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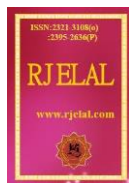
## THE ROLE OF A CRITIC IN THE MAKING OF A POET: THE CASE OF NILMANI PHOOKAN AND HIREN GOHAIN

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### Abstract

The renowned Assamese poet NilmaniPhookan (1933-2023) had received critical attention and appreciation from the eminent Assamese literary critic and social scientist Prof Hiren Gohain (born 1939) since the publication of Phookan's first anthology in 1963. Gohain's criticism played a significant role in the poetic journey of Phookan. The present paper explores this unique literary relationship under the broad perspective of the role of critics in the life of a creative writer.

**Keywords:** poet, critic, NilmaniPhookan, Hiren Gohain, Assamese literature

### Introduction

In the history of literature it has often been observed that critics or editors have played a significant role in the shaping of the life and career of poets or other creative writers. The relationship between a critic and a poet sometimes becomes very crucial in the proper reception or appreciation of a poet. In this regard, the role of Dr Johnson may be considered very significant in regard to William Shakespeare. Although the latter was a very popular playwright during the Elizabethan Period of English literature, there was no comprehensive critical analysis of Shakespeare's plays till the eighteenth century. Hence, Shakespeare was yet to occupy the prominent place in English literature that he occupies now. In the eighteenth century, Dr Johnson brought out a new edition of Shakespeare's plays with a Preface. This Preface was an excellent critical commentary on Shakespeare's plays in general and

it played a great role in the rediscovery of Shakespeare by the English people. On the other hand, critics might spoil and destroy the life and career of a poet which was seen in case of John Keats. The contemporary critics and journals were not sympathetic and encouraging towards the young and emerging talent of Keats and, hence, Keats had to pass through a phase of mental agony due to the harsh criticism that his poetry had provoked. In the twentieth century, the poet and critic Ezra Pound played an important role in the early stage of T S Eliot's poetic career. Eliot's classic poem *The Waste Land* (1922) was originally a very long poem which was drastically edited and abridged by Pound, who was according to Eliot 'the better craftsman' in matter of poetry. It is doubtful whether *The Waste Land* would have aroused the same kind of reception and reaction if it had been published without the critical abridgement done on it by Pound. The relationship between Pound and Eliot is a classic

example of the role that a critic or a peer-poet often plays in the shaping of the creative orientation of a poet or creative writer.

It is under this perspective that the present paper intends to analyse the role of the eminent Assamese literary critic Professor Hiren Gohain (born 1939) in the life and career of the renowned Assamese poet, the recipient of the prestigious BharatiyaJnanpith award, Nilmani Phookan (1933-2022).

### **The Symbiosis between the Poet Nilmani Phookan and the Critic Hiren Gohain**

In 2021, the Assamese poet NilmaniPhukoon became the joint recipients of the prestigious BharatiyaJnanpith Award alongwith the Konkani writer Damodar Mauzo. Phukoon, basically a poet and art critic, is the first poet from Assam winning the Jnanpith award as the earlier two recipients from Assam, Dr Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya and Prof. Indira (MamoniRoysom) Goswami, were basically novelists.

This short piece of writing endeavours to throw some light on the crucial role played by Professor Hiren Gohain, eminent critic and public intellectual, in the poetic career and the achievement of Nilmani Phukoon. The poet Phukoon, in his memoir "*PahoriboNuwarilJee*" (What I Could not Forget), has specifically praised the impeccable role of Hiren Gohain in the growth and development of his poetic self.<sup>1</sup> When Nilmani Phookan's first collection of poems was published in 1963, at that time Hiren Gohain, after doing his Masters in English from Delhi University with a record-breaking top position, had taken up a teaching job at Kirorimal College, Delhi. By then, a few critical articles of Gohain had already been published in magazines and journals which contained the sparkles of originality and insight in them. The poet Nilmani Phukoon and the critic Hiren Gohain had been known to each other from their student days, and so the poet felt enthused to mail a copy of his first anthology to the Delhi address of Hiren Gohain, who surprised the poet by writing a comprehensive review of the anthology that eventually got published in the prestigious

Assamese journal "*Ramdhenu*" in 1963 itself. This article was later anthologized in Gohain's collection of critical essays '*Sahityar Satya*'.<sup>2</sup> Although Phukoon's poetic genius was already recognized by Dr Mahendra Bora, an eminent poet and critic, Dr Gohain's piece was perhaps the first full-fledged critical evaluation of Phukoon's poetry. The impact of this review on the poet has been duly acknowledged by Phukoon in his memoir.

As narrated in the memoir, the poet Phukoon instantly went through this critical review twice, and it produced a profound impact on him. This review proved to be a turning point in the life of Phookan who thereafter took a firm decision to pursue the writing of poetry in real earnest. However, Gohain's review, instead of being eulogistic, focused more on Phukoon's limitations as a poet citing concrete evidences, and warned him that those tendencies might impede his future growth as an important poet of Assam and the world. At the same time, Gohain did also identify some areas of strength in Phukoon's poetry. This incisive and insightful analysis proved to be highly inspirational for Phukoon. This review played a crucial role in changing the orientation of Phukoon's poetry from the tradition of symbolism to a language and style that can touch the common man.

Since then, Hiren Gohain made it a point to make a regular track of the progress and direction of Phukoon's poetry and whenever Phookan's poetry seemed to fall into mediocrity, Gohain promptly came up with sincere criticism. Meanwhile, Gohain had also returned to Assam after obtaining PhD for his illuminating research, on the celebrated English poet John Milton from, Cambridge University and started teaching in the English department of Gauhati University. In 1975, Phukoon's fifth collection of poems was published and it was disappointing for Gohain, the critic. In a strongly-worded review, later included in Gohain's book "*Bishwayaton*",<sup>3</sup> the critic Gohain reprimanded the poet for his laxity in diction and for compromising with his own poetic sincerity and seriousness. Gohain's observation was that Phookan was deviating from the high standard of poetry that he had already set for himself and, therefore, a course

correction was necessary for him. This review played a crucial role again in the life of the poet who always scrupulously followed the views of a critic like Gohain, and thereafter, he wrote some of the best poems of his career which were anthologized in Phukoon's later collections entitled "Kavita" and "Nriyoroita Prithivi". He received the prestigious Sahitya Akademi award for the collection "Kovita" during this phase in the 1980s.

However, the most significant contribution of Hiren Gohain as a critic in the evaluation and assessment of Nilmani Phukoon's poetry came in 1994 when a handsomely printed anthology comprising the very best selected poems of Phukoon edited by Gohain was brought out by a reputed publication house of Assam. This book also contained a long preface written by Hiren Gohain and also a comprehensive interview of the poet taken by Gohain himself. Perhaps no other critic has ever written such a long preface to any single volume of Assamese poetry. In this preface, Gohain made a thorough, comprehensive, elucidative and incisive analysis and interpretation of Phukoon's poetry in the light of Gohain's vast knowledge and profound understanding of world literature. This volume is entitled "*SagortolirShonkgho*" (The Conch-shell beneath the Sea)<sup>4</sup> which is reflective of the vastness and the depth of Phukoon's poetry and its treasure like value. Gohain's preface provided a clue even for an untrained reader to explore the beautiful world concealed in Phookan's poetry. It also helped in establishing Phukoon as the foremost Assamese poet of the last part of the twentieth century.

In addition to this critical and intellectual support, Hiren Gohain's help to Phookan in some other spheres of literary achievements has also found praise in Phookan's memoir. As mentioned by Phookan, in the early 1970s, he had to run from pillar to post for long two years to get a publisher for his fourth collection of poems, and then he discussed the matter with Gohain who spoke to a reputed publisher and convinced him on the merit of the work and thus the volume saw the light of the day. Again, on another occasion, Phookan was passing through a very depressing phase in his life when he was falsely accused of plagiarism. In reality, it was a

deep-rooted conspiracy to malign his poetic reputation. Phookan eventually succeeded in proving his innocence albeit with much difficulty and the whole conspiracy got exposed. Yet, the entire episode had left a scar on the poet's mind and had a demoralizing effect on him. In order to enthuse and motivate the poet again, Hiren Gohain did the translations of a few poems of Phukoon into English and got them published in the then prestigious national magazine "Mainstream". As recorded in his memoir, this had a rejuvenating effect upon the poet.

In this short piece of writing, while highlighting the role of Hiren Gohain as a critic in respect of Nilmani Phukoon's poetry as mentioned by the poet himself in his memoir, there is no wish to undermine the contributions of other critics who have also critically evaluated Phookan's poetry at different times. Professor Bhaben Barua, Harekrishna Deka, late Kabin Phukan, late Hirendranath Dutta, Professor Ranjit Kumar Dev Goswami, Dr Ananda Barmudoi, Professor Bibhash Choudhury, Dr M Kamaluddin Ahmed are some prominent critics among them. The late HomenBorgohain also did something unique in assessing Phookan's greatness as a poet. When Borgohain was the editor of the Assamese magazine "Sutradhar" he brought out a special issue on NilamoniPhukoon's poetry in the year 1990.

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