: Faber, 1966.