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A Comparative Study of the Poetry of Ajit Barua and T.S. Eliot

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Abstract

The paper makes a comparative study of the poetry of two important poets, Ajit Barua and T. S. Eliot, associated with modernist poetic consciousness of Assamese and English literature respectively. They belong to different linguistic, cultural, historic and geographical contexts but both poets are responding to the crisis of modern life thru poetic experimentation, intellectual reflection, symbolic suggestiveness and a keen sense of social and spiritual disintegration. Eliot's poetry came out of the cultural crisis of post-war Europe. Ajit Barua's poetry grew out of the colonial transition, Indian independence, social change, political uncertainty and cultural experience of Assam. The study looks at their treatment of modernity, alienation, urban experience, historical consciousness, myth, tradition, nature, and spiritual anxiety. It also discusses the impact of Eliot on the poetic technique of Ajit Barua, especially in terms of fragmentation, allusion, impersonality, irony, indirect expression and juxtaposition of seemingly unconnected images. But Barua does not just imitate Eliot. He uses modernist techniques to the Assamese experience and infuses them with a certain regional, social and cultural value. Eliot's poetry often represents a spiritually exhausted Western civilization whereas Barua's poetry negotiates between the inherited Assamese traditions and the pressures of modernity. The comparative analysis shows that both the poets convert chaos into artistic form, but their poetic visions differ in emphasis. Eliot seeks metaphysical and Christian order, whereas Barua is more grounded in social reality, historical change, cultural identity and the complex nature of Indian modernity. The study concludes that Ajit Barua's poetry is a creative appropriation, not a passive imitation of Eliotian modernism.

Keywords: Ajit Barua, T. S. Eliot, Assamese verse, modernism, fragmentation, alienation, myth, comparative literature.

I. Introduction

Comparative literature allows the reader to think about literary texts across language, culture and national boundaries. The comparison of Ajit Barua and T. S. Eliot is particularly useful as both the poets represent modernist tendencies, writing from significantly different cultural locations. Eliot is one of the towering figures of modernism in twentieth-century England. His poetry epitomizes the fragmentation, spiritual uncertainty, psychological anxiety and cultural crisis of the modern western world. Another significant Assamese poet, Ajit Barua, employs modernist strategies but uses them to represent the realities of Assam and India.

Eliot's modernism is characterized by formal experimentation, historical allusion, symbolic density, multiple voices, and an aversion to straightforward emotional expression. His poetry portrays modern life as disjointed and spiritually troubled. In poems like "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," "The Waste Land," "The Hollow Men," and "Four Quartets," Eliot explores the relationship between individual consciousness and a broken civilization. Modernity appears as a condition of paralysis, alienation, memory, fear and spiritual void. (Eliot)

Ajit Barua's poetic development has followed a different historical road. His early poetry was imbued with the romantic lyricism and the literary ambiance of Assamese poetry. But eventually he drifted toward a more complex modernist mode. His poetry deals with social contradictions, historical violence, urban experience, political anxiety, personal isolation and the decay of traditional certainties. His poetic practice has been related to Eliot and French symbolism, especially in the use of indirectness, suggestion, irony and intellectual organization. But the roots from which Barua's poetry springs are the Assamese language, landscape, history and cultural consciousness.(Barua, 1989).

The intention of this paper is not to prove that the two poets are one. Instead, it aims to map their similarities and differences. The study is divided into five major areas: the modernity and the historical crisis, alienation and the urban condition, poetic technique, tradition and myth, and spiritual and cultural consciousness.

II. Objectives:

The main objectives of this study are:

- ❖ To study the modernistic features of the poetry of Ajit Barua and T.S. Eliot.
- ❖ To compare their approach to alienation, to social crisis, to spiritual uncertainty.
- ❖ To study the effect of Eliot on the poetic technique of Ajit Barua.
- ❖ To examine their use of myth, tradition, symbolism and allusion.

III. Methodology

The present paper is qualitative and comparative. It is based on a close reading of selected poems by T.S. Eliot and a thematic study of the poetry of Ajit Barua, which is available in Assamese literary criticism and translated discussion. Theoretical ideas of modernism, tradition, impersonality, symbolism and comparative literature are also used in the study.

The analysis draws mainly on the following works of Eliot: "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," "The Waste Land," "The Hollow Men," "Gerontion," and Four Quartets. The paper considers the modernist development of the poetry of Ajit Barua, his poems dealing with social reality, cultural conflict, urban consciousness, historical experience and use of Eliotian techniques. In translation, rhythm, sound and cultural nuance may change, so the paper stresses theme, image, structure and poetic method rather than precise verbal equivalence.

IV. The Historical Crisis of Modernism

Modernism was born out of a crisis of traditional values and forms. Industrialization, urbanization, war, colonialism, scientific change, psychological theory and the decline of established religious and cultural structures shaped it. Modernist poetry often represents experience as fragmented rather than complete. It is a narrative of discontinuity, juxtaposition, allusion, interior monolog and symbolic association.

One of the most influential examples of this modernist transformation is the poetry of Eliot. In "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," the speaker is unable to turn thought into action. The poem moves haltingly, repeatedly, and self-interruptingly. The speaker's questions are not evidence of intellectual freedom but of psychological paralysis. His modern identity is created through doubt, self-consciousness, fear of judgment, and the inability to find meaningful human contact.(Eliot).

In The Waste Land the crisis is that of civilization. The poem has a mix of voices, languages, literary traditions, religious allusions, popular songs, and scenes from contemporary urban life. It is a broken structure, an indication of a culture that has lost a coherent center. The poem does not offer a simple story because the modern world itself has become difficult to organize into one meaningful story. Eliot creates unity through the use of recurring images, mythic patterns, verbal echoes and cultural allusion.(Eliot)

Ajit Barua stands for modernity as a time of disruption too. But the historical setting of his poetry is different from Eliot's. Barua writes from Assam, a land of colonial history, of linguistic and ethnic complexity, of political and economic change, of the tensions between the traditional and the modern. His modernity is not only European industrial modernity. It is the experience of a society in negotiation with colonial inheritance, postcolonial nationalism, regional identity, social inequality and the influence of international ideas.(Barua).

This is an important distinction for the comparative understanding of the two poets. Eliot writes of the fall of a civilization that had once thought itself culturally superior. Barua writes about a society trying to define itself in a time of historical pressure and cultural transition. Eliot's crisis is largely the exhaustion of Western civilization. Barua's crisis is concerned with the difficulty of preserving cultural identity in the face of new political and social realities.

V. The Modern Individual and Alienation

Both writers are preoccupied with the alienation. Eliot's alienation is psychological, social, cultural, and spiritual. Prufrock's alienation is expressed through his failure to fully participate in social life. He observes the world around him but is unable to act decisively within it. Consciousness, in his hesitation, becomes a prison. The self is split between desire and fear, imagination and reality, aspiration and defeat.

And so are the characters in *The Waste Land*. They communicate, but seldom do they get close. Sexual relations become mechanical. Memory becomes unstable. Public life appears empty. The voices in the poem appear to be those of different people and periods in history, but their situation is connected by spiritual exhaustion. Alienation is thus both individual and collective. (Eliot).

Ajit Barua's treatment of alienation has links with this modernist tradition but it is informed by the Assamese social reality. His poetic individuals are frequently in a world where inherited values no longer provide complete guidance. He is caught between memory and the present, between rural and urban, between tradition and modernity, between private feeling and public crisis. Barua's speakers are not cut off from society; they feel isolated in a society undergoing rapid transformation. (Barua)

Eliot often constructs alienation with lifeless urban imagery: fog, deserted streets, crowds, dilapidated buildings, parched landscapes, mechanical repetition of activity. Barua also employs images of social decay and psychological distance, but his imagery may be more related to regional landscape and cultural memory. The Assamese environment is more than just a setting; it becomes a source of identity, a measure of what modernity threatens to erase. (Eliot).

The distinction may be stated thus: Eliot's isolated individual seeks a spiritual order after the breakdown of European cultural unity; Barua's individual negotiates the fragmentation of a changing regional and national society. Both poets describe the loneliness of modern consciousness, but their alienation has different historical roots.

VI. Urban Experience and Social Reality

The city of modernity is a key place in Eliot's poetry. The city is not a mere geographical place but a symbol of a spiritual, emotional condition. The drawing rooms, streets, hotels, social occasions of "Prufrock" create an atmosphere of artificiality. In *The Waste Land*, for instance, London is associated with the crowd, routine, exhaustion and the deadening effect of modern civilization. There are thousands of people in the city but real human contact is rare.

Repetition and mechanical movement characterize Eliot's urban world. People go to work, say the usual things, look for physical relationships, walk down the street with no real sense of purpose. The city's outward activity hides an inner emptiness. This tension between motion and paralysis is one of the great paradoxes of Eliot's modernism.

Ajit Barua's poetry also responds to the changing social and urban life. His poetic world incorporates the pressures of modern institutions, political authority, economic inequality, bureaucratic routine and the weakening of intimate community. The city can be a symbol of opportunity but it can also breed anonymity and disconnection. The individual is swallowed by a crowd, not necessarily to find belonging. But Barua's city experience is not that of Eliot. Eliot's city is a product of the metropolitan culture of early twentieth-century Europe. Barua's city is tied to Indian and Assamese modernization, where colonial institutions, local traditions, rural migration, class differentiations, and regional politics come together. His poetry therefore depicts modernity in a layered and uneven manner. Traditional and modern forms do not just replace each other but coexist, often in conflict. (Barua)

Barua's social concern also keeps his poetry from being purely private or abstract. His modernist technique is used to reveal social contradictions. Indirect expression and fragmented images may be more effective than direct political statement in exposing the disorder of public life. In this regard, Barua extends Eliot's method by giving it a more explicitly regional and socially responsive character.

VII. Fragmentation and Poetic Technique

The most formal bond between Eliot and Ajit Barua is in their use of modernist technique. Eliot's poetry often uses fragmentation, abrupt shifts, multiple voices, changing points of view, literary allusions, symbolic imagery, and a mixture of elevated and colloquial diction. The poem is not always a smooth lyrical speech. It's a space where different cultural and psychological stuff comes into conflict. Eliot's fragmentation is not due to artistic sloppiness. It is the structure of modern experience. The modern man receives impressions from many sources, but these impressions do not by themselves produce a complete view of the world. Eliot gives himself the task of imposing an artistic order on disorder. His poems are hard because they echo the difficulty of consciousness itself.

Ajit Barua's poetry also is not conventional in its romantic expression. Instead of the transparent, continuous presentation of emotion he often uses suggestion, compression, irony, symbolic association, and intellectual control. His poems may require the reader to make connections between disparate images, to find relationships between them. This technique adds density and discourages the poem from being boiled down to one clear meaning.

Eliot's theory of poetic impersonality is pertinent here. Poetry, Eliot says, is not the expression of a personal emotion. The poet makes art out of his own experience. Ajit Barua is also one to eschew sentimental self-expression. Even when his poetry begins with personal or emotional experience, however, that experience is tied to social history, collective anxiety, or cultural memory. But Eliot's influence on Barua should not be viewed as imitation. The European intellectual tradition, classical literature, Christianity and the experience of the First World War all helped to shape Eliot's use of fragmentation. Barua employs similar techniques for Assamese language and cultural material. His fragmentation may be a reflection of the divided experience of postcolonial society, regional uncertainty, political conflict and the pressure of cultural transformation. (Eliot).

VIII. Myth, Allusion and Tradition

Myth is a device of organization of fragmented modern experience, as Eliot uses it. The Waste Land fuses ancient fertility myths, Christian symbols, Buddhist references, echoes of Shakespeare, Dantean images, and popular culture. Myth provides an underlying structure for the chaos of modern life. It allows Eliot to connect the present with the past and to suggest that the modern crisis has historical and spiritual dimensions.

Eliot's use of tradition is not a showy ornament of scholarship. It creates a dialog between different times. Older narratives are reinterpreted in the light of modern experience, and the modern world is understood in the light of older narratives. The poem can therefore transcend individual biography and become a meditation on civilization.

Ajit Barua too works in relation to tradition but his relation to tradition is more directly linked to the Assamese cultural memory. The local landscape, social practices, historical experience, religious traditions, literary heritage and Assamese folklore offer materials thru which modern life can be interpreted. His poetry does not regard tradition as a dead museum object. Here tradition is a living but contested resource.

The difference between the two poets is especially evident in the character of their allusions. Eliot's allusions often cross European and Asian civilizations, creating a large cultural map. Such allusions would generally be more immediately linked with Assamese and Indian contexts, even when they draw from international modernism. His poetic world is an example of the translation of the world modernist forms into the regional cultural consciousness. For Eliot, myth presents the possibility of regaining order. Tradition, for Barua, could be both a source of identity and an object of questioning. He appreciates the importance of inherited culture, but does not think that tradition can automatically offer answers to modern problems. His poetry is therefore dialectical: it looks back to its cultural resources and forward to a new social and intellectual reality.

IX. Environment & Nature

The position of nature is important but different in the poetry of Eliot and Barua. Eliot's landscapes are often symbolic and psychologically intense. In *The Waste Land*, the dry land, dead tree, sterile rock, and polluted river all express spiritual barrenness. Human civilization has become disconnected from moral and spiritual vitality and, by so doing, Nature has lost its regenerative power. (Eliot)

In *Four Quartets*, however, Eliot adopts a more meditative treatment of nature. Gardens, rivers, seasons, stillness offer a place for reflection on time, consciousness, history and divine reality. Nature is not simply decorative, it becomes part of a metaphysical quest. (Eliot)

The Assamese environment has shaped Ajit Barua's relationship with nature, in which rivers, rain, vegetation, hills, agricultural life and seasonal change are closely related to cultural identity. His poetry may employ nature as a symbol of spiritual condition as well as a material reality threatened by social and historical change. Landscape can contain memory, and show the relationship between people and place.

Barua's use of natural imagery may have a stronger sense of community and regional affiliation compared to Eliot's often desolate urban landscape. But nature with both poets is never merely picturesque. It is a meditation on the state of civilization and on the possibility or impossibility of renewal. In both cases, nature is treated as something more than romantic celebration.

X. Religious Angst

Spiritual anxiety is one of the deepest connections between Eliot and Ajit Barua. In Eliot's early poetry the world is one in which the grip of religious certainty is lessened. His speakers know emptiness but do not easily recover faith. Without spiritual meaning, there is paralysis, fear and despair. In his later poetry, especially in *Four Quartets*, Eliot moves toward a Christian conception of time, suffering, discipline, and revelation.

The shift from fragmentation to spiritual order is key to Eliot's poetic career. His later work does not cancel out the modern crisis, but seeks to understand it. We experience time as loss and repetition, but time can also be a field of spiritual discovery. Silence, stillness, humility are offered as necessary conditions for insight. Ajit Barua's poetry also reflects anxiety about the loss of certainty but his spiritual position is less easily fitted into a single religious framework. He is known for poetry of doubt, irony, cultural questioning, and the difficulty of finding stable meaning in modern society. Memory, nature, ethical responsibility, human suffering, and the tenacity of cultural tradition are the means of spirituality.

Therefore, Barua's modernism is not a shift from chaos to a fixed theological order. It may be open-ended. Much of his poetic power is the result of unresolved tension. The poet offers no final solution to the problems of history and society. He creates a space where doubt, memory, protest and cultural reflection can coexist, rather.

XI. Language and Word Usage

Eliot's language is notable for its range. He combines the everyday and the literary quotation, the formal and the song, the dramatic and the meditative. This blend mirrors the multiplicity of contemporary experience. A reference to Sanskrit scripture or medieval poetry can sit comfortably alongside a public conversation. It's disorienting and illuminating all at once.

Ajit Barua too creates a modern poetic language, departing from the usual romantic sweetness. His diction is perhaps terse, ironic, intellectual, imagistic. The language doesn't always immediately explain itself. Instead it opens itself to interpretive participation. This density is a reason for the importance of his poetry in the evolution of modern Assamese poetic expression. But the linguistic difference is significant. Eliot could draw on English as a world literary language with access to many historical registers and European traditions. Barua writes in Assamese, a language that has its own literary history, regional varieties, oral traditions and cultural associations. His modernist achievement is partly in demonstrating that the Assamese language can express complex intellectual, psychological and international concerns without losing its regional character. (Barua).

The comparative study is also affected by translation. The availability of Eliot's texts in abundance may lead to the easier discussion of his technical effects such as sound patterns, rhythm, quotation, and multi-lingual passages. Barua's poetry demands an awareness of the cultural references of Assamese and the musical qualities of the original language. Thus, a full comparison should include the Assamese originals where possible.

XII. Tradition & Modernity

In his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Eliot claims that the individual poet must be evaluated in relation to the literary tradition. The original poet does not completely sever himself from the past. Rather, a new work changes the existing order of literature. This principle can be applied to Ajit Barua usefully.

Barua’s poetic modernity is developed thru contact with international literary movements, especially European modernism, but he does not abandon the Assamese literary inheritance. He combines modernistic technique with local history, regional language, social experience and cultural memory. His poetry shows that modernism isn't one imported style. It can be shaped by various historical contexts.

Eliot’s own relationship to tradition was complex. He rejected the notion of poetry as mere spontaneous personal emotion, but also redefined tradition thru radical formal innovation. Barua also calls upon tradition not to create conservative poetry but to probe the functioning of inherited values in the modern world.(Friedman).

The two poets therefore share a belief that poetry must be historically engaged. Their work is unlike the purely decorative or sentimental verse in that it considers poetic form a mode of thought. Both poets force the reader to confront the connection between past and present, individual and society, language and culture.

XIII. Key Similarities

The principal similarities between Ajit Barua and T. S. Eliot can be summed up as follows:

- Both use tradition to understand modern life.
- Both poets are responding to the crisis of modern civilization.
- Both display alienation, psychological uncertainty and social fragmentation.
- Both of them shy away from direct romantic expression.
- Both use symbolism, irony, allusion and indirect suggestion.
- Both link personal experience to historical and cultural processes.
- For both, poetic form becomes an instrument of intellectual exploration.
- Both are about modern people who find it hard to have meaning.
- Both employ images of decay, dislocation and spiritual emptiness.
- Both combine elements of lyric and drama and reflection and narrative.

XIV. Key Differences:

But these similarities not with standing important differences remain:

- Eliot’s poetry is rooted in the crisis of Western civilization, and Barua’s poetry is rooted in Assamese and Indian modernity.
- Eliot's later poetry tends toward a recognizable Christian spiritual order. Barua's poetry often keeps a more open and culturally plural uncertainty.
- While Eliot heavily draws on an international canon, Barua’s cultural references are more tied to Assamese and Indian experience.

- Eliot's city as a symbol of European spiritual exhaustion and Barua's modern social world as a postcolonial transition and regional identity.
- Eliot's mythic method aims at structural unity amidst fragmentation; Barua employs tradition as a vehicle of cultural continuity and critical scrutiny.
- The poetry of Barua gives more importance to the social and historical realities of Assam in particular.
- Metaphysical questions are more often foregrounded in Eliot's modernism than in Barua's which combines philosophical reflection with social and cultural concern.

XV. Conclusion

The comparison of Ajit Barua and T. S. Eliot shows the strong connection of global modernism with local literary expression. Both poets recognize that modern life is discontinuous, anxious, lonely, and that inherited certainties are undermined. Both develop poetic strategies adequate to the representation of this condition. Fragmentation, irony, allusion, symbolic imagery, multiple voices, and intellectual density are important features of their poetry. The cultural and spiritual crisis of early twentieth-century Europe influences Eliot's poetry. His poems reveal a civilization struggling to understand the effects of war, urbanization, secularization and the collapse of traditional authority. His later poetry seeks to find spiritual discipline and metaphysical order in this crisis.

Ajit Barua's poetry exemplifies Eliot's modernist concern, but it is transfigured thru the lens of Assamese cultural and historical experience. His poetry is not just derivative. Eliot's is an important technical and intellectual influence but Barua adapts the modernism to express the complex nature of Assam and India. His poetry unites the social reality with the regional identity, the historical consciousness, the cultural memory and the psychological tensions of modern life.

The most productive way to think about Barua's relationship with Eliot is thru the notion of creative adaptation. Barua shares some Eliotian modernist concerns—fragmentation, indirection, symbolism, impersonality, allusion—but in a new way. The result is a poetic modernism that is at once international and regional. It argues that European modernist poetry is not the property of Europe alone. It can be translated into other languages and cultural situations and still retain its power to interrogate the present.

Therefore, the relation between Ajit Barua and T. S. Eliot is of dialog and not mere imitation. Eliot is instrumental in creating a modernist vocabulary of cultural crisis, while Barua extends that vocabulary to Assamese literature. Their poetry suggests that the modern condition can be shared across cultures but is always lived in specific histories, languages, landscapes, and forms of collective memory.

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