

## A GASTRO CRITICAL STUDY OF SEAMUS HEANEY'S POETRY

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### Abstract

Gastro criticism is a comparatively new approach to the study of literary text. There were some studies in the field of cultural studies which dealt with the relationship between culinary practices, food and culture. But Gastro criticism emerged as distinct filed in the literary theory and studies after 2000. Gastro criticism tries to study the representation and depiction of culinary practice, food, eating habits and eating scenes and its relation with other forms of culture. It uses insights and knowledge from various other fields such as anthropology, cultural studies, gastronomy, literature and semiotics, so it multidisciplinary in the nature. Food does not just sustain us, but it also reveals power structures in a society. It also reveals the economic condition of a society. We can use gastro critical approach to study a particular author and reveal the depiction of society in all its varied aspects. Food habits also reveal the nature of an individual. The present research paper applies gastro critical approach to poetry of Seamus Heaney and tries to reveal the various implication of depiction of food in his poetry.

**Key Words :** Gastro criticism, literature, Seamus Heaney, close reading, culture, food and culinary practices.

Gastro criticism is an emerging discipline in literary studies and literary criticism. The studies of food and culinary practices in Literature and culture have a long history. Roland Barthes has studied the use of food from sociological and cultural point of view. Claude Levi Strauss also studied the food and culinary practices in various cultures across the globe from semiotic and anthropological point of view. Claude Levi Strauss has argued that food has other functions than just nutrition and sustenance. He said that food connotes cultural, historical relationships and values. Terry Eagleton has written an influential essay on relationship between food and sign system. He illustrates this relationship by using various examples and images. He proves that food, language and literature are interconnected intimately.

The term Gastro criticism was coined by the French scholar Richard Tobin in 2008. He was the pioneer of Gastro criticism. He was a French professor in French and Italian literary studies. He used the term Gastro criticism for the first time in a lecture delivered at University Of California, Santa Barbara in November 2008. The title of his lecture was "*Thought for Food: Literature and Gastronomy*". In this lecture, he talked about emerging field of literary food criticism. He used the term Gastro criticism to designate reading based on food and its concomitants. He, for the first time, applied the multidisciplinary insights of food studies to literature while studying the comedies of Molière.

Gastro criticism tries to explore correlation between what we eat and what we become. The primary principle of Gastro critics is that food systems inform literature. A Gastro critical approach to text gives us an opportunity to study interactions with food and culinary practices throughout the text. It gives new insights to the readers, as an innovative literary and cultural method, of studying literary texts. Tobin argues,

*Cultural traits, social institutions, national histories and individual attitudes cannot be entirely understood without an understanding also of how these have meshed our varied and peculiar modes of eating. (Tobin2002/2004, 623)*

As it is evident from the above quotation, Tobin connects and finds an inherent relation between one's food habits, culinary practices and social institutions, cultures and histories. So his approach to study of food is multi-disciplinary and pluralistic. He believed that Gastro criticism breaks the boundaries of traditional approach to study of literature and food practices.

Gastro criticism is an interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary approach because it uses new insights, research and knowledge from many disciplines such as anthropology, social science, history, cultural studies, linguistics, semiotics, literary studies and gastronomy. So we can say that gastro criticism is a multi-disciplinary approach which tries to explore the relation between gastronomy, literary criticism and literary and cultural studies.

Gastro criticism shows symbolic significance and social relevance of food and culinary practices. It also throws light on man's use of food and culinary practices of society and its significance in power relations. We do not use food only for living and sustenance. Our eating habits create in us a sense of belonging and identity. Preparation of food also asserts one's own individual agency. Food is a marker of individual, cultural and social identity. Food and culinary practices also show the social and economic condition of an individual as well as of given society or a family. Gastro criticism is also known by some other names such as cytocriticism which was used by critic Beatrice Fink in 1987. But later on it was not accepted by scholars and as such the nomenclature gastro criticism prevailed.

Noble laureate Seamus Heaney was born on 13 April 1939 County Derry at small farm named Mossbawn. He grew up on farm among natural scenery, observing rural, archaic and agrarian life. This way of life left a lasting impression on his mind. Throughout his literary career Heaney revisited his childhood life and celebrated it in his poetry. In an interview to Dennis O'Driscoll in the book entitled *Stepping Stones* Heaney told him that he grew among cattle-rearing, churning of butter, gathering of rainwater, picking blackberries, digging and collecting potatoes, helping his mother and aunt Mary in the kitchen in the rural setting. He also admits that this agrarian, ancient, idyllic way of life was fast disappearing before his eyes. So he tried to preserve this archaic, rural way of life with all its nuisances and nostalgia in his poetry.

He tries to preserve the ancient food and culinary practices in his poetry. He writes about the agrarian way of life, farming practices, farming tools, cattle fairs and trading. He writes about the household chores and homemade food. So we find many poems which deal with cooking, culinary practices and eating scenes in his *Homeland*. This is all but common because he spent his childhood among these scenes and activities. Cooking, culinary practices, eating habits and culture are related with each other inseparably. We cannot separate culture from culinary practices and eating habits of people. They are tied with each other. This paper deals with the Gastro critical study of Seamus Heaney's works.

Oysters are mainly found in seas. One important feature of oysters is that they can be found in different shapes and sizes. One more amazing feature of oysters is that they can change their gender in one life. Generally their habitat is brackish and salty water, bays and tidal creek. Apart from eating they also provide pearls. Generally oysters are eaten raw for the micronutrients and Vitamin B12 they contain. In Ireland, oysters are eaten raw for their delicacy and health benefits. They are also farmed in some parts of Ireland, particularly County Clare and county Kerry. *Oyster* is the first poem from his poetry collection *Opened Ground* published in 1979. The poem is notable for its pictorial quality. Every word creates a picture of fine dining Heaney enjoying with his friends. It appeals to all the senses of readers. Oysters are too calcified small species of fishes, so when they are put on the plate they made a clacking sound. As he saw them in the plate, his taste buds are aroused. He says that his palette was hung with Starlight. As he sips the sea juice slowly, he remembers the mythical figure of Orion. The words such as '*filling estuary*', '*palate hung with starlight*' and '*salty pleiads*' suggest delicacy and other worldly taste of oysters. In short, Heaney enjoys eating oysters greatly and it was a heavenly experience for him.

The tone in the second stanza changes from great enjoyment to one of the regret as he describes the farming of oysters. He feels a sense of wrong doing because oysters are violated when they are alive and while resting on their ice beds peacefully. The words such as 'ripped and shucked' and 'scattered' connote inhuman violence done to oysters. There is reference to the Romans in the next stanza. The reference to Romans has two implications. The first one is that oysters are enjoyed from the ancient period of Romans for their taste and delicacy. The second one is that Romans violence and their enjoyment of Irish oysters.

Seamus Heaney spent his childhood at dairy farm and as such he was familiar with all the farming activities and chores associated with it. The poem *Churning Day* depicts the process of making butter. The power of the poem lies in the evocations. The poem appeals to the senses of touch, smell and taste and touch. Heaney creates a picture before reader's eyes of his mother making butter with minute and graphical details of butter making. Here is how he describes the butter in minute details:

*A thick crust, coarse-grained as limestone rough-cast  
Hardened gradually on top of the four crocks  
That stood, large pottery bombs, in the small pantry  
After the hot brewery of gland, cud and udder  
Cool porous earthenware fermented the buttermilk.  
(Heaney,11)*

He enlists all the pots and cans necessary for making butter--staff, birch wood bowl, kettles, scrubbers, Crocs, butter spades, strainer etc. His mother would initiate the process of making butter. She will work for hours to make butter. Her hands were blistered and her arms ache from the strenuous work of butter making. Her cheeks and cloths were spattered with floppy milk. After the day of butter making his house would stink as sulphur mine for a very long time.

In another poem entitled *The Butter Print*, Heaney talks about the tradition of carving a figure on the face homemade butter. Heaney wrote the poem after seeing an old utensil used to decorate faces of butter. Such kinds of wooden plates were used to print figures on face of butter pat. Heaney wonders who might have carved the cross-hatched head of rye on the round open face of butter. This short poem shows Heaney's knowledge and his minute observation of culinary practices of Ireland. Heaney wrote the poem *The Milk Factory* when he saw a milk factory at Castledawson polluting the water in the river Moyala. The poem is set outside the milk factory. The poet and his friends are standing at the other side of the river Moyala. But still they can see the workers working in the milk factory. They saw that milky water from the milk factory is discharged from the discharge pipe directly into the river Moyala. The poet could not understand from the other side whether it is milk or milky water. Heaney calls the milk factory as Limbo. He sees the workers are working in this Limbo round the clock in shifts. He uses the word 'waded' which suggest the hard work and toil the workers has to do. On the adverse side of this, as the milky water was directly discharged in the river Moyala the oxygen level in the river water dipped. It was hazardous for the fish and other life forms in the river. Eventually the milk factory in Castledawson was closed down in 1970. This short poem is again very significant because it shows Heaney's concern for river pollution, its bad effects on environment and his keen observation of flora and fauna of Irish landscape. Obliquely he wants to suggest that while procuring our food we must also care for other life forms and our ecology.

Fiddlehead or fiddlehead fern is a plant that grows in wild. They are known for their flavor, taste and delicacy. They mainly grow in spring time. But not all fiddleheads are used for eating. Only unfurled fronds of fern are used for eating. They are eaten boiled, steamed or raw as salad. In the short poem entitled fiddleheads Heaney surprises his readers with a turn in the middle of the poem. In the beginning of the poems Heaney assures us that fiddlehead ferns are a delicacy to eat, but wonders where they are found – Japan, Estonia in Ireland many years ago. He answers the question in next line and says that whenever

fiddlehead ferns are mentioned, he remembers a friend from Japan whose name was Toraiwa. Toraiwa once said to Heaney that erotic belong to poetry and he wanted it more in his poetry. Heaney answers,

*“So here they are, Toraiwa, frilled infolded, tenderized,  
In a little steaming basket just for you”*

As is evident, these lines can be read on two levels. On the literal level, they refer to cooking of fiddlehead fern. On another level they have erotic undertones as wished buy Toraiwa.

*Blackberry Picking* is another poem that deals with the food. In this poem, Heaney talks about the transient nature of food. He wants BlackBerry to remain fresh and juicy for a longer time, but it does not happen. He says that in the late August heavy rain and sun help blackberries ripen early. At first there would be one or two blackberries that would ripen here and there. But within a week all the black berries would ripen. Heaney compares the taste of black berries with the taste of thickened wine. He says that blackberries contain the blood of the summer in them. Heaney describes the fresh and juicy blackberries in following words:

*You ate that first one and its flesh was sweet  
Like thickened wine: Summer’s blood was in it  
Leaving stains upon the tongue and lust for  
Picking. Then red one inked up .....*

(Heaney ,5)

Heaney and his friends would carry all types of pots to collect blackberries--- milk-cans, jam pots, peatins. They would collect blackberries all around the field-- around hey fields, corn fields and potato drills. They would collect and store the blackberries throughout the season. But it was not an easy task as the briars scratched, weight grass bleached the boots and hands were peppered with horn picks. Towards the end of the poem Heaney realizes that all these labor is in vain as the black berries would begin to ferment. After witnessing the scene of rotten black berries he felt like crying. He says that it is not fair that all the lovely, delicious black berries smelt of rot. Every year he thought that Blackberries would not rot, but eventually after sometime they would taste sour and begin to rot.

Potato was staple food for Irish people as most people used it for centuries. We find mention of potatoes in many poems of Heaney. Of all this poems two poems from his post first poetry collection *Death of Naturalist* are important. In the first poem *Digging*, Heaney mentions his father's skill at digging turf and potato. The poet still remembers the cold smell of potato mold, the slap and squelch of soggy pit. The most important poem dealing with potato digging, the importance of potatoes in Irish society and the great famine of 1948 is *At Potato Digging*. The poem depicts the activity of digging and collecting potatoes, the quality of potatoes and its historical connections. As the mechanical Digger digs the potatoes, the labourers collected the potatoes behind the machine. Heaney compares this activity with crows attacking crow black fields. The workers form higgledy line from hedge to headland. The rhythmic movement the workers made while picking potato is vividly portrayed by Heaney. This activity of picking potatoes occurs every autumn for centuries. The potatoes collected at the harvest are of finest quality. These finest quality potatoes exude very good smell. They felt solid in the hands but are wet inside. These potatoes promise taste of ground and root.

*Fine-white, purple. They lie scattered  
Like inflated pebbles. Native  
To the black hutch of clay  
Where the halved seed shot and clotted  
.....  
By the spade, they show white as cream.*

(Heaney, 22)

There inside is as white as cream. Then he remembers another harvest of 1940s. Ireland faced one of the worst famine in 1940s and failure of potato crop for three consecutive years. Millions of people died due to this famine and millions had had to leave Ireland. So potato harvest of the present time takes Heaney back to the potato harvest of 1940s. He thinks of the untold miseries suffered by the Irish people due to the failure of potato crop for three consecutive years. Millions of people died because of starvation and diseases. The poem is an example of how crop failure can cause suffering and starvation in a society.

*Turkeys Observed* is another poem dealing with food items. Heaney wrote it after he saw turkeys is in a butcher's shop. He feels sympathy for the dead turkeys. He says that you can observe blue breasted turkeys in kids in a butcher's shop during Christmas. They were beached bare on the marble slabs. Apart from these prominent poems of Heaney that deal with culinary practices and food items, there are number of poems which deal with the sowing, planting, farming and harvesting which deal with the production of grains, vegetables and fruits. They also deal with food practices of Irish people. A number of Heaney's place poems deal with local qualities and landscape and particularly the water and vegetation.

### Conclusion:

As the above discussion shows there are many poems in Heaney's work which deal with the Irish culinary practices, food habits, eating scenes and preparation of food and collection of food material. They throw light on the Irish culture, traditions and history. Heaney does not just depict the food in his poetry. While depicting the culinary practices and eating scenes, he shows his awareness about the environment, Irish ecology and Irish history.

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