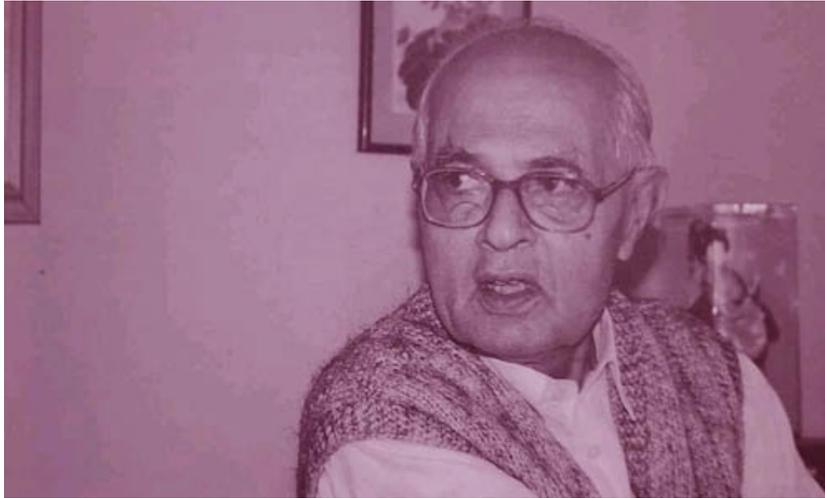


Prose

## Poetry of Nilmani Phookan

By Dr. M. Kamaluddin Ahmed



Nilmani Phookan (b.1933) occupies a niche similar to those of Jayanta Mahapatra, Sitakant Mahapatra, Keki N. Daruwala and Sankha Ghosh in the modernist Indian poetry. For more than five decades Nilmani Phookan has dominated modernist Assamese poetry. His poetry is marked by symbolism, imagism, his association with painting, and the opening of new possibilities of language in a broad perspective. It is to be noted that poet Nilmani Phookan was not directly influenced by the imagist movement, but he drew his images from the store of the unconscious mind. His dynamic images remind F R Leavis's remark that the reader's response is called for movement and image at the same time. In Phookan's poetry, the speaker's attitude has been expressed through images only. A horrific scene of the killing field of humanity is expressed in a very precise manner:

Wearing moth-eaten Chapkan of Singkhap  
The night was getting longer  
I became excited ("I have forgotten many things and keep forgetting many more")  
(My translation)

In some cases, symbols merge with images or vice-versa in Nilmani Phookan's poetry. For example, 'Call of the herd of sea-ducks' – the auditory image – symbolizes a kind of beginning of a new life even in the midst of massacre. For Phookan, image is the only vehicle of thought; he thinks in and realises with imagery. The use of symbolism has added a new dimension to his poetry, in the poem "Buranji" (History) a special journey has been described. We encounter various themes in the symbolic poetry of Nilmani Phookan: an expedition of a visionary artist in "Buranji" (History); loneliness and death in the poem "Brahmaputrat Suryyasto" (Sunset in the Brahmaputra). Like Lorca, Nilmani Phookan has adopted 'horse' to symbolise the continuity of life. The sadness in Phookan's poetry is akin to that of the German poet Paul Celan (1920–70)

and Japanese poetry. Like Paul Celan, Phookan has given a metaphorical expression in a poem with poignancy to a heart-breaking incident of his own life. Phookan's tragic vision arises out of some emotions. However, insights and wisdom can also provide incentive in forming such a vision. The poet is optimistic about drinking the sap of life out of sadness. Nilmani Phookan's two books titled Lok Kalpa Dristi (1987) and Rup Barna Bak (1988) bear the evidence of his relationship with craft and painting. His deep appreciation of painting has enriched his poetry to a great extent. Garcia Lorca deeply realized the significance of colour, and colour had also a role to play in terms of texture of his poems. For instance, the first two lines of the poem "Sleepwalking Ballad" give an impression of a certain colour in reader's mind:

Green, how love you green  
A green wind. Green branches.

The poem "Hothat sei artanad ahi" (Suddenly that scream coming) focuses on red colour; the main concern of the poem "Ei etai matro sobdo seujiya" (This lone word — Green) is greenery that comes and goes before the reader's eye; in the poem "Kin kin henguliyar majot" (In the drizzly glow) yellowish colour enriches in term of theme. The voice of the bird invites the possibilities of life. What Paul Celan called self-devised distance or a strangeness makes Nilmani Phookan's poetry obscure, possibly the innovative use of language helped in the defamiliarization process.

The language of poems based on silence namely "Dhonwar somoy" (When smoke rises), "Eta nil upalabdhi" (A feeling of Blues) and "Artoswar" (Scream) keep distance from the colloquialism. In "Dhowar somoy" the silence is eloquent in short lines. The poems "Eta nil upalabdhi" and "Artoswar" reverberate the deafening silence of loneliness. Maurice Blanchot can be quoted in this context: "The language of the unreal, the fictive language which delivers as to fiction, comes from silence to return to silence."

There is ample scope of thinking fictive meaning for the dramatic quality of the word Phookan has applied. Colloquialism is used in a straight way in the poems of Nrityarota Prithivi (The Dancing Earth). In some poems we come across a kind of dramatic expression which is rare in Phookan's early poetry, of course in the day-to-day language

His language of the latest poetry collection Alop Agote ami ki kotha pati Achhilo (What we were talking about in a minute ago) is marked by rare density. The poet is seen as a keen observer of the universe, time and his surroundings. The poet has flashed light which is beyond time and space in the warm feelings of the human being. He has searched it within his self. The images of the moon, stars and sun have come up in these poems with another dimension. The poet observes various incidents where humanity is humiliated, and he sketches it with harshness and tenderness both.

A truly iconic figure in the modernist Assamese poetry, Nilmani Phookan will remain a beacon of poetic commitment for the younger generation of Assamese poets.

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