

Ecological Self and Nativism in Seamus Heaney's "Digging"

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Abstract

"Digging" is more than a recollection of childhood experience by the speaker. By analyzing the poem, it can be stated that nativism is nurtured in the speaker by the ecological self realization achieved through his childhood experiences. The setting of the poem is the landscape of Northern Ireland. The whole poem is about the speaker recollecting the memories of his grandfather working in the 'soggy peat', and his father 'digging' in the potato field. As a child, he used to accompany them. For the speaker, the dependence on the land was not just for survival. As a child he enjoyed being with nature. It can be inferred from the poem that the speaker experienced this happiness when he attained 'ecological self realization' (a term coined by Arnae Naess). It is this ecological self realization acquired in his childhood days that sowed the seeds of nativism in the speaker. At present, he cannot have a direct attachment with nature like his forefathers. But, through the acquired nativism, with the aid of ecological self realization, he can continue the same 'digging' done by his father using his pen.

Key words: Nativism, Ecological self realization, Arne Naess

Death of the Naturalist is a collection of 34 poems by the Irish poet Seamus Heaney, published in 1966. The speaker's life, from the childhood to adulthood can be traced in this poetry collection. Nature is an inevitable element in Heaney's poems. "Digging", the first poem from *Death of the Naturalist*, shows the speaker's strong bond with nature. According to Stephen Burt, Seamus Heaney began his career as a poet of earth. "Digging" depicts the deep attachment of the speaker, his father and grandfather with their farm land. The speaker in the poem is a writer. As a writer, he finds the same link with the nature like that of his forefathers who were farmers. Both writing and farming are a blend of culture and nature. They are not conflicting entities. The nativism suggested in the poem is a blend of native landscape and native culture dependent on the landscape.

Recollection of the speaker's childhood experience, digging by his father, has become the major source of the poem. In Russel Sander's "Speaking a Word for Nature" the author states that contemporary writers are in such a situation that if they want to write something on nature they have to go back to their childhood experience. As adults, they are influenced more by rationality and science. They are no more able to have a pure sense of nature. They are controlled by ego-centric views. According to G. Madhusoodhanan, one's childhood plays a vital role in nurturing his/her creativity. Childhood is a period when children are enthusiastic to grasp the wonders of nature. It is this interaction that cultivates creativity in them.

In "Digging", the speaker is referring to a learning process he was going through, while he was accompanying his father and grandfather in digging. The features of the rural landscape are portrayed from the point of view of "a child's fresh emotion" (Sanders 189). The seed of nativism lies in his childhood days. Along with this learning process he was attaining self realization explained by Arnae Naess. As an adult he is able to nurture and maintain nativism because of the Self realization experienced in his childhood. According to Arnae Naess, 'eco self' or the larger 'Self' can be attained when one transcends his/her ego or small 'self' by widening the relation with the environment around him. The speaker in the poem achieved such a relation with the environment. The poem suggests that the speaker became a nativist, rooted in the Self realization nurtured in his childhood days. Cuddon says: "The term nativism is used by postcolonial critics to describe the desire to return to pre-colonial cultural values and native traditions. This project of recovering indigenous cultural forms was particularly significant in the decolonization period after the Second World War since native cultures

were constructed as 'primitive' or less developed during colonialism”.

The visual images of 'spade', 'turf', 'soggy peat' and kinetic image of digging in 'potato drills', shows that his father and grandfather lead a life completely dependent on nature. The line “Loving their cool hardness in our hands” shows the Self realization achieved by the speaker. The verb 'loving' conveys his bond with the landscape when he had potatoes in his hands. The given line shows the widened relation of the speaker's 'self' with the potato field. His nativism is rooted in this bond. The line “Through living roots awaken in my head” from the poem implies that he carries the memory of his childhood experience to 'awaken' nativism in his 'head'. The final stanza of the poem “Between my finger and my thumb/ The squat pen rests. / I'll dig with it.”, asserts that he will be using his creativity, for propagating nativism. Thus it can be stated that the poem expresses 'nativism' based on Self realization.

A lyrical poem is subjective in nature. In “Digging” the speaker holds a subjective position towards the landscape. More than a setting the land, and the speaker's connection with it is the centre of concern. “Digging” as a lyrical poem expresses emotional attachment with the land. Self realization achieved by the speaker cannot be expressed in an objective point view towards the landscape. The speaker has placed himself within the landscape, and also as one who is emotionally attached with the same. Thus the form of the poem also stresses on the link between 'nativism' and Self realization.

The historical context of the poem, reveals the importance of 'nativism' in connection to the landscape of the Northern Ireland. Seamus Heaney is a native of Ireland, and a member of Irish Catholic community from Derry, who were basically farmers. With the invasion of the British, Irish Catholics have faced many discriminations from past to present. A larger part of the land owned by Irish Catholics had usurped by the British imperialists. The exploitation and oppression by the British led to many protests by the Irish people. As a poet, he had to choose between gun and spade. If he chooses gun he needs to be a poet of protest. But he chose spade to be a poet of earth. “It was from the tension between worlds - past and present, Irish and English, farm and academia - that he twisted his poetry... For him the crude certainties of the Republican nationalist narrative were always subverted by the personal and his deep sense of a common humanity” (The Sydney Morning Herald).

Heaney grew up on the family farm, where what counted was skill with a spade or a plough. At present, Northern Ireland is still under the power of UK. The Irish Catholic minorities, the native Irish people who were basically farmers, are facing immense discrimination from past to present. The images used to present his experience as an adult is different from that of his childhood days. “Between my finger and thumb/The squat pen rests like gun”. His pen is compared to a gun, that implies the historical situation existed while Heaney was leading his life as a writer in Northern Ireland. War can be seen as the extreme end of ego self or 'self' as Arnae Naess calls it. There had been a constant fight between Protestants and Catholics in Ireland. Helen Vendler notes the fact: “the disturbing thing about 'Digging' is that the Irish Catholic child grew up between the offers of two instruments: the spade and the gun. 'Choose,' said two opposing voices from his culture: 'Inherit the farm,' said agricultural tradition; 'Take up arms,' said Republican militarism” (Vendler 28-29). Gun is for destruction whereas a spade is for creation or cultivation. The metaphor of gun also suggests pen as his weapon to retain the virtue of his childhood days.

According to Phillip Gavin, the British considered Gaelic tradition as something barbaric. They wanted to mould Ireland according the culture of Modern world. An aspect of the colonial rule is as follows: “To the industrious, ambitious British, their rural Irish neighbors seemed to be an alien, rebellious, backward people, stuck in an ancient agrarian past. They laid-back, communal lifestyle of Irish peasants with their long periods of idleness was also an affront to influential Protestants in England who believed idleness was the devil's work”.

The English settlers did the same in America too. Scott Russel Sanders says that the English settlers including literary writers tried to mould the “wildness” according to European culture. Similarly, the British imperialists wanted to reshape the rural landscape of Ireland which seriously affected their nativity. They had an anthropocentric notion of nature. For them, nature is an object to be processed and refined in an ego centered culture. Deep ecology supports nativism by reacting against this kind of exploitation. The seventh principle of deep ecology says, “The ideological change is mainly that of appreciating life quality (dwelling in situations of inherent value) rather than adhering to an increasingly higher standard of living. There will be a profound awareness of the difference between big and great” (Devall and Sessions 70).

The English settlers focused on higher standard of living by failing to achieve Self realization. They failed to understand the fact that the Irish settlers had a quality life which was in tune with nature. Native Irish people refined their culture by depending on nature. Contributions of Northern Irish poetry reveals the merit of local culture as:

small cultures possess particular strengths and energies that are often invisible and largely unavailable (or at least not so easily available) to the bigger psycho-spatial territories of classic 'metropolitan' cultures. 'Metropolitan' perspectives always tend to assume that the larger culture must subsume the strengths of the smaller 'peripheral' one, apart from local colour, whilst possessing many more of its own; but this is hardly the case, as the disproportionate achievements of Northern Irish poetry rather dramatically exemplify in the contemporary British context. (Agee 29)

In the poem the shift from the potato field to flower bed shows the privilege given to the 'higher standard' than 'quality'. The British invaders devalued quality life by accusing the native Irish for being “alien, rebellious, backward people, stuck in an ancient agrarian past”(Gavin). The English settlers saw land as a commodity for their selfish needs or excess needs not of any inherent value.

There is a sharp contrast between the image of digging in present and past. The speaker hears the harsh sound of digging from outside while he is on work with pen and paper. The sound is similar to that of metals and stones. “Under my window, a clean rasping sound/ When the spade sinks into gravelly ground”. The auditory image of metal also suggests that lands or the soil has changed according to the changing attitude of man towards nature. Their tradition is also disappearing due to the dominant culture framed by globalization. Linton, says Makarand Paranjape “identified a strategic and symbolic mode of protest adopted by groups which feel inferior or threatened by the onslaught of more powerful or dominant culture.”(Paranjape 160).

Ireland has also become a prey of the dominant culture imposed by the English rulers and settlers. The present situation of Northern Irish writers is that: Writing both against and from within the globalizing circuits of modernity, Northern Irish poets move between assimilationism (feeling part of the English literary tradition), nativism (seeking to restore the culture of itself) and the skepticism of those who are unwilling to subscribe to a rigid nationalism and are ready to engage transnational modes of thinking and feeling. (Andrews 19).

The focus of this paper is on nativism in connection to the landscape. Once Heaney wrote for asserting his Irish identity in his poem an open letter “for, be advised My passport's green/No glass of ours was ever raised/To toast The Queen...But British, no, the name's not right” (Fenton). His childhood as a member of a farmer's life is evident in most of his poems. Their survival was based on potato farming. “Digging” asserts that it is these experiences, he had from his community's life based on nature, that will be the basis for his creative work.

Twenty years back his father used to dig for potatoes. “My father, digging. I look down/Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds/Bends low, comes up twenty years away/Stooping in

rhythm through potato drills / Where he was digging”. At present he digs on a flower bed which shows that the unique eco centered culture of Ireland is fading away. The Flower bed is usually used as a decoration incapable of producing anything fruitful. After twenty years, the present situation of poet is that when he looks outside, he cannot see anything productive in nature. The dominant culture erased his native culture. The only solution is to maintain the creativity he has developed through his experience as a child with the productive nature. He can support nativism through his creativity. He glorifies his forefathers for the work they have done in the field. They did something more productive due to their deep attachment with nature. The 'bog' during his grandfather's time where he did digging for peat harvesting is also in contrast with the hard soil seen at present condition. Though he cannot follow the path of his forefathers he continues digging with his pen by linking his work with his past experience attached with nature. Thus he maintains the eco self nurtured in his childhood. “Between my finger and thumb/ My squat pen rests/I'll dig with it”.

Madhusoodhanan emphasizes on the relevance of nostalgia for maintaining tradition. For Heaney it's not just nostalgia. The speaker is proud to continue his tradition. His nostalgia is grounded on nativism. The childhood experiences which aroused nostalgia in him is framed by Self realization. The present setting of the speaker is different from that of his father and grandfather. The speaker is sitting beside a desk in a room. His forefathers were engaged in the open field. His memories of his childhood experiences in the open field made him to maintain the same connection like his forefathers. It is this connection which makes him dig with his pen.

Potato farming is inevitable in Irish tradition. The survival of Irish people was based on potato farming. Death of the Naturalist was written during the time when Northern Ireland was under the constitutional control of British. “Digging” shows Heaney's craving for sustaining his Irish identity in which ecology also plays a major role. Finally, Heaney decides to give up “the concept of writing as aggression, and the spade as his final analogue for his pen the pen will serve as an instrument of exploration and excavation, yielding warmth (like his grandfather's turf for fires) and nourishment (like his father's potatoes)” (Vendler 29). The speaker possesses an eco self which made him to use the pen for his culture rooted on nature.

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