



## Reading Seamus Heaney's *Door into the Dark* (1969)

Prajakta Simon

Research Scholar

Centre for English Studies, SLL&CS JNU, New Delhi

**Abstract:** In the poetry collection, *Door into the Dark* (1969) by an Irish poet Seamus Heaney (1939-2013) there is a major shift in the poet from his previous collection *Death of a Naturalist* (1966), from being a local poet and expands his area of poetic investigation, celebrating the self-fulfilling pre-colonial Irish history and juxtaposing it with Irish modernization. He revisits his 'former textual self' to embrace his children, wife, mother, rural craftsmen and tradesmen and speak on their behalf to provide a distinct touch to Celtic identity and Irish Consciousness.

**Keywords:** words, doors, dark, history, bogland

The second collection of poems *Door into the Dark* (1969) prompts an enlarged poetic consciousness. It marks a significant shift from the *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) where Seamus Heaney took inspiration from childhood memory and personal history to explore the terrain of his poetic consciousness while in *Door into the Dark* his poetic consciousness expands to embrace the literal and imaginative space beyond Mossbawn, his native home.

In this collection, Heaney writes that "words themselves are doors". They provide point of entry into "the dark centre, the blurred and irrational storehouse of insight and instinct, the hidden core of the self." Darkness is approached as a landscape of investigation to probe into the deeper levels of consciousness. The dark prevails in the consciousness of the Christian people of Ireland. Heaney relies on the "acts of faith" to give meaning to Irish identity.

In the poem 'Thatcher' the poet lends his voice to the man who makes roof. He is unaware of his own impending obsolescence and therefore it becomes essential for Heaney to compensate for the loss of his livelihood and identity by memorialising him. Unlike Seamus Heaney he cannot speak. Therefore, silence becomes instrumental in positing resistance to the British hegemony. And Seamus Heaney does this by deconstructing the imperialist project by giving importance to silence over speech. Helen Hennessy Vendler writes "if writing about labourers engaged in archaic occupations is one way for a modern poet to submerge his own adult identity in anonymity, another way is to leave his own historical moment, to speak as 'I' or 'we' from another era." This is exactly what Heaney does by the end of the poem. His outsider state is present to them and not 'us'. The way in which the Thatcher:

Then fixed the ladder, laid out well-honed blades

And snipped at straw and sharpened ends of rods

That, bent in two, made a white-pronged staple

For pinning down his world, handful by handful.

Couchant for days on sods above the rafters,

He shaved and flushed the butts, stitched all together

Into a sloped honeycomb, a stubble patch,

And left them gaping at his Midas touch. (line 9-16, Thatcher, *Door into the Dark*).

The poet glorifies the skill of the Thatcher by registering his art into the chronicle of names lost in history. Heaney like a "tribal apologist" taps their history for the sake of succeeding generations. By chronicling the fading identities of these silent figures Heaney is "able to write about the presence of these atavisms, some of which, as a member of his own particular tradition, he can understand, without granting them any ethical or juridical warrant."

Karen Marguerite Moloney writes that for Seamus Heaney the root cause of sterile and fragmented state of post colonial Irish society is excessive dependence on the "solidity" and "rationality" of the male psyche and this is the reason why *Door into the Dark* sees a major shift towards marriage as the union between man and woman that would lead towards balance between reason and emotion. Unlike 'The Forge' where the male psyche dominates and shows that the creative process is the outcome of brutal act of destruction, Heaney brings to the fore the woman psyche in 'The Wife's Tale' whose isolation from the affectionless husband makes it evident that the seemingly unproductive or not so creative act of laying out lunch for her husband and his fellow labourers in itself binds the generations of farmers together.

‘The Wife’s Tale’ is a dramatic monologue of a farming woman which has its source in ‘Homage to Pieter Breghuel.’ In *Poetry Book Society Bulletin* Heaney expresses his desire to “write about a woman bringing tea to a harvest field. Earlier I might have set down the picture and trusted that it was redolent of the emotion it evoked for me.” It gives glimpse of the dark marriage where woman is dispossessed of her husband since the man has become one with the land he works on. This suggests the Irish idea of the marriage of the man with the land he tills. As the woman spreads the food on linen cloth and invites her husband with other labourers the lack of affection in the husband for his wife is disclosed:

When I had spread it all on linen cloth

Under the hedge, I called them over. (line 1-2, *The Wife’s Tale, Door into the Dark*).

The woman – narrator becomes a silent observer. Her husband highlighting his own sexual importance asks her:

He lay down and said, ‘Give these fellows theirs,

I’m in no hurry,’ plucking grass in handfuls

And tossing it in the air. ‘That looks well.’ (line 8-10, *The Wife’s Tale, Door into the Dark*).

Though the female persona narrates the event in the poem it is the male persona who prevails over the hegemonic relationship between the sexes. The male persona celebrates his own utility by expressing pride in his work as he gathers the ‘good clean seed’ while the woman in want of manly affection is left alienated:

‘It’s threshing better than I thought, and mind

It’s good clean seed. Away over there and look.’ (line 16-17, *The Wife’s Tale, Door into the Dark*).

The woman acts as the supporter and nourishes the husband without getting love in return. This poem highlights the hubris of the man who takes pride in his work and this detaches him from his wife who acts as life-support”

...‘There’s good yield,

Isn’t there?’ - as proud as if he were the land itself-

‘Enough for crushing and for sowing both.’ (line 29-31, *The Wife’s Tale, Door into the Dark*).

The patriarchal dominance in the poem incorporates the female’s role in nurturing the masculine society. Once the labourers had their fill the woman was no longer needed on the field:

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... (line 32-35, *The Wife's Tale, Door into the Dark*).

As if her care for her husband was as natural as her duty to him. The wifely duty and natural care as a woman remains undistinguished. The poem thus highlights that a balance should be maintained between man and woman.

The collection's last poem, 'Bogland,' is dedicated to Seamus Heaney's friend, T.P. Flanagan (1929-2011), a landscape artist. It is a rebuttal to Theodore Roethke's 'In the Praise of Prairie.' Writing about the origination of 'Bogland' Seamus Heaney recounts, "I had been vaguely wishing to write a poem about bogland, chiefly because it is a landscape that has a strange assuaging effect on me, one with associations reaching back into early childhood... So I began to get an idea of bog as the memory of the landscape, or as a landscape that remembered everything that happened in and to it... Moreover, since memory was the faculty that supplied me with the first quickening of my own poetry, I had a tentative unrealized need to make congruence between memory and bogland and, for the want of a better word, our national consciousness. And it all released itself after 'We have no prairies...' - but we have bogs."

The bogland is symbolic of Irish identity, geography and history. Boglands are valuable wetlands and not wastelands. It is fundamental to Irish landscape with its 'moistness,' 'softness,' 'fertility,' and 'primitive past.' It takes the motif of darkness to the fullest level which is fathomless. The dark marshy land preserves physical and cultural history and childhood memory of Heaney. Heaney writes that "I had a tentative unrealized need to make a congruence between memory and bogland and...our national consciousness." To this, Edna Longley comments, "if the bog becomes a symbol of national consciousness, it is not in the manner of an insular, self-righteous nationalism. Heaney is mindful of the fact that the lost homeland is less a territorial locality than an ontological locus whose universal dimensions forever elude the boundaries of a particular nation. (...) The bogholes or receding memory lead back to a fathomless ocean flow which transcends our contemporary grasp. (p.106.)"

Heaney begins the poem with a negation: "We have no prairies." This establishes a stark contrast between North America's prairie region which is so vast in scale that 'slice a big sun at evening' and the encroaching horizon of the Irish landscape that is "wooded into the cyclop's eye / Of a tarn." (line 6-7) Comparing the 'tarn,' a small pond like structure to a 'cyclop's eye', again reiterates Heaney's idea of establishing the relation between landscape and myth. It would be interesting to know that what would cause Heaney to compare the Irish landscape with that of American Prairies. To which Heaney answers that in the year 1969, when the poem got published, he was teaching at Queen's University, Belfast, and had been going through the Western literature exploring the west

as a significant American Consciousness to which Heaney had a counterpart- the bog, the central part of Ireland and integral to Irish myth. If the American Prairies are an expression of expansion and transcendence beyond the geographical limits, the Irish bogs constrict the human imagination to the wet and bottomless centre, digging ‘inwards and downwards.’ The ‘encroaching horizon’ hints at the preserving quality of the bog which both hides and opens up the past of shared memory and belonging. As the bog has a wet centre, its fluidity remains intact and render it ever-changing to which no specific meaning could be assigned. Some critics read the bog as the repository of ‘human psyche’ that remains unfenced. Following this logic, the bog is also interpreted as a metaphor for deep seated ‘unconscious’ extended to ‘national consciousness.’

The matter of national consciousness has always remained a troublesome project for Irish poets like Seamus Heaney and James Joyce because it implicates the unnatural relationship with England and thwarted desires of United Ireland. The dividedness of the country and the mind creates a conflict in Heaney. The shifting nature of the bog that turns to thick crust each day and moistens every night suggests that bog as a metaphor for Ireland is a place for change to which no distinct signification could be assigned. Heaney writes:

...Our unfenced country  
Is bog that keeps crusting  
Between the sights of the sun. (line 6-8, *The Bogland, Door into the Dark.*)

The image of the skeleton of the ‘Great Irish Elk’ buried beneath the bog creates an assuaging effect on the mind of young Heaney that makes him time travel to memory of his early childhood. It is then that he began associating the bog with the memory of the landscape that preserved material and physical history. Since he enjoyed the summer days at the bogland with his family he always felt a sense of ‘being in migration’ which later on develops into what Edna Longley calls ‘an inner émigré.’ The physical beauty of the bogland represented a thing of marvel to be enjoyed by a poetic mind. Its sublimity released the poetic consciousness from the pressures of history, polity and identity.

Butter sunk under  
More than a hundred years  
Was recovered salty and white.  
The ground itself is kind, black butter (line 13-16, *The Bogland, Door into the Dark.*)

The bog crusts itself over the moist peat and the relics of history such as the ‘Great Irish Elk’ like a salty butter to preserve them for millions of years. The bog nurtures the deep buried coal that gathers not only the imagination of human psyche but also the route to national consciousness. The “kind black butter” draws the pioneers of Ireland to “keep striking/ Inwards and downwards”(line 23-24). The fluid bog which has no definite

shape alludes to post-colonial psyche of Irish people to whom no single signification could be assigned. In other words, the individual consciousness of the poet that reaches up to the consciousness of the nation could not be reduced or downscaled to a single meaning. The 'coal' a symbol of solidity could not be dug from the bog, 'they'll never dig coal here, because the marshy land could only produce '...the waterlogged trunks / Of great firs, soft as pulp.'"(line21-22). Heaney by the end of the poem again draws contrast between the American pioneers who discover and expand horizontally, The Irish pioneers work vertically, they dig 'Inwards and downwards' exploring the Celtic past. But the discovery never turns out to be complete because it is a whirlpool of new findings that never exhausts, "Every layer they strip / Seems camped on before."(line 25-26).

The final stanza links the bog's "bottomless centre" with the unfathomable pool of human imagination. As the human imagination knows no boundaries similarly the bogs unravels itself with unbounded findings and discoveries. In his attempt to forge a relationship between bogland, memory, and, national consciousness, Heaney was trying to make successful comparison between the victims of ancient Jutland who were sacrificed as a consequence of fulfilling the fertility ritual and those innocent people who were massacred during the violent era of the 'Troubles.' "Bogland" cyclically returns to the poem 'Digging' with the desire of unearthing the deep rooted memory, history, and myths of his place of origin.

"Bogland," marks a major shift from his earlier poems as it becomes suggestive of communal identity. It also marks shift from modernism to postmodernism. Imitating his precursors like W.B. Yeats' idea of tradition and James Joyce's modernity, Seamus Heaney turns to rejection of boundaries and conventions and embrace postmodernist technique to reach to the unfathomable consciousness of the 'self.' Since memory was the immediate authority that provided Heaney to time travel to the deep seated consciousness of Irish community as a whole, it is no wonder that Heaney saw great potential in extending the individual and collective memory to national memory. Though the possessive pronoun 'we' in the opening line indicates at collective identity for the Irish people, it is without doubt that it hints at post-colonial national identity of the Irish. Now, the idea of national memory raises complicated questions about which and whose nation does it talk about. To this, Heaney in an interview with Edward Broadbridge makes a remarkable point by hinting at the word 'remember' which is potent in Irish history and politics. He establishes the relationship between remembering and national history by throwing pivotal marks for reference. Heaney is very well aware of the complication of formulating national memory. It is because of the anomalous state of Ireland which has strained relationship with England and unrealized united Ireland, and yet he produces single national narrative for his homeland in the bog poems like "Bogland."

**Bibliography:**

- Heaney, Seamus. *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-78*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Sep 1, 1981. p. 52.
- Parker, Michael. *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet*. Springer, 12 Oct. 1994.
- Vendler, Helen Hennessy. "Anonymities." *Seamus Heaney*. Harvard University Press: 2000. p. 21.
- O'Brien, Eugene. "Seamus Heaney and the Place of Writing." *Academia.edu*. N.p., n.d. Web. 20 June 2017.p.98.
- Longley, Edna. "Heaney and Homecoming" *Transitions: Narratives in Modern Irish Culture*, Dublin: Wolfhound.(ed.) Richard Kearney 1988, pp. 101-122.

