Chapter I

INTRODUCTION
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I.1

The Background: Nilmani Phukan

The pursuit of research in literature, especially in poetry, has often been a challenging task. In fact, it has become thornier in the twenty-first century as the conventional ways to seek ‘meaning’ in literary texts are bewildered by various critical thoughts and theories. On the other hand, the process of writing poetry, to an extent, itself is unexplainable; it is a self-sufficient object and the poet can be said just as a vehicle. The conventional concept that the poet is a visionary still exists there and the history of criticism, despite certain current antithesis; shows that tracing ‘meaning’ in poetic texts has been a common trait in critical discourses. Withstanding this view, thus, critics and researchers study poetry looking for meanings and implications. In the present study too, we will try to find out ‘meanings’ of certain poetic texts taking recourse to a theory
which itself in a way seems to question the originality of literary texts. Hence the study carries a technical challenge within it at the first place.

Nilmani Phukan (b.1933) has been regarded as a major modern poet in Assamese. He is perhaps one of the most discussed poets writing in Assamese so far. He was born in a village called Chakiyal near Dergaon in Assam. Despite being a teacher of History, Phukan has been honoured with prestigious awards including the Sahitya Akademi for poetry. Nilmani Phukan has eight collections of verse to his credit- *Surjya Heno Nami Aahe Ei Nadiyedi* (1963) (*The Sun is Said to Descend Along This River*), *Nirjanatar Sabda* (1965) (*The Sound of Silence*), *Aru Ki Naisabda* (1968) (*And What Quietude*), *Phuli Thaka Surjyamukhi Phultor Phale* (1971) (*Towards the Blooming Sunflower*), *Kait aru Golap aru Kait* (1975), *Thorns Roses Thorns*, *Kabita* (1980) (*Poems*), *Nrityarata Prithibi* (1985) (*The Dancing Earth*), and *Alap Aagate Aami Ki Katha Pati Aacilo* (2003) (*What Were We Talking a Little While Ago*). Apart from his poetry collections, he authored a few books on art and sculpture and translated several Spanish, Chinese and Japanese poems into Assamese. Moreover there are two selected versions of his poems- *Golapi Jamur Lagna* (1976) (*The Moment of Rose Apple*) and *Sagar Talir Sankha* (1994) (*Conch from the Depths of the Sea*).
Nilmani Phukan’s input into Assamese poetry, however, is crucial and significant in several respects. His poetic voice has been a central one in the spectrum of modern Assamese poetry. He seems to delve deep into the nuances of the Assamese language through his poetic exercises. It appears that, straight and general comment on his poetry will be ludicrous as his poems are encumbered with multiplicity of meanings. It seems that Nilmani Phukan facilitates the reader with a unique aroma of folk-life and folk-culture. He explores the resources of Assamese folklore through the medium of poetic language. The poet extensively uses various elements of folklore in his poetry. These render multiple meanings into his poetic texts. A careful reading of the poems of Nilmani Phukan reveals that folklore has been a very effectual and important channel for the poet to convey certain messages. It is interesting to observe that his poems even carry certain ‘texts’ of folklore. Accordingly, the elements of folklore which appear in his poetry may also exist as ‘inter-texts’ bearing variegated relevance and meanings. It is thus essential to analyse why the poet repeatedly goes to the terrain of folklore and finds denotation there.

The North East India presents a rich picture of culture and folklore. Different tribes living in the region exemplify a great storehouse of folk-elements along with the items of the non-tribal. In Assam, the process of assimilation and absorption of various tribal
populations into the Hindu-Assamese fold has been in operation until now. (Datta, Sarma & Das 26) Such assimilation in turn has been enhancing the bulk of folk-materials in Assam. A considerable volume of tribal myths, legends and ballads from different parts of the region inspire the writers to employ those into their works. Nilmani Phukan thus can be read in this light. It is significant to note that Nilmani Phukan translated a few tribal poems into Assamese in the book entitled *Aranyar Gan (The Songs of the Forest)* (1993). He holds:

> If I were not born amidst the serene nature of Assam, if I had not spent my childhood among the folk-songs, festivals, dances of the villages, I could not write poetry.

*(Phukan, *Sampurna Kabita* 409; translated from Assamese)*

He also expresses how he has been immensely influenced by the folk-tales, myths and ballads, especially by ‘Tejimala’ and ‘Kamala Kuwarir Sadhu’. (Phukan, *Bicitra Lekha* 28). Further, it will be important to mention that Nilmani Phukan was influenced by Federico Garcia Lorca, the Spanish poet, who also used Spanish folklore at length in his poetry.¹ (Phukan, *Bicitra Lekha* 22). Along these lines, it is an area for critical scrutiny: why does Nilmani Phukan extensively use folklore?
Is it merely a part of his technique? Is there any greater socio-political relevance behind such use? What are the implied meanings of folk-elements? Can the folk-texts in his poetry be explored from the perspective of intertextuality? Or, will the folklore in his poetry permit a researcher to have an intertextual reading? If yes, how and why folklore approximates the tendencies of intertextuality in his poetry?

It is essential to see how Phukan’s poetry has been receiving critical attention. Attempt is made below to go through a review of earlier literature and central criticism on Nilmani Phukan to see if any such reading of his poetry has come out or not.

I.2

Review of Literature

It is apparent that Nilmani Phukan’s poetry has received a good deal of criticism so far.

Mahendra Bora in his introduction to *Natun Kabita (New Poems)* (1956) observed that the poems of Nilmani Phukan were quite penetrating in realizing life and living. He says that there is an echo of a serene world in the poetry of Phukan. These reflect the deepest problem in life. Bora
points out the use of excessive symbols by Phukan and his poetry demands a reader to be sensitive. He further says that the influence of voriticism upon the poet cannot be neglected. (Bora, M, n.pag)

Hiren Gohain opines that Nilmani Phukan has a deeper appeal upon the reader through his images and words. He considers Phukan as a representative of romantic sensibility who observes the wide horizon of human soul and human life. (Gohain ix). Gohain says that he could remember Wordsworth while reading Phukan. (Gohain ix). Further he observes that the poet would achieve a lager horizon if he fills up his feeling with a profound realization of the contemporary reality. He is a bit critical in the review of Phukan’s first book showing certain limitations on the part of the poet. (Das & Bayan 451). As the poet gradually achieves subtlety, Gohain praises Phukan in the ‘Introduction’ to 
*Sagartalir Sankha (Conch from the Depths of the Sea)* (1994). He opines that Phukan’s poetry, among his contemporaries, achieves a distinctive quality. (Gohain ix). Gohain mentions about Phukan’s use of symbols and how the poet effectively talks about the obscurity and mystery of life. He also explores various dimensions of Phukan’s poetry in the long preface. Gohain points out how folklore has gradually enriched Phukan’s poetic insight. He mentions and thus surveys some of Phukan’s sources of
folklore. For example, he talks about the subterranean association of ‘Tejimala' in Phukan’s poetry.

Bhaben Barua, poet and critic, expresses in the preface to Golapi Jamur Lagna (The Moment of Rose Apple) (1976) that Phukan has been slowly but surely able to reconcile the thought with a suggestive language. According to Barua, Phukan became able to render new apparel during 1960s. (Phukan, Golapi Jamur Lagna 3). And it is, Barua says, due to Phukan’s use of a more subtle language. Barua considers that Phukan’s success as a poet can be basically traced from his fourth collection, Phuli Thaka Sujiyamukhi Phultor Phale (Towards the Blooming Sunflower) which was published in 1971. Bhaben Barua again observes in his Asamiya Kabita: Rupantarar Parba (Assamese Poetry: the Phase of Metamorphosis) (2002) that the second part of Phukan’s poetry which had emerged in the late 1980s of the twentieth century consists of a mysterious nature. He mentions about a split personality in Phukan in his later poems. (Barua, B 274-75). Yet, Barua does not seem to deny the fact that Phukan has achieved a very effective internal music through the use of sensitive images.

Poet and critic Hirendra Nath Dutta says that Nilmani Phukan belongs to the set of romantic poets but he does not bear the hope of indomitable power of men like the romanticists. Rather, according to
Dutta, Phukan’s poetry expresses the pain of human being; his poetic self has been touched with a tragic sense. (Thakur 17-18). Further Dutta says that there is a good impact of impressionism, surrealism, expressionism, symbolism on Phukan. (Thakur 19)

Kabin Phukan, a poet and critic, observes that though Nilmani Phukan uses symbols, his path is more that of human symbolism than of transcendent symbolism as his youth was not full of sadness and despair. (Thakur 61). But Kabin Phukan notably remarks that Phukan’s use of folklore in a way rejects his overt affinity to symbolism. (Thakur 62). Kabin Phukan also talks about the association of Assamese Bihu songs in the poetry of Nimani Phukan, particularly in the poem entitled ‘Golapi Jamur Lagno’.

Harekrishna Deka points out the association of Nilmani Phukan with Japanese and Chinese poetry along with the symbolic trend of European Poetry. According to Deka, the modernism in Phukan is different from that of Eliot’s; rather he opines that it is basically romantic. (Thakur 32). He also remarks that the poet consciously avoids romantic sensibility in his poems. (Phukan, Sampurna Kabita 24-25). Deka mentions that Phukan often appears to have been exploring an area of solitude, turning his poetic gaze inward, discovering the longed for solitude within his self and not outside. The familiar world gets de-
familiarized in the region, this de-familiarization achieved through a metaphorical exploration of language that acquires symbolic suggestiveness. (Deka, *Nilmani Phukan Kabi aru Kabita* 102)

Ranjit Kumar Dev Goswami in an article entitled ‘Asomiya Kobita: 1951-1971’ (Assamese Poetry: 1951-1971) regards Nilmani Phukan as the only poet to be called ‘first class’ of the age. (Dev Goswami, ‘Asomiya Kobita: 1951-1971’ 264). He in the discussion of *Golapi Jamur Lagno* (*The Moment of Rose Apple*) criticizes the poetry of Phukan considering it the result of a derivative culture. He is critical of the poet for the poet’s excessive sense of pain and aloofness in the poems despite keeping only a little hope for future. (Dev Gowami, ‘Grantha Samalocana: Golapi Jamur Lagna’ 98). He also notices the influence of Jibonanoda Das, a renowned Bengali poet and few Japanese poets upon Phukan.

At the same time, it is imperative to see how issues such as exploration of intertextuality and folklore have been discussed in some other literary and critical discourses.

Gail R. O’day in the paper entitled ‘*Jeremiah 9:22-23* and *1 Corinthians 1:26-31*: A study in intertextuality’ seeks to explore one particular example of intertextuality in Paul: the relationship between *Jer*
9:22-23 and 1 Cor 1:26-31, beside mentioning that Toni Morrison's novel, *Beloved* (1987), is a masterful example of the varieties and possibilities of intertextuality and both the novel's title and its superscription are drawn from *Rom 9:25*. (O'day 259-60) Grail R. O'day thus also makes a brief analysis of the text of Jer 9:22-23, which is taken as the received text in the intertextual study.

Carl Lindahl in a review of Susan Stewart's *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature* (1979) holds that the book *Nonsense* focuses on the tactics through which oral and literary art anticipate outwardly meaningless forms, images, and propositions to render meaning. Lindahl opines that Susan Stewart offers the term "nonsense" as an umbrella arching over all those concepts which stand opposed to the rules and expectations which pervade art and everyday life. (Lindahl 71). Stewart suggests, according to Lindahl, that nonsense is important in both life and art because it defines and limits the everyday, the ordinary, the real; without nonsense, there would be no sense. Lindahl offers the view that Stewart displays a mastery of all her materials, which range over a wide compass of styles, genres, and historical periods drawing upon a rich field of literary and folkloric texts. Further Lindahl says that although Stewart discusses both folkloric and
literary examples of nonsense, she makes no causal or hierarchical connection between the two. (Lindahl 72)

Miriam Decosta in the essay ‘The Use of African Folklore in Hispanic Literature’ tries to explore the fact that one of the primary contributions of Afro-Hispanic literature to the development of a native culture in the New World is the introduction of African folklore into Caribbean and South American literature. Decosta says that the confluence of the two cultures - African and Hispanic - began much earlier with the conquest of Christian Spain by Islamic Moors and with the expansion of the African slave trade on the Iberian Peninsula in the sixteenth century. According to Miriam, African folklore has been an integral ingredient in Hispanic literature. (Decosta 22)

Ray W. Frantz in ‘The Role of Folklore in Huckleberry Finn’ says that Mark Twain often drew upon folk materials in his writing. According to Frantz, he used such materials only as a kind of window dressing to realize a momentary flash of humour or colour. He holds that the extent of his artistic achievement with folklore in Huckleberry Finn has not been sufficiently recognized. He writes that in this novel Twain employed folklore with a great care which in turn influences structure, supports thematic development, provides plot motivation, and depicts character of the novel. Further he holds that folklore emerges as organically important
to the novel as a whole and fundamental to an appreciation of his accomplishment in this work. (Frantz 314)

Serafin Roldan-Santiago in the paper ‘Thematic and Structural Functions of Folklore in Caribbean Literature: The Case of the "Written" and the "Oral"’ states that the concepts of langue and parole offered by Ferdinand de Saussure, can also be applied, with a bit of stretching and adapting, to areas such as: high culture vs. little culture, literature vs. oral folklore, high art vs. folk art, industrial manufacturing vs. folk crafts, organized religion vs. folk religion. (Roldan- Santiago 1). Taking such notion Serafin discusses how folklore has been a crucial force in Caribbean literature and shows the relevance of folklore in modern literary practices.

In the essay ‘Premchand's Use of Folklore in His Short Stories’, Inge C. Orr says that Premchand, one of India’s famous story writers, singled out various folk customs and beliefs in India which he considered as social evils, and exposed them in his writings. He revived the noble ideals of ancient times, yet he knew that India could not return to that glorious past. (Orr 55)
Aim and Scope of the study:

From this overview it is apparent that though a substantial body of criticism on Nilmani Phukan has emerged, the subject regarding the poet’s use of folklore from the perspective of intertextuality has hardly been dealt with, and therefore an open area to explore. The issue of representation of folklore and its study with the theories of intertextuality, however, is evident in certain academic discussions. Such issues are yet to be discussed in the study of Assamese literature in general or in the study of Nilmani Phukan’s poetry. The critics though see certain associations and influences in Phukan; their seeing is far from the theoretical stand point of intertextuality. Therefore, basically my aim here is to explore intertextuality in the poetry of Nilmani Phukan. Emphasis is made to examine the greater ramifications of the folklore and folk-texts in the poems and their relevance and meanings in the overall poetic sensibility of the poet. In the process, my study will also shed light on the influences upon the poet which might have provoked him to create the things in particular way.
Methodology:

The study basically typifies exploratory research, description and interpretation. So the emphasis is made on the following things.

- **Sources of data:**

  The study treats the original works of Nilmani Phukan as primary sources. Secondary sources are the essays and criticism written on the poet. The study of the poet's home and surrounding has been considered as valuable source.

- **Methods of Data Collection:**

  A series of interviews with Nilmani Phukan and his family members have been taken to gather data. Similarly interviews have been held with a few contemporary critics and authors. Various texts by the poet and about the poet (including his diaries and letters) have been collected.
• **Methods of Data Analysis:**

A close analysis of the data from the stated perspective is being made. Basically textual analysis is done in the study. The concepts of intertextuality are used in the analysis. The fundamental theoretical design of intertextuality is mentioned below.

The term Intertextuality is coined by the French critic Julia Kristeva which she derived from the study of dialogue and carnival formulated by Mikhail Bakhtin. The fundamental idea of the theory of intertextuality is that any text is essentially a mixture of references to or quotations from other texts; a text is not a closed system and does not exist in isolation. (Macey 204). Intertextuality is not simply a matter of influence which pass from one author to the other, but of the multiple and complex relations that exist between texts in both synchronic and diachronic ways. (Macey 204). ‘Influence’ is one mode of intertextuality. (Bloom 26). Texts, whether literary or non-literary, are viewed by modern theorists as lacking in any kind of independent meaning. (Allen 1). Graham Allen opines that
poststructuralist critics employ the term to disrupt notions of meaning, whilst structuralist critics employ the same term to locate literary meaning. (Allen 4). It signifies the flexible nature of the term as a concept. However, the concept opens up a view that the act of reading plunges the readers into a network of textual relations. To interpret a text, to discover its meaning or meanings, is to trace those relations. Meaning becomes something which exists between a text and all the other texts to which it refers and relates, moving out from the independent text into a network of textual relations. (Allen 2). Thus the text becomes the intertext. It is important to say that intertextuality has been adapted by critics of non-literary art forms such as painting, music and architecture. (Allen 5). The idea of intertextuality will be instrumental in my study as many texts of folklore or ‘folk-texts’ create the central texture of various poems by Nilmani Phukan. Bloom’s notion of anxiety of influence will also be used to explore intertextuality in the poetry of Nilmani Phukan. To substantiate my theoretical position, however, the views of some other theorists such as Ferdinand de Saussure, M.M.
Bakhtin, Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco and so on will also be discussed. But it will be basically Kristeva and Bloom that the emphasis will be laid upon.

The following chapters will deal with theories of folklore and intertextuality, modern Assamese poetry, poetry of Nilmani Phukan and exploration of folklore and intertextuality in Nilmani Phukan's poetry.
Works Cited


Decosta, Miriam. “The Use of African Folklore in Hispanic Literature”.


Notes:


2. A short-lived modernist movement in British art and poetry of the early 20th century. It was partly influenced by Cubism.

3. A famous Assamese folk-tale which was included in *Burhi Air Sadhu* (1911), a collection of folktales by Lakshminath Bezbaroa.