Chapter VI

INTERTEXTUALITY IN NILMANI PHUKAN: RELEVANCE AND MEANINGS
The traits in contemporary Assamese poetry show that Nilmani Phukan has greatly inspired a group of young poets. Many poets seem to imitate his style, language and even thought. Various important poets in the recent time such as Rajib Barua, Anubhab Tulasi, Nilim Kumar plainly explain Phukan’s strong influence upon them. (Prakash, May, 2014). Harekrishna Deka comments:

Phukan is a major influence on a whole generation of modern Assamese poets. The younger generation looked up to him for inspiration and for direction. Many of them wrote derivatively and perished. Many of them have taken cues from his experiments and have emerged as significant poets in our poetry.

(Deka, Nilmani Phukan Kabi aru Kabita 108)
Despite seeing Nilmani Phukan's importance as one of the foremost modern Assamese poets, the findings in the Chapter IV can make reader a bit critical towards Phukan. Question may arise: is Nilmani Phukan 'original' in his approach? The issue of intertextuality, as discussed, may open up such notions. Therefore, one has to look at Phukan's position as a poet also from this perspective.

It is seen from Table-1 in Chapter-IV that Nimani Phukan employs the elements of folklore as allusions; certain suggestions are made through these. His treatment of folklore is quite unique. An example may clear the point. The poem named 'Capara Capere Khahe Pran' (Life heavily falls) talks about poet's longing for the days of his youth. The poetic persona is nostalgic regarding his past memories: village, river, soil, fellow villagers and so on. When different images of his youth come to his mind and strike him he is sad. Then he associates his sorrow with an allusion from the folktale entitled 'Tejimala'. The lines 'meteka phul hoi phule/ kar hat eikhani' (whose hand is this/ blooming as hyacinth flower) suggest this. In a way, the pain and sorrow of Tejimala, the protagonist of the tale, is transported to the poet with the connotations carried out by these two lines. Tejimala is killed violently by her stepmother in the tale and she takes the form of a lotus after her death. She forbids her father not to raise his hand to pluck the flower. The image of
the hyacinth flower (here lotus becomes hyacinth) and the association of
the hand are taken from the tale. These are employed by the poet to attain
further ramification on his theme to mourn for his childhood. The allusion
from the folktale has given a different dimension to the poem. Folk-
elements make his expression more fresh and lively. It opens up a serene
and exclusive vision to the eyes of the reader. This is seen in some other
poems as well. We make out two conjoined pictures in the poetry of
Phukan. On one hand, the folk-elements achieve new degree and new
allure in his poems. And on the other hand, the poems also appear
consequential through such employments.

Of course, as we have seen in Chapter III, the employment of folk-
text and texts other than folklore is not a new phenomenon in modern
Assamese poetry. In fact, modern Assamese poetry has been embracing it
for several centuries. As stated in the third chapter, Hem Barua, a
prominent voice in Assamese poetry, extensively employed folk-text in
his poetry. He especially used bihu songs and folksongs. A number of
poems in Balichanda reflect it well. Certain lines of ‘Pohorotkoi Endhar
Bhal’, for instance, are directly taken from the following bihu song:

\[
\text{keloi phulili rupohi Moder oi}
\]

\[
\text{keloi pelali koli}
\]
guruto nalage bhokototo nalage

thake tol bhorī sori

(Why did thou blossom moon flower dearest, why did thou budd, so though you are plentiful, thou art worthless quite)

This is also observed in some of his other poems such as ‘Jaror Dinor Xopon’ (Dream of the Wintry Days). Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya brings the folk myth of Beula- Lakhindar into the poem ‘Sownsiriyedi Nami Ahe Aair Hiya’. Association of ‘paneshoi’, a famous folktale, is found in ‘Paneshoi’. Navakanta Barua’s ‘Kromoha: Eta Sadhukatha’ (‘A Folk-Tale Continues’) is a fine model of employing folk-tale and myth to the genre of modern poetry. The poet critically gazes the present time and scenario in ‘Kromoha: Eta Sadhukatha’ (‘A Folk-Tale Continues’) memorizing the rich past of his nation with the aid of some myths. The poet uses references from the well-liked folk-tales such as ‘Tejimala’, ‘Chiloneer Jiyekor Sadhu’, ‘Saudar Sadhu’ and so on to view the change of the elements of history with the passage of time: land, river, forest and over all, the living condition of people. The poet’s handling of the folk-tales to comprehend history appears as a powerful weapon to convey his message to the reader. Each stanza of the poem figures out diverse images of folk-tales. The poem seems to represent a modern version of the Assamese deh-bicar songs. Again his poem
'Samrat' ('The Emperor') takes elements from the common myths of *The Mahabharata*. The poet criticizes the crisis of identity of king Dhritarashtra. The poet also opens out the dilemma of his mind, his morbid psyche and his confession regarding his inefficiency as a ruler. As we know that the stories of *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* are fairly inseparable from folk-life, the poet effectively uses such narratives in his poetic frame. Similarly his ‘Aradhora Bhanoni’, ‘Palestine’, ‘Uma-Tumoni’, ‘Pahora Swargar Swapna’ have folk-texts ‘Campawotir Sadhu’, ‘Tejimala’, ‘Pogola Parbotir Geet’, and ‘Gosai Opoja Nam’ respectively. Keshob Mahanta’s poetry too has striking alliances with folktales. He brings reference of ‘Tejimala’ in ‘Eta Kobita Pohi’ and ‘Campawoti’ in ‘Eyate Ga Dhui Lo Campa’. Likewise associations of ‘Chilonir Jiyek’ and ‘Kamala Kuwari’ appear in the poems such as ‘Bipriyo Bihonnola’ and ‘Kamala Kuwarir Jiyek’ respectively.

Another modern poet Ajit Barua also uses folklore in a few poems. The line ‘*Kino Juye Loga Soku*’ in ‘Jengrai 1963’ tells us to a bihu song in *Miri Jiyori* by Rajanikanto Bordoloi. The same line is there in the novel. The line ‘*Bhabi Sale Lilimai ei Jibonot Eko Nai*’ is also taken from a popular folksong. Similarly his poems such as ‘Hothat esat akolsoriya Botah’ and ‘Aji akou Mejankori Enasola’ identify some associations of folk-life and folklore.
So questions may arise: why Nilmani Phukan’s use of folklore demands special attention? How is he different from the others?

Again, the tradition of modern Assamese poetry shows sufficient evidences of intertextuality. To mention a few, Jogyeswar Sarma uses the myth of lord Krishna in ‘Ajanota Mahimanam’. He also brings references from *the Ramayana* in ‘Natun Ramayana’. In Mahim Bora’s ‘Mas’ (Fish) we find resonance of Yeats’ ‘Sailing to Byzantium’. On the other hand, it also echoes Hemingway’s *The Old man and the Sea* in the association of flying fish. Similarly Debokanta Barua’s ‘Ami Duwar Mukoli Koro’ (‘Let us open the Door’) echoes Keats’ ‘Much have I travelled’ and Jibonanando’s ‘Anek Ghursi Ami’. Further the poem brings associations from K. K. Handique’s article ‘Prasin Bebelinor Bed’, Rabindranath Tagore’s poems and a painting ‘And We are Opening the Gates’ by Nicholas Roerich. The elements of intertextuality can be well manifested in the use of mythical text in some poems of Navakanca Barua. His ‘Balmiki’, ‘Rawan’ and ‘Ratnakorr Duswapna’ bring association from *the Ramayana*. So is the case with several modern poets.

Then, naturally, question arises: What is so special about Nilmani Phukan’s use of intertextuality?
It can be arguably opined that Nilmani Phukan is the only Assamese poet who does the most extensive use of folklore in the poetic texts. His treatment of folklore appears as a remarkable intertextual exercise as his poems are loaded with various folk-texts. Further, he does wide use of texts, allusions, suggestions from other genres and mediums that are not found with the same degree in any Assamese poet. This is, to an extent, an exceptional feature in the poetry of Phukan as well as in modern Assamese poetry.

The reading of his poems shows that Phukan began his poetic career as a poet of silence. Several critics in fact have pointed out this. Hiren Gohain says that the initial poetic phase of Phukan was of silence. (Gohain x). Ranjit Kumar Dev Goswami came heavily on Phukan for such monolithic and 'personal' representations. (Dev Goswami 99). Such poems basically reflect sorrow, pain, quietness and aloofness of human life. Influenced mainly by the French poet Charles Baudelaire, he used to write poetry in contour of French symbolism during the time. The harsh criticism on him and the growing socio-political crisis in Assam gradually converted his poetic sensibility and made his voice more public and socially concerned. There is a paradigm shift in his outlook and content. And in such juncture, folk-lore immensely helped him to articulating his new consciousness.
The reason behind the aforesaid observation is distinct. Though we notice the use of folk-lore by Phukan in his earlier poems, its flow was not prominent. It became loaded in the later volumes, particularly from *Nrityarata Prithibi (The Dancing Earth)*. Significantly, the shift in his poetic sensibility can be noticed from this book. It can be a significant aspect to see that Phukan’s employment of folklore, in a way, is related to his changing outlook.

The most common view about folklore is that it is inseparable from the life of common people. A folk expresses his laugh, sorrow, pain, anguish, and so on through folk-music, folktale, folk-tale, folk-dance and so many ways. Phukan’s close association with folklore thus can be noticed as his growing concern for common people: their laugh, sorrow, pain, anguish and all. Strikingly when Phukan uses folk-text, the poem appeals the reader more.

How then, they can be read with the help of theories?

Julia Kristeva proposes the text as a dynamic site in which relational processes and practices are the focus of analysis instead of static structures and products. (Kristeva 65). Developing Bakhtin’s concept of literary language, she further says that “each word (text) is an intersection of other words (texts) where at least one other word (text)
can be read”. (Kristeva 66). The concept thus states that texts are not self-contained systems but are differential and historical. Rejecting the New Critical principle of textual autonomy, the idea of intertextuality insists that a text cannot exist as a self-sufficient whole, and so, that it does not function as a closed system. We can perceive intertextuality in Phukan’s poetry in the light of such theories. In case of Nilmani Phukan’s poetry, such ideas do work also with exception. Though Phukan has intertextuality in his poems, the intertexts can not swallow the overall significances of the poem. These elements in fact increase his poetic beauty.

Harold Bloom’s notion of influence has been a central concern in any discussion on intertextuality and Bloom uses the term ‘anxiety of influence’ to describe the young author’s experience of the strangeness when he recognizes the influence of his predecessors in his own work. According to Bloom, the shock of recognition is quite strong and therefore the author may not able to write anything at all originally, or becomes convinced that he can only reproduce the work of his forerunners. (Bloom 28). In case of Nilmani Phukan, however, we do not see such strong influence of any poet. Initially he was influenced by French Symbolism. He was also influenced by Garcia Lorca. But he has come out from such trap during 1980s. If he has finally any influence,
that is of the trap of Assamese folklore. No single author stands as
colossus behind Phukan’s enduring poetic sensibility. Despite the fact
that his poems possess features of intertextuality, Phukan has been able to
produce works which are original.

It is already discussed that the germs of intertextuality may be
marked out in folklore itself. Folklorist Bascom’s view regarding the role
of imitation in acquiring knowledge from previous texts has resemblance
with that of Bloom’s. In the study of folklore, the idea of mixing up of
genres has been discussed since the time of Grimm brothers and Alan
Dundes understood it from the perspective of devolution. Nilmani
Phukan’s use of folk-texts thus is quite a notable tendency and it demands
more study on the subject.
Works Cited


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