

The Creative Launcher

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A Critical Reading of Nabakanta Barua's "Measurements"

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Abstract

'Measurements' is a poem written by an Assamese poet, Nabakanta Barua. He belongs to the new generation of poets in Assamese Literature. He writes in the modernist tradition of Hopkins (using sprung rhythm), W. B. Yeats (conflict between the romantic and the modern) and T. S. Eliot (material and spiritual hollowness). He received the Sahitya Akademi Award for Assamese Literature in 1975. The poem has a good deal of influence of T. S. Eliot. It reminds the beginning of 'Prufrock' and depicts the purposelessness, hollowness and faithlessness of modern existence. It bears the influence of the European decadent culture which reveals the inner crisis of the human soul through doubts, apprehensions, boredom and frustration. In this poem Nabakanta Barua talks about city life in which man has to go through an endless process of 'measurements' resulting into nothingness. The poem seems to begin with talking about the stitching of clothing in a materialistic sense but, in its deeper meanings, it gives philosophical and spiritual perspectives. Different kinds of metaphors have been used to clarify the situations of nothingness and barrenness.

Keywords- Measurements, Spirituality, Materialism, Modernity, Frustration

Nabakanta Barua is known for the delination of culture, modernity, human values, insensitivity of the modern people through his poetry. He brings things entailed with social, emotional and philosophical ideas. His another poem, especially, *He Anarya He Mahanagar*, shows a conflict between his sensitive soul and a disturbing atmosphere of confused values. The concurrent themes in his poems are a juxtaposition between the images of love (life) and death, of beauty and banality, and of hope and anxiety. His poems also express a sense of

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estrangement from one's own self. They express a kind of guilt in the author for being ungrateful to the mother earth for all her kindness. It leads to the emergence of the conflict between the beauty of the countryside (pure nature) and rapidly modernizing the growth of cities. Mahendra Bora writes, "Everywhere there is a disturbing atmosphere of confused values. Everything is invested with contradictory impulses. ... the city life is no life, but is a life in death" ('Nabakanta Barua and His Poetry', 23).

He brought modernity in Assamese poetry by depicting a modern society in which he was brought up and schooled. He lived that modern society himself. He depicts sufferings and injustice of his own society. Most of his poems mark a transition from the romantic Assamese poetry (depicting nature and the beauty of the countryside with some philosophical meanings, for example, the poems of Rabindranath Tagore in Bangla) to the modernist tradition that was grounded in the current reality of that time: the city of Calcutta, its splendour and squalor against the backdrop of wars, revolutions, partition, hope, suffering, dreams and death of dreams. He was the pioneer among those who tried to take Assamese poetry far away from the influence Bangla poetry (especially of Rabibdranath Tagore).

The poem, "Measurements" presents a situation which may be assessed in medical terms. It presents situational imagery and tries to involve readers with its action. The poet has stressed the idea of postponement of so many actions in our life in several ways. The poem puts a kind of great enquiry before us why we always try to put things aside and do not show our interest in the situations and actions of the present. On the one hand the poem seems to be exploring the incompleteness of the act of the stitching a piece of cloth, on the other hand it also seems to trying to satirise symbolically the state government system that has gone corrupt and almost all functions of the system are deferred endlessly.

Critical Analysis

The poem seems to begin with the stitching of clothing by a tailor in his shop. The narrator of the poem proposes to visit the tailor's shop to give measurements so that the tailor could stitch clothe that fits him/her. The identity of the narrator is not disclosed and the poet uses the first person plural pronoun 'We' to address the narrator. The poem begins with the measurement of a person by a tailor and turns into a deeper rendering of the inner crisis of the

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human soul. It takes a philosophical turn as the poem progresses into further stanzas. In these verses, the poet gives the measurement of the complete human body as if the clothing is being stitched not only for the outer-body (anatomical structure) but also inner structures (physiology) of human beings.

It is afternoon now.

Let's go to the tailor's; to get measured.

Measurements of neck chest hands and arms

Measurements of the palm and the heart

We shall give measurements of the entrails

And the kidney and the liver,

Give measurements of hormones and affections (1-8)

Through these lines, Nabakanta Barua evokes the sense of chaos when one beggings for one good work that same works starts stretching out beyond the imagined limits of the doer. The tailor in the poem seems to be the representative of the modern man who is lost aimlessly in the work that he began. It shows how hollow the competence of modern man seems to be that it falters and deviates from the main focus.

The tailor also seems to assuming the representation of the government system that is very exploitative, corrupt and rotten. Metaphorically, the 'measurements' given by the narrator to the tailor link them to the measurements (ways or schemes) of through which the government officials mess with the matter in order to delay the work.

The poem takes a metaphorical turn, at the same time, it reminds the reader that what it began with (the stitching of clothing) is no longer a matter of concern as there are many other things to be concerned with. It shows that what one begins with never finishes and another new task is yet to be done or any other tasks which started earlier also need to be dealt with, and, therefore, people are caught into an endless series of work (giving 'measurements'). Further, the poem shows the helplessness of human beings that they can 'only give only measurements'. They seem to be only waiters and watchers as T S Eliot writes in *The Family Reunion* when Agatha says to Mary, 'You and I, Mary, are only watchers and waiters: not the easiest role' (49). Life has become so mechanical that it has made human life a complete

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failure in almost every sense. It also reminds us of Matthew Arnold's 'Scholar Gipsy' in which he mentions how human life is divided into 'thousands schemes of wit'.

Let us give measurements of life,
Of this that and several things.
Give only the measurements.
We shall think of the stitching later on.
For the time being let's just give the measurements
We can only give measurements. (9-15)

The poem discusses different kinds of complexities of human life in which man seems to be very helpless again and again. People commit suicide as they do not find any way out of their problems and miseries. People have to measure (take serious considerations of) every activity and actions that they perform. Even the letters of one's speeches are to be measured. This seems too much of the mechanical way of living that Prufrock also does the same when he measures his activities in a restaurant: 'Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons, / I have measured out my life with coffee spoons' (4). Perhaps everything is just a process or matter of measurements for the narrator.

We can only take reckonings
We shall record that suicides have
Swelled considerably.
We shall give count of the number
Of letters in a speech.
Give count of the Christians in Arabia.
Just give measurements.(16-22)

It seems to be depicting the aimlessness and hollowness of human existence in which man does not have any control over things happening around him. His destiny is pre-determined. Everything is already set to happen and man cannot change it therefore he delays or postpones taking any determined action against the stagnation, wariness and problems of his life.

We shall think of the stitching later on.

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Merely think. (23-24)

The author tries to show that all efforts made by us are futile and facts are bound to change their meanings and contexts after a certain period of time. The verses also express the relativity of 'truth' and suggest that truth is not timeless. All human efforts are caught in an endless process and never reach their completion; truth and fact also lose their meaning and relevance in modern times. In these lines, the poem moves beyond the limits of modernity of the European traditions in the twentieth century and links all human activities to deconstructive semiotic conditions in which the signified is deferred into an endless series of signifiers. The poem shows that all measurements of life are just an endless process and there is no real measurement as such and there is not any final cloth that is better stitched to fit us. Everything is just a process: a process without an end and without any meaning. Therefore, the poet ends the poem with a rhetorical question: 'When will someone stitch the garment to fit man?'

Someone after us will measure anew

Saying that our measurements have gone awry.

Fresh new measurements they'll take.

Just take measurements.

When will someone stitch the garment to fit man? (25-29)

This rhetorical question perhaps refers to pessimist attitude to life and questions many issues like helplessness, procrastination, the futility of human efforts, obscurity, mystery and illusion. It perhaps emphasizes on two issues: 'when' and 'someone'. It asks 'when' the time will come when that clothing is going to be stitched which fits man, and who is 'someone' whose identity is still not clear: it is certainly not the tailor. It perhaps further seems to say that man grows and man changes. His perceptions and observations change with the changing of time. Modern life is changing fast and this change brings boredom, incompleteness and frustration that leads to complete failure. Man is helpless and impatient and he does not fit in all circumstances and stages of life, therefore, all measurements are temporary. Man can do nothing but 'think' and move on.

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