

Symbols and Imagery in Modern Assamese Poetry

(With reference to selected poems of Hem Barua, Nabakata Barua, and Mahim Bora)

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1. Introduction

Assamese poetry has undergone a profound transformation over the decades, reflecting the rich cultural diversity and historical shifts of the region. From its romantic roots to the innovative expressions of modernity, the journey of Assamese poetry showcases a vibrant interplay of tradition and contemporary influences. The evolution of Assamese literature witnessed a major transformation with the emergence of the Romantic era, marked by the pages of *Jonaki* magazine. This period laid the groundwork for a new wave of innovation in Assamese poetry, especially during the 1940s, when the publication of *Jayanti* magazine introduced progressive themes and a fresh approach to poetic expression. In the post-war era, Assamese poetry began to diverge from its earlier Romantic influences, adopting a more modern sensibility that reflected the complexities of contemporary life.

1.1 Historical Context and Evolution

The Romantic era of Assamese literature was foundational in shaping poetic expression, characterized by emotional depth and cultural reflection. This period celebrated nature, personal experience, and the beauty of the Assamese landscape, which became integral to the works of poets. The transition to modernity began in the 1940s, particularly with the publication of *Jayanti*, which not only promoted progressive themes but also emphasized social justice, political awareness, and a deeper engagement with the human condition. (Sarma, 2002 p.119) This shift allowed poets to explore new forms, experimenting with free verse and incorporating elements from Western literary traditions. The post-war context, marked by a desire for renewal and introspection, further encouraged poets to reflect on identity, belonging, and the changing socio-political landscape of Assam.

1. 2. Influence of Western Literary Movements

The influence of Western literature, particularly the symbolism and modernist movements, significantly shaped the landscape of Assamese poetry. The publication of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* in 1922 served as a catalyst for Assamese poets, encouraging them to explore fragmented narratives and complex imagery. This modern poetry movement gained momentum with the publication of *Jayanti* in November 1943, which became a platform for new voices and ideas. Influenced by French symbolists like Paul Verlaine and Charles Baudelaire, Assamese poets began to incorporate rich symbols and evocative language into their work. The contributions of magazines like *Pachowa* and *Ramdhenu* in the 1950s further enriched the poetic discourse, allowing for a fusion of local themes with global literary techniques. This exchange fostered a new aesthetic sensibility, where poets could articulate their inner experiences while resonating with universal human emotions.

1. 3. Symbols and Imagery in Modern Assamese Poetry

Prominent figures such as Hem Barua, Nabakanta Barua and Mahim Bora emerged as pioneers of this modern poetic movement, each contributing their unique perspectives and styles.



Hem Barua (1915-1977)

Courtesy: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hem_Barua

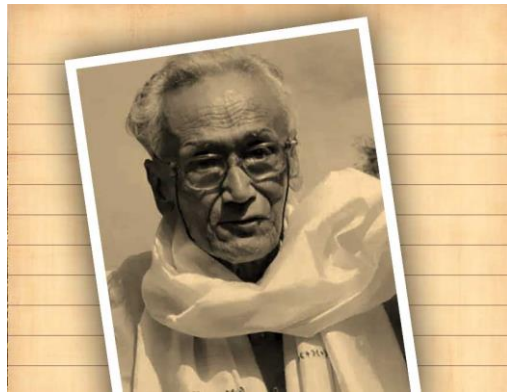
Hem Barua, often regarded as a modern poet, infused Assamese poetry with Western influences, creating a trend that reflected the struggles of everyday life. His works, such as *Balichanda* (1959) and *Mana Mayuri* (1967) showcase a myriad of symbols drawn from Assamese folk life, politics, and personal experiences. His poetry often employs familiar similes and rich imagery to convey complex emotions, illustrating the plight of the common people while drawing on cultural narratives.



Nabakanta Barua (1926-2002)

Courtesy: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nabakanta_Barua

Nabakanta Barua, who followed Hem Baruah, expanded the use of painting as a central motif in his poetry. His collections, including *Eti Duti Egharati Tora* (1958) and *Mor aru Prithibir* (1973), integrate symbols from Assamese national life with European influences. His innovative use of language and imagery, such as the fire of the palash tree symbolizing destruction and strength, underscores his engagement with both local and global contexts. Barua's works resonate with a sense of optimism amidst despair, as seen in his portrayal of children as symbols of innocence and hope.



Mahim Bora (1924-2016)

Courtesy: <https://eastindiastory.com/ronga-jia-poet-mahim-bora/>

Mahim Bora's poetry is marked by a distinctive symbolic representation and visual imagery that reflect the realities of middle-class life. His poems often address societal issues with intelligence and thoughtfulness. For example, in his poem *Moi Bisora Sithikhan* he poignantly captures the struggles of the lower middle class while employing rich imagery to

evoke a sense of place and experience. Bora's use of symbols, such as fish representing the beauty and fragility of life, reflects a deep understanding of existential themes.

This paper explores how symbols and imagery shape the thematic depth and emotional resonance of modern Assamese poetry through the works of Hem Baruah, Nabakanta Barua, and Mahim Bora in great detail.

2.0 Symbols and Imagery in Modern Assamese Poetry:

a) Hem Barua (1915-1977)

Hem Barua is one of the most modern poets in modern Assamese poetry literature. In fact, through Hem Barua, Assamese poetry was nourished by Western poetry and created the trend of modern Assamese poetry. It was through his poetry that the Assamese readers of the West received Ezra Pound, Hume, and T. S. Eliot. Hem Barua's poetry reflects people's struggle for life as well as distrust of the prevailing social order, using rhythm-like vibrating prose, depression, romantic craft, and optimism everywhere, along with symbols and imagery derived from various themes ranging from the folk life of Assam to politics. Hem Barua believed that literature could not be done without politics (Modern Literature, Hem Barua). Hem Barua's two books of poetry, *Balichanda* (1959k) and *Mana Mayuri* (1967), respectively preserve poetry from the fifties to sixties. The use of almost familiar similes can be seen among the symbols of Hem Barua's poetry. In modern Assamese poetry, Hem Barua's work has a plethora of realistic content. However, Hem Barua's poetry does not show an incomprehensible combination of symbols like Eliot. On the contrary, in his poetry, symbols can be seen from Indian poetry-epics, puranas, and upapuranas, bihu geets, fables, low-pitched songs, malita, mantras, etc. An example of a symbol used based on this folklore is:

*Juhalor juir poharat tumi. Mor paranar niphut konat
Tuh juir jui jole. Uh tomar baraf semeka onth.
Mara prithibit tejar arati. Eta tuni ahe.
Duta tuni ahe. Eta dhan niye. Duta dhan niye.
Dhanor damat tejpiyar
Ranchali. Tejpiyar bangsa nashalai kiman din
Baki? Aru kiman din? (Jarar Dinar Sapon, Balichanda)*

In the poem, he wishes to destroy Tejpiya's lineage by seeking the exploitation of the masses. Here the Tuni birds of legend have taken the form of exploiters, and Tejpiya reflects

the true nature of the exploiter. (Barua, 2009 p.88) The favourite symbol of Hem Barooah is the Moon . Like the French poet Mallarmé's widely used his favorite symbol, the Blue Sky, Hem Barua has used the moon in many ways.(Barua, 2009 p.95) That is why Hem Barua mentions in the poem that the moon became 'like a widow with a bow on its head.' The poet refers to the painful moon through this imagery. Hem Barua's poems show that the imagery of 'Moon' appears in a different form. For example, *Haladhia Jon* in *Mamatar Sithi*, *Ghar Auxit Jon* in *Bihur Dinar Gaan*, *Barphat Bagai Phura Mrityumukhi Jon* in *Emuthi Kabita*, the feelings of hope, stagnation, and pain are embodied through the imagery of Moon.

In Hem Barua's poetic vision, women are often a source of inspiration and compassion. One of his poems is *Mamatar Sithi*. The main source of the poem is the poem *The River Marcent's Wife: A Letter*, translated by Ezra Pound from the poem by Li-Po, a Chinese poet. (Bhattacharjee,2002 p.107) In the poem, a widow named 'Mamta' describes the loss of her husband prematurely and the pain in her heart, remembering the memories of her deceased husband after seven years.

Eya mom edal jwalai laiso
Aji bahu dinor murat tomaloi chithi likho buli
Bahiror urunga botah jak aahi momdal kobaishe
Chao khirikikhon jopai dio.
Sat bacharar agor kathabor tomar monot aachene?

In the poem, the poet depicts the burning wax as a symbol of the tragic sound of the tragic life of a widowed woman. Hem Barua was influenced by the imagery used in Ezra Pound's poetry. *Mamataar Sithi* beautifully expresses the use of imagery:

Moi tomalkor gharaloi no koi ahibor dina
Akashar meghar mohanat
Haladhiya jonto naokhon loi
Amak je ringiyai matisil tarar deshaloi

In the poetry, the picture of the foreboding of Mamata's newly formed worldly life is beautifully vivid. The close kinship with public life seems to have led to the use of imagery in his poetry to express feelings more accessibly.

In modern poetry, the meaning of thought can often be derived from the realization of the embodied form of painting. In Hem Barua's poetry, harmony is created more through the mirage of meaning rather than direct meaning. For example:

*Amar pathar ramak jamak
bhadair ag chotalat
dorpati thark barak mako sari sari pare. (Jatrar Xekh Nai)*

Through the poem, he narrates a beautiful view of the green paddy fields of the Assamese month Kati. The ever-growing fields have brought joy to Bhadai's house. Through this joy, the portrayal of Bhadai's wife's state of mind, the success of labor—all of these combine to create the background of rural agricultural life.

b) Nabakanta Barua (1926-2002)

In the later period of Hem Barua, Nabakanta Barua played a decisive role in the direction of Assamese poetry in the sixties with his poetic talent. It is through his poetry that there is a widespread application of painting as a key symptom of contemporary poetry. Among his books of poetry, he has given *Eti Duti Egharati Taora* (1958), *Jati aru Keitaman Sketch* (1960), *Samrat* (1962), *Ravan* (1963), *Mor aru Prithibir* (1973), *Ratnakar* (1983), *Surjyamukhir Angikar* (1998), *Dalangat Tamighora* (1998). The symbols used in Nabakanta Barua's poetry introduce the poet's thinking and intelligence. Among the symbols used in Nabakanta Barua's poetry are those emanating from European poets through Bengali poetry, as well as symbols created from the background of Assam's national life. In this case, with the help of folk songs, myths, proverbs, etc., the subject matter has been diversified. For example:

*Palashar jui numal etiya. sal aru satiyan
Banat manar dinor atit bohagar dhumuhar (Palash, Mor aaru Prithibir)*

Here the fire of Palash is a destructive force, while the sal and satiyan forests are used as symbols of strength. In the poem *Rod*, written in the pattern of Japanese Haiku poetry, the symbol *Mora Saap* is used to depict the solitude of the pathway sleeping in the heat of the scorching sun.

*Patharuwa bat
Mora sapor dore
Beka dighal boga thor.*

In the poetry of Nabakanta Barua, 'Nil nadi' is used as a symbol of stagnation.

*Edin herabo jon jonor hahir sate
Neel nadi samoyor sumat sukabo
tathapito roi jabo
klanti hin ekhoni akash (Mor aaru Prithibir)*

It reflects the optimism of the poet. The light of that hope looks at the ‘endless untiring sky’ with deep confidence and faith. This sky is mentioned by the poet as a symbol of ‘great life.’

In the poetry of Nabakanta Barua, influenced by the French symbolist poet Mallarmé, his favorite symbol ‘Blue Sky’ is widely used. Nabakanta Barua uses his favorite symbol ‘Akash’ in various forms. In his eyes, this sky is free, of greater life, a sign of the infinite. Similar to the use of ‘Cactus’ as a symbol of lifeless and thorny life in European poetry, Nabakanta Barua gradually refers to the economic disaster of the country with the symbol ‘Siju Kait’ in the poem:

*Itihas juri pori rol matho
sukan haror
siju kaitar desh
mora prithibir desh.*

In the poem titled *Tejimala*, the poet has become a symbol of hope amidst the painful civic life of modern civilization. *Tejimala*’s character, described in legend, is a beautiful figure plagued by the tyranny of Mahimak, but Nabakanta Barua has infused a sense of hope hidden in the suffering of modern civilization through *Tejimala*.

*Tumar nished ajio manisho
amar glanir bokar kusum amarei Tejimala.*

(Tejimala, Mor aaru Prithibir)

Nabakanta Barua’s poetry recognizes people in an international context. In an international perspective, for example, children are used as symbols of innocent simplicity, unfathomable joys, etc.

*Khelak shishur dale
Prithibir chotale chotale. (Mor desh: Katana Desh)*

In the poems of Nabakanta Barua, the child’s innocent laugh often gets mixed with various themes of nature. This resonates with the national language of the Assamese nation. The symbolism in Nabakanta Barua’s poetry is profound. The presence of a musical bond can be sensed through the numerous rhythms in the poetry. This has been one of the defining features of Nabakanta Barua’s poetry. Nabakanta Barua’s poetry seems to echo the sounds of T. S. Eliot through the subtlety of creative expression. In the poem titled *Saraniat Saindhya* he has beautifully described the arrival of evening.

*Espora akashor son
Khahi pori roi dubarit,*

Jonakir duta jilmil

Nimat junuka dubharit.

The evening imagery is also visually illuminating. His poetry speaks of peace, serenity, and simplicity. Through the words of Nabakanta Barua, a hopeful consciousness is awakened within the poet's heart.

c) Mahim Bora (1924-2016)

Mahim Bora's poetry is characterized by symbolic depth and visual richness. Critic Bhaven Barua mentions that among modern poets, Mahim Bora stands among a few poets whose works resonate with profound meaning. His poetry expresses a mindset that connects diverse experiences and leads to new insights. The symbol of 'Fish' often appears in Mahim Bora's poetry, representing the fluidity and beauty of life.

Xonali rupali mas, nila benguniya mas

Janmare rangin mas rangin aru

Ajashra mṛityure

Sepa, khoka, pal, dalangat

Ghat-jal, khewalit ghiladhari nair bukut,

-tathapi amar.

The concept of Mas (fish) in his poem comes from the expression 'matsya rupe avatara hoila prathamata' described in Shankaradeva's *Dashavatara*, but in his poetry it symbolizes primitive continuous life and indicates the flow of life of a terrible soul that overwhelms death. (Modern Assamese Poets and Poems, 2017). Mahim Bora's work also mirrors the realities of middle-class life. In his poem *Moi Bisora Sithikhan*, he captures the joys and sorrows of the lower middle class, reflecting societal indifference:

Andhar koṭhat bohi

Manhar bhag loi kare tonatoni

Jivanor paikari dor

Hathatei nami gol bahut tolole

Mahajan deuliyā kari. (Porichoy)

3.0 Discussion and Conclusion

Modern poetry addresses deeply personal and confidential issues faced by individuals. During this period, Assamese poets were particularly influenced by modernist poets in the

West, such as T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. Similarly, poets from Japanese Haiku, Baudelaire, Mayakovsky, Pablo Neruda, and Khalil Gibran had a direct impact on Assamese poetry. (Bharali, 1992, p. 101) As a result, modern Assamese poetry, inspired by Western ideals, began to incorporate symbolism and imagery. Moreover, the advent of Marxist philosophy, existentialism, expressionism, surrealism, and Freudian doctrine introduced Assamese poets to new genres alongside Bengali poets such as Jibanananda Das, Buddhadeb Bosu and Bishnu Dey. This interaction added another dimension to modern Assamese poetry. The modernist genre of Assamese poetry emerged from the *Ramdheni* era. Modern Assamese poetry did not develop suddenly. In contrast to the simple emotional and romantic spirit of earlier Assamese poetry, the works of the sixties and seventies demanded a more thoughtful engagement rather than merely emotional responses. This period introduced a kind of ‘incomprehensible’ concept, where discerning readers could grasp the essence of these poems only through diligent effort. (Bharali, 1992 p. 99) It is often believed that fully understanding a poem can dilute its poetic essence. In this context, Coleridge stated, “Poetry gives most pleasure when only generally and not perfectly understood.” Numerous new poets emerged during this time, further strengthening the foundation of Assamese poetry through the expression of their unique personalities. Assamese youth, educated in English, became acquainted with the symbolist traditions of France through their studies of English literature. Simultaneously, Assamese poets were inspired by both English literature and Bengali poetry. As a result, they gained familiarity with Japanese Haiku and Chinese poetry through these influences.

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