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Autobiographical Elements in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney

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Autobiographical Elements in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney

Sneha Jha

Abstract- **The present research paper aims to reflect upon the various autobiographical elements projected throughout the poetry of Seamus Heaney. No poet, or for that matter artist of any sort can be isolated from the very circumstances prevailing around her/him. Nor do her/his poetic creations can be abandoned completely from the events of her/his life. In fact, Heaney's poetic faculty collected food for the real poetic production from his own life experiences which were in close proximity to him since his childhood to his mature years.**

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I. Introduction

Kamala Das asserts that "A writer's raw material is not stone or clay; it is her personality".1 And this is quite evident in the works of Seamus Heaney. In his poetry one can recognize family affections, vibrant and self speaking landscapes and intense social concerns. It recites an expressive autobiographical story reaching from Heaney's boyhood to his elderhood, thereby crossing his sixties. The present research paper endeavours to study the manifold autobiographical influences exhibited in the poetry of Seamus Heaney, playing a major role in shaping the same.

II. Analysis

A poet's persona does not thrive in segregation. She/he is in fact the by-product of all such situations and conditions which occur around her/him. The versatile mind and the sensitive heart of a poet are always open to what is perceived by his senses. This research paper in particular focuses on the personality of Seamus Heaney which found its vibrant expression in his poetry through varied usage of images and symbols which are but inspired by his real life incident and the social structure in which he was born and brought up.

From the very initial years of his boyhood, Heaney was quite anxious about the peculiarities of the social arrangements that were often occurring around him and his family as well. Merely because of his Catholic faith, Heaney's father was debarred from the due social respect that he owed to earn on behalf of his sincere and hard work. The Protestants treated the Catholics as outcasts and overruled them from even enjoying the privileges of the basic human rights. These things find a continuous and concrete expression in the poetry of Seamus Heaney. Heaney's experiences as a child provided a lot of raw materials for his poetic creation. At many places he employs certain images and symbols which come directly from his own childhood. In this context, the words of Michael Parker are worth mentioning:

> "The locations of his childhood prove to be
> as important to the later development
> of the poet as the human landscape." 2

Here, it is quite relevant to mention the experiences of Heaney's academic journey in which he suffered poignantly because of being ignored in the huge crowd of the young Protestant students. Even the criteria of the punishment inflicted upon the students of the respective communities could tell the story of the discrimination that existed during those days. This obviously created a rift between the Protestant and the Catholic students. Heaney recalls such experiences of class distinction in his poem, "The Ministry of Fear", published in the famous poetry collection "North":

> "On my first day, the leather strap
> went epileptic in the Big Study.
> Its echoes plashing over our bowed heads,
> But I still wrote home that a boarder's life
> Was not so bad, shying as usual." 3

The fascinating stories of Heaney's father as well as his grandfather toiling hard in the fields also provided a solid substance for some of the remarkable pieces of poetry. Heaney's father was quite efficient at making a fine web of furrows in the fields while ploughing. The images of a hard working farmer appear time and again in Heaney's poetry. There is a direct reference to Patrick Heaney in "Death of a Naturalist", when he describes a staunch, an energetic and a sturdy hero with a spade in his hands. The following lines refer the same:

> "Under my window, a clean rasping
> Sound
> When the spade sinks into gravelly
> Ground:
> My father digging." 4

Also, there is a clear reference to Heaney's grandfather in the following lines of "Digging ":

> "My grandfather cut more turf in a day
> Than any other man or Toner's big.
> Once I carried him milk in a bottle
> Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up
> To drink it, then fell to right away

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Nicking and slicing neatly, having sods over his shoulder, going down
and down For the good turf.
Digging." 5

Heaney employed a variety of images and symbols in his poetry. It is quite evident from his poetry pieces, that the image making faculty of Seamus Heaney was also inspired and nurtured by what he saw and experienced about his mother. Heaney was the eldest of nine children born to Patrick Heaney and Margaret Mc Cann. 'One can very well imagine the fate of a woman bearing and giving birth to nine children with the elder children crying around her, one in her lap and the next in her womb'. 6 Being a farmer's wife, she had to toil all day long and Heaney being a sensitive young man, tried to pour out the feelings of his mother through his poetic creations. An apt example of this is found in the following lines:

"I am tired of walking about with this plunger
Inside me. God, he plays like a young
Calf
Gone wild on a rope.
Lying or standing won't settle these capers,
This gulp in my well." 7

The problems faced and felt by a female, or to be more specific, the difficulties faced by a mother during the times of pregnancy is very well evident in these lines. In an another poem titled as "The Wife's Tale", the poet portrays the sufferings of a farmer's wife, through the following lines:

"They lay in the ring of their own
crusts and dregs
Smoking and saying nothing.
"There's good yield,
Isn't there?" - as proud as if he were the land itself
'Enough for crushing and for sowing both.'
And that was it. I'd come and he had
shown me
So I belonged no further to the work.
I gathered cups and folded up the cloth
And went. But they still kept their ease
spread out , unbuttoned, grateful, under the
trees." 8

This very image of a typical farmer's wife is quite suggestive of the image of the poet's mother who also worked harder and harder the whole day long.

The poem "Churning Day" also recollects the image of the poet's mother. A lady, well trained in the household chores, involved in the activity of churning in the poem. The image portrayed in the following lines bear resemblance to the poet's mother:

"Out came the four crocks, spilled their heavy lip
Of cream, their white insides, into the sterile churn,
The staff, like a great whisky muddler fashioned
in deal wood, was plunged in, the lid lifted.
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.
Where finally gold flecks
began to dance. They poured hot water then,
sterilized a birchwood bowl
and little corrugated butter-spades." 9

It would not be out of the mark to mention another poem by Heaney which is titled as "Mid-Term Break", that shares an intensely autobiographical tragedy of the death of Heaney's younger brother. Rather, it would be quite convincing to say that the poem "Mid -Term Break" is a direct result of this very incident. The poetic verse is overshadowed with the tinge of melancholy and sadness. The following lines from the poem will asset the same.

"Snowdrops
And candles soothed the beside; I saw him
for the first time in six weeks. Paler now,
wearing a poppy bruise on his left temple,
He lay in the four foot box as in his cot.
No gaudy scars, the bumper knocked him clear.
A four foot box, a foot for every year." 10

'The intensity of grief is summed up in the four foot box, one foot for every year. The poet's deep affection for his young brother and his intensity of grief at this unnatural calamity are filled in these minimum words.'11 The latter part of the same poem reflects the responsible character of the poet:

"And tell me they were 'sorry for my trouble'.
Whispers informed strangers I was the eldest,
Away at school, as my mother held my hand." 12

Something that is quite spare and strange about Heaney's poetry is that, rather than comparing a feminine beauty to a delicate and subtle phenomena, the poet compares his wife to a wild bird like 'the skunk' and a water animal like 'an otter', which are but not quite beautiful creatures."The Skunk" by Seamus Heaney describes the speaker's married life through a biomorphic comparison between his wife and a Skunk.' The poem is a tribute to his wife. He had been teaching in California and greatly missed Marie. The nocturnal visits of a skunk remind him of her.'13 Heaney was criticized a lot for such a comparison and some found it to be quite insulting. No doubt, the comparison is somewhat unusual, yet it remains a magnificent piece of writing. Away from his wife Heaney recalls the skunk which reminds him of his wife. The poet says:

"Up, black, striped and demasked like the chasuble
At a funeral mass, the skunk's tail
Paraded the skunk. Night after night
I expected her like a visitor." 14

He further adds:

"It all came back to me last night
stirred

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By the sootfall of your things at
Bedtime,
Your hands-down, tail-up hunt in a
bottom drawer
For the black plunge-line nightdress." 15

Heaney infuses his deep emotion into words. There is a continuous flow of the real life incidents into the poetic renderings of Seamus Heaney, thereby making his poems largely autobiographical in nature.

III. Conclusion

It can safely be concluded that Seamus Heaney being a sensitive person and a versatile artist was largely influenced by the events and happenings of his life that occurred around him. And the poetic personality of Seamus Heaney was actually the product of the multiple influences floating around him which in no sense underscored his originality rather it added a new dimension to the poetic faculty of the great poet.

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