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## ELIOT AND BEYOND: A SURVEY OF NABAKANTA BARUA'S POETRY

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### ABSTRACT

T.S. Eliot (1888-1965) is an epoch-making poet synonymous with modernism in poetry. One of the most widely read and translated poets of the twentieth century, Eliot has influenced poets the world over. Nabakanta Barua (1926-2002) is a post-Independence Indian poet writing in Assamese. Regarded as the most representative modernist poet of the Assamese literature, Barua has been deeply influenced by Eliot's poetry and poetic theory. Without any blind imitation, Barua has assimilated the western influence to initiate a new era in Assamese poetry. The Eliot-brand of modernism has undergone a fascinating transformation in Barua's poetry as the Assamese poet looks beyond Eliot in his perspective. The paper aims at tracking this transformation with a comparative analysis of a few poems of Eliot and Barua.

Key Words: Barua, Eliot, Modernism, Assamese Poetry, Influence, City, Decadence, Weariness, Quest, Culture .

### INTRODUCTION

Nabakanta Barua (1926-2002) is one of the greatest Indian modernist poets writing in Assamese. For his immense contribution to Assamese literature, that includes 11 collections of poems, 5 novels, some essays and short stories for children, he was awarded The National Sahitya Academy Award in 1975. Some of his works have been translated into different Indian languages . For his contribution to Literature and Education Barua has been conferred with Padma Bhushan, Kamal Kumari National Award , Assam Valley Literary Award and Assam Prakashan Parishad Award. Though Hem Barua and Ajit Barua are regarded as the pioneers of modernist poetry in Assam, the most potent modernist voice is heard in the poetry of Nabakanta Barua.

### OBJECTIVE OF THE PAPER

The influence of T.S. Eliot's poetic theory and praxis is immense on Nabakanta Barua. But with remarkable originality and difference in approach to the contemporary context, Barua's poetry offers an interesting scope for comparative analysis. The aim of this paper is to highlight the fascinating metamorphosis Eliot-brand of modernism undergoes in the poetry of Nabakanta Barua.

### METHODOLOGY

The methodology adopted here will a comparative analysis of a few poems of T. S. Eliot and Nabakanta Barua.

### ELIOT AND POETIC INFLUENCE

T.S. Eliot, with his sensitive multi-lingual scholarship, has contributed more than anyone else to the framework of ideas within which modern poetry is read and interpreted. F.R. Leavis rightly

observes, "He (Eliot) has made a new start and established new bearings". (Leavis 1982: 25) Eliot is one of the most widely read and translated world poets of the previous century. With his technical innovations, he has influenced generations of poets all over the world. Poetic influence should not be evaluated from the point of view of Harold Bloom, who thinks, "Poetic influence.....always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet." Bloom further adds, "The history of fruitful poetic influence.....is a history of distortion." (Bloom 1973: 30) Bloom thinks that a poet who is influenced, tends to produce poetry which is in danger of being derivative of the poetry that influences him/her. Besides, the precursor poet infuses a feeling of anxiety in the mind of the influenced poet. This view of Bloom does not hold good in all cases. Bloom belittles poetic influence, which is often instrumental in creating literature of the highest order. Such influence often plays the role of a catalyst initiating a creative fusion in the mind of the influenced poet. In this respect Eliot's observation is noteworthy. According to him, "influence can fecundate." (Eliot 1965 :18) This has precisely happened with Nabakanta Barua, the modernist trend-setter in the post-Independence Assamese poetry. With his firm cultural-root, Barua has rendered a fascinatingly healthy transformation to Modernism associated with the theory and praxis of Eliot. Karabi Deka Hazarika observes, "The victory march of the modern Assamese poetry starts with the poetry of Nabakanta Barua." (Deka Hazarika 2004: 115) Though Hem Barua is the first modernist Assamese poet, Nabakanta Barua is acknowledged as the most representative and most successful modern Assamese poet.

#### **THE BACKGROUND OF INFLUENCE**

Two factors broadly condition Eliot's influence on Barua : the Assamese poet's awareness of the morbidity and weariness of his contemporary world and his propinquity to English literature. During the fifth decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Assam witnessed some rapid socio-political changes. During The Second World War the entire north-eastern region of India was under military occupation in the face of the Japanese invasion and the advance of the Indian National Army under the

commandership of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose. There was an atmosphere of anxiety in the entire region. Just before Independence , Assam, like Bengal, witnessed large scale communal violence as a by-product of partition. Post-Independence violence and moral degeneration contributed to an atmosphere of perplexity and chaos. In spite of difference between Eliot's Europe and Barua's Assam, there was a similarity between the two contexts from the point of view of technological advancement , moral degeneration, weariness and an acute consciousness of physical and moral morbidity. Barua, who had his higher education in Calcutta, came in contact with the poetry of Bengali masters like Rabindranath Tagore and Jibananda Das. As a student and Professor of English literature he had obvious proximity to the modernist poetry of Eliot ,the Imagist movement of Pound and the contributions of the French symbolists to the development of modern English poetry. He found in Eliot a suitable idiom to express the complex experience of his contemporary world. Professor Madan Sharma rightly observes, "The Assamese poets of the 1950s have been profoundly influenced by Bengali poets like Rabindranath and Jibananda Das and English poets like T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound." (Sharma 2002:120-121)

#### **A SURVEY OF BARUA'S POETRY**

Eliot's influence is primarily seen in Barua's use of images. It is apparent that Barua's painting of modern life is based on his first hand experience. But in finding a proper idiom to express his complex experience , he is profoundly influenced by Eliot's innovative imagery and theory of poetic art. He is much impressed by Eliot's views on the suggestive and evocative power of diction as well as the cerebral nature of the poetic process.Acknowledging his indebtedness to Eliot Barua says, "I had mostly limited myself to surface borrowings and to bodily lifting some of the imagery particularly of the early Eliot." (Barua 1992: 1) Here "bodily lifting" does not mean that Barua randomly takes some images from Eliot and uses those here and there in his poems. Here Barua refers to those Eliot-images , which are apparent 'objective correlatives' of his feelings and emotions. Therefore, there is striking similarity in the imagery of the two poets. For both the poets

'darkness' is an image of death and ignorance, while 'light' is an image of life and knowledge. In "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", 'restless nights' evokes a picture of mental gloom. In Barua's "The Belt of the Spinning Wheel" a similar feeling is evoked by 'the dark of my mind'. 'Desert', 'sand' and 'cactus' are some important images both in Eliot and Barua. The following lines of Eliot evoke the picture of a spiritual desert :

This is the dead land  
This is cactus land  
(*"The Hollow Men", Selected Poems, 78*)

Barua creates a similar atmosphere in "Continuous" with a set of strikingly similar images like 'land of cactus thorns', 'body of the dead earth' and 'land of dry bones'. The image of 'cactus' appears to be Barua's direct borrowing from Eliot. Barua further uses this image in an identical context:

The cactus alone will flower  
And at midnight, in the starry glow,  
Scatter its pollens to the sand-boa –  
(*"Once A River", Selected Poems, 22*)

'City' is an important theme both in Eliot and Barua. They have used 'city' both as an image and a symbol. City is symbolic not only of modern living, but also the mental landscape of modern man. In Eliot's early poetry, city with all its ugliness and spiritual decadence, is the symbol and epitome of the waste land the poet depicts. In Barua city is a symbol of cruelty, sin and deception. In many poems like "O Forest O Metropolis", "Harbour of the Ganges of Life", "All Cities, All Men" and "Once A River" Barua's primary concern is to depict the decadence, lifelessness and loneliness associated with modern city life. In "All Cities, All Men" Barua presents a picture of mechanical sex that is very similar to the episode of the typist girl in Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Their awareness of the contemporary world is reflected in repeated references to 'city' in their poems. The lifeless look of the metropolis often evokes a sense of death in Barua. He has expressed his feeling of utter dejection towards the lifeless big city in the line, 'Death-like-silence in the ugliness of afternoon'. ("Harbour of the Ganges of Life") The atmosphere of death intensifies in the observation of the dejected and helpless speaker,

who shudders with fear and futility to find death 'the only merchandise' on the 'steel- vessel' at harbour. With the dock at Khidirpur (a locality in Calcutta) in a lifeless sleep, the sand looks filled with 'sailors' bones'. The idea of death is absolute and the speaker does not see any prospect of 'the dead city' being washed away by the life-giving waters of The Ganges. At last his resentment and rejection of city life assumes the form of stoic bitterness. The picture of death is further painted in "O Forest O Metropolis". Death is presented in the image of a crawling snake that passes under man's feet. The vagaries of modern city, with its melancholic monotony and lifelessness, is vividly presented in "Shillong By Evening". An acute feeling of loneliness is expressed in "Song of an Afternoon Road". Here the speaker feels lonely even in the midst of a vast crowd. This shows the emotional gap among people, who have grown incapable of any effective communication. This may be the result of man's self-centered and isolated way of life. Urban pollution draws the attention of both Eliot and Barua. In Eliot 'The river sweats/ Oil and tar' and the speaker finds himself in the polluted atmosphere of 'Trams and dusty trees'. (from *The Waste Land*) Similarly in Barua, the speaker is keenly aware of a situation filled with 'only a consumptive pollution'. Deception and artificiality are very common among the city dwellers who live in their unreal world. They wear different dresses and different faces on different occasions. The monotony of this deliberate artificial exercise finds expression in the poetry of Eliot and Barua. The mechanical attitude of Eliot's speaker is reflected in the following lines:

There will be time, there will be time  
To prepare a face to meet the faces that  
you meet;  
(*"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", Selected Poems, 12*)

In the last line of "Once A River" Barua's speaker expresses a deeper sense of dejection :

I am tired of fashioning fresh images!  
(*Selected Poems, 23*)

'River' is an important image in the poetry of Barua. River, for him, is more a symbol than an

image. As the most important source of life-giving water, river is integral to progress of human civilization. Eliot's desert-like waste land thirsts for water. Without rain the rivers shrink. The picture of dryness and lifelessness finds a vivid depiction in Eliot's following lines:

Ganga was sunken, and the limp leaves  
Waited for rain,  
("The Waste Land", *Selected Poems*, 66)

Barua also uses the image of sunken rivers to depict a dry and lifeless world. This finds illustration in the following lines:

Turning rivers into rivulets  
And brooks into beds of stone.

("Once A River", *Selected Poems*, 21)

In "The Waste Land" the thunder utters three Upanishadic words : 'datta', 'dayadhvam' and 'damyata'; which respectively mean 'give' , 'sympathize' and 'control'. These are suggested as a probable solution to the problems of 'waste land'. Barua comes out with a similar suggestion in the following lines:

What did the cloud say,  
Give, give more, give you all,  
("Silt", *Selected Poems*, 17)

Here, there is a direct reference to Eliot's 'black clouds' that gather 'over Himavant'. (from *The Waste Land*) Barua's message finds a concrete expression in the next lines :

Plant trees by the road, open a high school.....  
Let our silt fertilize the banks of the Kolong.  
("Silt", *Selected Poems*, 17)

Eliot's poetry is remarkable for the spiritual solution it offers. As exemplified in the above cited lines from "Silt", Barua's poetry also offers a solution that is pragmatic.

#### THE DIFFERENCE

An important aspect of Barua's difference from Eliot is his treatment of 'romantic love'. Barua's early poems like "A Poem Of Love" and

"The Story Of Coming Back" show the influence of Tagore. Such poems express the poet's neo-romantic feelings of nostalgia and wishful longing. In these poems Barua's familiar images are the far-off, limitless sky and the green earth. These lines from "Realization" ---'crores of heavenly bodies at light years away/ Creator's eternal presence'.---- depict the poet's neo-romantic imagination. These early poems of Barua bear the mark of Tagore's romantic tradition. But it is fascinating to follow Barua's journey as a poet from this romantic world to the position of a trend-setting modernist poet with profound influence on poets of the younger generation.

Barua differs from Eliot in his perception of history. Eliot views history as a record of human ambition ,vanity and crime. History does not lead man to real knowledge, that lies in faith and divine grace. On the other hand, history often misguides by promoting confusion. The following lines depict Eliot's attitude to history:

History has many cunning passages,  
contrived corridors  
And issues, deceives with whispering  
ambitions,  
Guides us by vanities.

("Gerontion", *Selected Poems*, 32)

Thus Eliot views history as a record of human depravity. However, history is different from "the historical sense", which he considers "nearly indispensable" for a poet to attain maturity. (Eliot 1960: 49) By connecting the metaphysical essence of the past to the present degeneration, Eliot emphasizes the continued virility of the past. On the other hand, Barua's attitude to history is marked by ambivalence. In "When My Corpse Met The Buddha", the speaker compares history with a 'slimy stone'. The following lines exemplify the poet's peculiar attitude:

He pondered alone for a while, and then  
Like a lonesome school boy bored with a  
picnic  
Started scribbling his name  
On the slimy stone of history.  
(*Selected Poems*. 41)

In "Arjuna: A Poem for the Third Generation", the poet uses a mythical episode from *The Mahabharata*. After the great battle, the speaker Arjuna is concerned about Uttara's unborn child and thinks that the unborn child should not be taught their history. Addressing hermit Shukadeva he says:

O Shuka,  
Do not teach him our history.  
("Arjuna: A Poem for the Third Generation". *Selected Poems*, 34)

After the bloodbath in the great battle, there is little inspiration for the coming generation. So Arjuna does not want his future generation to learn their history, which is full of deceptions and killings. While Eliot's view of history is fixed, Barua remains ambivalent in his observation.

In the matter of religious faith Barua differs from Eliot, who is seen as a thoroughly religious poet. Eliot's poetry is marked by a spiritual quest that runs parallel to the poet's constant search for form. In search of solution his protagonists undertake inter-cultural and inter-religious journeys. In "Choruses from 'The Rock'" the protagonist speaks like a religious preacher:

We build the meaning:  
A church for all  
(*Selected Poems*, 111)

In his masterpiece *Four Quartets* Eliot arrives at the solution to his spiritual quest as well as his search for a perfect poetic form. Helen Gardner observes, "...it (*Four Quartets*) contains more fully than any of his earlier works the poetic solution of his peculiar problems as a poet," (Gardner 1972: 2)

On the other hand, Barua is a secular poet, who does not preach any religious philosophy and remains noncommittal towards matters of conventionally accepted faith. But he remains firmly rooted in his cultural ethos. Besides, there is a difference in both the poets' perception of their contemporary world. Pointing out this difference, Barua makes a significant observation. According to him, "At least to me he (Eliot) seemed to live in a decayed world searching for an escape route in the European and even in Indian lore. I lack that search.

My *Samskara* (cultural ethos) was enough; I did not search for any religious faith." (Barua 1992: 2) Barua's observation of men as 'sons of nectar' in "O Forest O Metropolis" does not reflect his religious faith; rather it shows the poet's consciousness of cultural values.. That apart, the near-misanthropic bitterness reflected in Eliot's line –I had not thought death had undone so many – (from *The Waste Land*); is no where reflected in Barua's poetry.

Like Eliot, Barua also provides a solution; but his solution is not religious. It is secular and humanistic and lacks the didactic intensity of Eliot's poetry. In "Valmiki '84" the clear message is humanism. Barua feels a new epic – *Manavayana* -- should be written to uphold human values. As *The Odyssey* of the human kind, *Manavayana* must sing the glory of human endeavor in agriculture and industry. In "The First Code of Life" Barua gives the message of self-purification. In the last stanza of the poem he forwards a positive suggestion:

Ye my people, the incarnations of the Great Ashoka,  
With your tears of repentance  
Have your hands washed off  
The stains of your brother's blood.  
Purify yourselves. Not with the spoilt incarnations  
But with the stable unity of  
Thought, Love and Sweat.  
Ye Ashoka the Terrible, transform yourself  
To Ashoka the Just.  
("The First Code of Life". Tr. Rituraj Kalita)

Barua feels that modern man has to overcome the darkness of disbelief by avoiding 'spoilt incarnations', who often preach hatred in the name of religion. Emphasis is laid on unity of 'Thought, Love and Sweat'. By mentioning 'sweat', Barua stresses the need of hard work. He believes in transformation in people's heart. He admonishes the modern man to transform himself from 'Ashoka the Terrible' to 'Ashoka the Just'.

## CONCLUSION

Nabakanta Barua has not blindly imitated the western literary greats like T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and the French Symbolists. As all great poets do, he

has assimilated the western influence and has created something really new and different in the post-Independence Assamese literature. Barua remains an original poet of great stature with individual brilliance. His poetry showcases the fascinating transformation the Eliot-brand of modernism undergoes in the Assamese poetry. Bimal Mazumdar rightly observes, “ Nabakanta Barua’s contribution to the modernization of diction and style of the Assamese poetry has been universally acknowledged.... It will not be improper to say that he has created a new era in the history of Assamese poetry.” (Mazumdar 2008: 11) Barua has influenced an entire generation of younger poets after him. This speaks volumes of the dominant role he has played in the post-Independence Assamese poetry.

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