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Bog Body, Violence and Silence in Seamus Heaney's "Punishment"

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Abstract: Bog is a symbol of national consciousness and predicament in Irish poetry. The Northern bog, for Seamus Heaney, is a 'placeless place' that has endless layers and sublayers of archival memory of lost cultures. He finds in the bog both 'political turbulence and spiritual succour'. The bog bodies provide a psychic impetus to Heaney. A primordial image stirs him to voice collective unconscious, unearth rituals, sacrifices, brutal killings and awakens his consciousness. Heaney puts forth the themes of atavism, voyeurism, genetic memory, motherland, sense of place and justice in 'Punishment'. The Paper expands upon Heaney's invocation of a bog body symbolic of a diminished nation-state and exploitation of intellect and craft to discuss 'sense of community' and 'sense of self'. It explores deposits of history of sacrifice, guilt and self-annihilation in the Irish context. The Paper engages with the moral dubiety and artistic mediation of Heaney quarrying for identity and enunciating lessons for evolution of thoughts and mind through social criticism.

Keywords: Bog, Troubles, Culture, Art, Consciousness, Voyeurism, Violence, Adultery, Punishment.

Seamus Heaney (1939-2013), a poet of the twentieth century, was a native of Northern Ireland. Heaney's writings emerge from his surroundings and experiences. "His Ireland is a merely nationalist zone in which political violence is subsumed into the glamorous realms of art" (Kiberd 30). He won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1995. The anthologies penned by Heaney present a coherent vision of Ireland (past and present). He created volumes of poetry out of his local and native background. Heaney was a Catholic in a Protestant Northern Ireland who served his community by preserving in literature her customs and traditions. He articulated his childhood experiences in Belfast to reveal insights to the modern world. Heaney reflected upon the violent political struggles that plagued Northern Ireland. The phase of Irish troubles, an ethno-nationalist conflict in Northern Ireland, was the historical framework used by Heaney to interpret civilized outrages of the country. This conflict led to violence in Ireland, England and



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the Europe. The nationalists punished people who sympathised with the Britishers. The Protestants or Loyalists wanted Ireland to remain within United Kingdom, but Catholics or Irish Republicans wanted to separate Northern Ireland from United Kingdom. Heaney resisted the dogmas of his times through his poetry. The interweaving of myth, culture, history and religion gave a complex form to Heaney's composition. "Punishment" is from Seamus Heaney's anthology titled *North*.

Seamus Heaney encapsulates the Irish Political scene of 1960s in "Punishment". The Troubles started in 1960s and ended with Good Friday Agreement in 1998 in Belfast. According to Heaney, Punishment is about standing by as the IRA (Irish Republican Army) tar and feather the young women in Ulster. During the violence of the Troubles in Ulster Irish women who dated with British soldiers were shaved, tarred, feathered and exposed to public humiliation. The title refers to the punishment inflicted by Republican extremists on those betraying the Irish cause. The poem is also about standing by as the British torture people in barracks and interrogation centres in Belfast. Punishment is one of the Bog Poems written by Heaney in response to the discovery of several bog bodies. These bodies date back to the 1500s and AD 1-200. Punishment is based on an actual archaeological discovery, the preserved mummified body of Windeby Girl, in the year 1952. Archaeologists believe that the bog bodies suffered violent death and were victims of ritual or judicial executions. Further research and DNA analysis reveal that Bog body, Windeby girl was a boy (Park 1, 5-6).

An article titled "The Curious case of Bog Bodies" elaborates upon the forensic analysis of corpses, bog bodies and peat bogs of northern Europe. These bog bodies of eighteenth century and 8000 BC comprise men, women, adults, children, Kings, Queens and commoners who were violently dispatched and deliberately placed in bogs. Experts believe that bogs were mass graves for outcasts, religious sacrifices, rebels, traitors and adulterous wives. Therefore, bogs are curious tombs harbouring homicide victims – honoured and disgraced. The famous archaeologist, Peter V. Glob, in his book *The Bog People* proposes that many bodies were brutally sacrificed in ritual killings to appease the Goddess of fertility. Many experts speculate that bogs for the people of Iron Age were gateways to the spiritual world. The excavators



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digging peat areas in ancient Irish territories exhumed bodies of failed King, contender to the throne or Royal hostage sacrificed to goddess of fertility. The decapitated and mutilated body organs were common to bog bodies along tribal boundaries. According to Irish mythology, combination of different killing methods like hanging, strangulation, poisoning, lacerating by axe or swords were used for ritual sacrifices. Hence, bogs become source of cultural identity for Irish people. Bogs are silent observers of sins and crimes committed by human beings. Bogs also divulge hidden secrets of mysterious deaths and tales of human atrocity. Bog bodies, according to Heaney, reveal continuity of violence in human history through ages (French 2-3, 5).

“Tollund Man”, “Grauballe Man” and “Yde Girl” are poems by Heaney that expand upon ritual hanging, ceremonial execution and strangulation of adulteress/infidels prevalent in pre-historic times(French 3-9). In the poem “Punishment”, Heaney sees the fourteen year old Windeby girl as a ‘sister’ to the girls who were shaven, blindfolded, tarred, feathered and tied to public railings for associating with English soldiers in Republican revenge attacks of his times. This recognition evokes empathy and guilt in the poet. Heaney begins the poem in third person with narration of violent act of torture, punishment and execution of Windeby girl. He describes her body which has been stripped off, entangled and blindfolded. Heaney addresses this girl as “little adulteress” and empathizes with her in the sixth stanza of the poem. He describes her flaxen hair and beautiful hair before the punishment. Heaney uses the first person in the third part of the poem to contemplate on the contemporary context – tarring and feathering of Catholic girls during The Troubles. The poem shifts from Iron Age to contemporary Ireland due to spatial - temporal variations and different perspectives (Park, 2-3). These shifts focus on the predicament of Ireland and the dilemma of the poet who is unable to easily lodge his feelings in rational humanism or atavistic piety. Heaney makes connections to the Iron Age ritual sacrifices, instances of contemporary political retribution, voyeurism, man’s connivance to civilize outrage and tribal intimate revenge using similes, metaphors, alliteration and allusion.

Heaney begins with the description of the girl punished for adultery, a transgression to the tribal code. The punishment inflicted on her is brutal and ritualistic in accordance with indigenous territorial numen. Such instances of endemic violence or secrets behind mysterious



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deaths and inhuman punishment find no mention in news/media (Mikanowski, 2-4). Heaney narrates the plight of Catholic girls who fraternized with British soldiers. He senses the tug/sudden pull of strap around Windeby girl's neck as she is pulled to the side of execution. He also feels the breeze blowing on her naked body. The female victims accused or punished for adultery were stripped and chained before drowning into the bogs. As the wind blows the body parts of the fossilized victim appear like decorative beads. The bogs preserve "not just bodies but consciousness, every layer telling its own history by means of geography" (Kiberd, 33). Heaney observes the fragile body framework of the girl shaking with fear, horror and cold as she is moved to the bog area.

Heaney, in the third stanza, sees the girl drowned in the bog and her body held in place by "weighing stone, floating rods and boughs." Heavy stone tied to the body of the girl indicates that this arrangement left little scope for the drowned body to surface. Archaeologists believe that she was drowned in as little as fifteen inches of water. Heaney compares her body to a barked sapling to emphasize on her youthfulness (hardened, destroyed over time). When the body of this young girl is dug up, her fragile bones are seen to be hardened with the passage of time. The bog environment has a mummifying effect on the body. It has preserved the body and the poet describes her skull containing the brain. He refers to her shaven, tarred and feathered skull that looks like a stubble black corn. The soiled bandage on her eyes discloses that the blindfold prevented the victim from seeing anything before her punishment. The noose around her neck tells the tale of her adulterous relation with the British soldier. This noose preserves the memories of love in a strange manner. It implies a wedding ring, a marriage trap and relationship intolerable to the nationalists. The complex imagery in this stanza evokes pathos for the girl. Heaney refers to the girl as little adulterous and describes her appearance before the punishment. He imagines her to be beautiful, undernourished girl with silken hair and calls her a scapegoat, a symbolic bearer of sins of society. She, like the goat sent into wilderness on the day of Atonement, gets punishment for the sins of others (Park, 2-5).

Heaney, as an observer, alludes to ancient history and the political situation in Ireland. The bog body of Windeby girl in punishment becomes a repository of culture and an anguished self-



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analysis. Heaney uses the bog as a metaphor for the perpetual inhumanity, brutality and killing of innocent people throughout history. Bog body is symbol of atrocities and vulnerabilities of past and present. Heaney explores the troubling parallel between sectarian killings in Northern Ireland and the ritual sacrifices to goddess Earth during the Iron Age. This multi-layered poem unravels the truth of the bog bodies, the victims of injustice and voices silenced by violence. Heaney makes use of sensuous imagery to highlight the plight of women (who were adulterous and betrayed the Irish cause). The poem voices concerns regarding atavism and voyeurism of the civil society. Heaney's poetic utterance reveals quiescence (of passivity and silence) at the times of brutal political killings.

The poetic voice continues to engage with the fantasized image of the dead girl. He imagines that she was blonde, thin and beautiful prior to her punishment. There is very little evidence to suggest that the girl was beautiful, but Heaney's imagination overrides the physical evidence. The use of "Tar-Black" indicates the state of her decomposition in the bog and recalls violent history from a more recent period with Republican reprisals in Ireland when women who associated with English soldiers were tarred and feathered for adultery. When Heaney calls her "My poor Scapegoat", he suggests that both the dead girl and her contemporary equivalent have become objects of blame for their respective communities.

After having spoken about the bog body (adulteress), Heaney speaks to the bog body. Heaney, as a custodian of lost culture forgotten history and diminished heritage, reflects on individual and national consciousness. The poet says that he almost loves the bog body but could do nothing to save her. He confesses that he or anyone from the community did not intervene to prevent injustice (as no one had courage to do so). He, therefore, is guilty of silence. Such silence perpetrates violence and is akin to stoning the victim (accused of adultery). Heaney makes a Biblical reference to the New Testament with "stones of silence" in the eighth stanza of the poem. Women were stoned to death for adultery in the past. In the New Testament such a woman is saved by Jesus. "Silence, in the Gospel story, implied that the observers were guilty and, therefore, that the woman was not condemned" (Hufstader 68). On one hand Heaney admits that he simply observed and stood by the victim in silence (69). He is afraid of his sins being



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made public. He calls himself an artful voyeur. Anyone who enjoys seeing others in pain is a voyeur. On the other hand Heaney realizes that he has an artistic duty to perform. In the role of an artist, Heaney voices the suffering of the young girl. Heaney's observation opens the possibility of "an equation between prehistoric sacrifice and modern sectarian ruthlessness" (Haffenden, 97). He is also critical of his role as a passive observer. Heaney confesses his voyeurism and perversity. The poet partakes "duplicity of culture" in sympathising with the victim's plight and repeating his sin of fetishising beaded nipples like a voyeur, whose sin is reflected in his artistic creation (Kiberd, 33). This sin is a greater offence than his connivance in the tribal revenge on a woman who walked out with an 'enemy' soldier. Heaney uses the word 'connive' alongside the phrase 'civilized outrage' to indicate that problems posed by North have solutions neither in the poetic nor in the political (34).

The imagery of violence and death – brain's exposed and darkened combs – follows in the next stanza. He exposes the girl to the readers as he examines the remains of the girl's body. This connects to Heaney's confession of voyeurism. Archaeologists and academics have numbered bones of bog body. This suggests a total erosion of individuality and an indignity in death. Since the bog body is a numbered exhibit in the museum and nobody has voiced the injustice done to her, Heaney chooses her 'numbered bones', 'beauty', plight and his silence as the subject for his poem to do some justice to her. Heaney feels that he is guilty of non-interference in the brutal scene. He 'stood dumb' watching the helplessness of punished girls and women weeping by the railings, who, like her, have been labelled as "betraying sisters". This is a stark portrayal of modern society mired in ancient rituals and tribal ways. In the last stanza, Heaney recalls his own reaction of conniving in "civilized outrage" during The Troubles in Ireland. He would publicly denounce the tarred and feathered women and be an acquiescent onlooker.

Heaney demonstrates double allegiance in the poem to reveal the fact that silent moments become an act of survival. Heaney confesses the guilt of this silence and connivance. He compares the violence of tribal men, safeguards of unwritten law who punish transgressors, to the violence and brutality of Irish Revolutionary Army. He condemns barbaric societies, whether in the Iron Age or the contemporary times in Northern Ireland, and brutalities of nationalists.



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These civilized outrages, Heaney believes, are equivalent to vindictive ways of the tribes. These atavistic tendencies in modern society are responsible for perpetuation of violence. The discovery of an ancient execution and burial site offers Heaney a way both analysing contemporary politics in Ireland and offering a personal meditation on his own feelings of culpability. The bog poem, "Punishment", undertakes to overcome the atavistic savagery of ritual sacrifice "by re-enacting it in a conscious mode"(Hufstader, 71). Heaney identifies himself with Ireland and its past but finds " liberation from tribal past through attainment of consciousness"(61). The punishment of tar-and-feathering for consorting with British soldiers and shaving of head of female victims deprives them of femininity and reveals the brute forces. The unsettling parallels between the tar-and-feathering of women in Northern Ireland (during The Troubles) and bog body of an adulteress punished for violation of sexual allegiance to Irishmen reveal perpetuation of violence. Heaney's identification with tribal justice, objectification of women, voyeurism and silence to violence explain the "banality of evil" (in Hannah Arendt's words). The victim of violence "Windbey Girl" and subject of Punishment evokes self-introspection and elevates individual/cultural consciousness. Poetry, for Heaney, 'is a divination, a restoration of the culture' (18). He defines and interprets the present by connecting it with the past to renew the individual conscience and forge the uncreated conscience of the race.

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