

A Glimpse of Jayanta Mahapatra's Poetic World

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Abstract

Jayanta Mahapatra is one of the leading modern Indian English poets. He entered very late in the poetic creation but he has created a landmark. His multiple volumes have been published. He belongs to Orissa and his poetry is full of local colour. The natural surroundings are used as background to express his ideas. He has taken a variety of themes which he has taken from his own personal experiences from his surroundings such as poverty, sufferings of women, people suffering from diseases, religious issues etc. There is evident deep contrast between Indian and Western culture, Hinduism and Christianity, science and metaphysics. It is through his matured poetic art that the poet has shared his personal experiences. Apart from symbols and other poetic tools, imagery is the key element of his poetic design. There is abundance of natural and other images. The poet has expressed his ideas in a very condensed language. His images are drawn from the world of external and internal reality. Along with the poet we take a journey to the mystical world. This paper is an attempt to get a glimpse of Jayanta Mahapatra's poetic world.

Key words: Loneliness, Poverty, Rain, Sufferings, Temple, Women.

Introduction

Jayanta Mahapatra was born in Cuttack in Orissa. He received his education locally and became a teacher of Physics. At the age of forty he turned from Physics to poetry and rose to distinguished place among other Indian poets. He created a landmark with his poetic genius. He is one of the famous trinity of modern Indian English poets, the others are Nissim Ezekiel and A.K. Ramanujan. This trinity voiced the issues of India in English language with the theme which is true to Indian emotions and rooted to Indian culture and tradition. He has been publishing multiple volumes of poetry. To name a few - *Close The Sky, Ten by Ten* (1971), *Swayamvara And Other Poems* (1971), *A Father's Hours* (1976), *A Rain of Rites* (1976), *Waiting* (1979), *The False Start* (1980), *Relationship* (1980), *Life Signs* (1983), *Dispossessed Nests* (1986), *Selected poems* (1987), *Burden of Waves and Fruit* (1988), *Temple* (1989), *A Whiteness Of Bone* (1992), *The Best of Jayanta Mahapatra* (1995), *Shadow Space* (1997), *Bare Face* (2001), *Random Descent* (2005). Mahapatra's themes are based on versatile subjects and are dealt with artistic excellence. The regional element with locale of Orissa is dominant in his poetry. He deals with wide range of themes such as human relationships, Indian social problems, love, copulation, marriage, morality etc. Mahapatra dealt with various contrasts very well and voiced them in his poetry with great crisp. Keeping his surroundings in back ground, the poet has made use of plenty of images, symbols and mythical elements to elucidate his viewpoint through his poetic art. "His poetry is a systematic experiment with the images and imagery is the single language in his poetry."¹ He gave vision to his

historical consciousness. He has taken up various social and religious elements and has dealt them artistically with the use of abundant images and symbols. Having Physics in his background, the poet is highly analytical and reasonable in his outlook as he said, “Physics did make me more analytical helping me to break ties with my ancestral beliefs; and still, the basic quality of acceptance, of an unshakeable closeness with my destiny persists.”² His images have scientific touch. His poetry is loaded with symbols to project Indian culture. The poet has tried to explore himself through his poetic art. He is the first Indian poet who won Sahitya Akademi Award for English poetry.

Orissa is the pivot around which the poetry of Mahapatra revolves. Mahapatra was born and brought up here. The landscape of Orissa and places like Puri and Konark are generally depicted in his poems. His poem “Dawn at Puri” depicts the picture of the Puri sea-beach viewed at dawn. There is realistic portrayal of surroundings. It shows the noising crows, the skulls lying here and there on the sea-beach and the old, white clad, widowed women waiting to enter the great temple of Lord Jagannatha. The scene suggests the idea of extreme poverty and wretchedness of the people of Orissa. It indicates that though there is an expression of solemnity in the eyes of the devotees, their eyes are full of despair:

Endless crow noises
A skull on the holy sands
tilts its empty country towards hunger.
White – clad widowed women
past the centres of their lives
are waiting to enter the Great Temple.
Their austere eyes
stare like those caught in a net,
hanging by the dawn’s shining strands of faith.³

Another short poem “Taste for Tomorrow” describes the morning scene in the town of Puri. Here similar reference has been made to the crows which have come out of the nests. The poet presents the picture of a wide street which is the only wide street in the town. He compares this street to the huge loosely hanging tongue of some monstrous creature. The next picture is that of five lepers whose faces have partly been eaten away by disease. The lepers reverently move to one side as a holy priest passes by the street. At the end of the street Mahapatra finds a large crowd waiting to enter the temple:

At Puri, the crows.
The one wide street
lolls out like a giant tongue.
Five faceless lepers move aside
as a priest passes by.
And at the street’s end
the crowds thronging the temple door.⁴

The natural surrounding of river side of Orissa is portrayed in “Evening Landscape by the River”. The poet surveys the scene and feels sad. The atmosphere is gloomy. The poor fishermen live in broken shacks situated close to the river. There is a temple in the distance and it is absolutely still in meditation. The poet once said,

Life is a painful, the process of writing a poem is painful, and then

poetry is going into and finding the centre of yourself, and I suppose you can't do this if you don't give up your own self. It sounds quite ambiguous, but you are always aware of the silence which occupies your soul or whatever, and words only go on to make us more aware of this silence which suspends all life, keeps you hanging.⁵

Mahapatra's "Indian Summer Poem" presents the pictures of summer in India especially in Orissa. There is picture of a mournful wind blowing and producing moaning sounds. The poet portrays the priests chanting louder than before. He delineates the scene of the crocodiles moving into deeper waters in the river. The next picture is that of dung-heap smouldering in the morning sunlight and giving out smoke. Finally the poem pictures the good wife lying in bed in the long afternoon and dreaming. The pictures reflect the very spirit of an Indian summer, especially a summer in Orissa. These landscape poems depict the predicament of modern man in the modern milieu. Although they are categorized as regional they have universal significance. The landscape, the seasons and the environment become the starting point that gives Mahapatra's poetic imagination free play. It encourages him to contemplate on his personal moods. There are so many other poems depicting the Orissa landscape like "Dawn", "Village", "Old Places", "A Twilight poem" etc. The religious images, landscape, local people get a realistic portrayal. They transform themselves into living characters. Landscape in Mahapatra's poetry becomes vital point for the understanding of his poetry. Mahapatra portrays inner reality through the landscape. He draws various images which have deep meaning. "A scrutiny of Mahapatra's imagery reveals that his images are drawn from two worlds - the exterior world of phenomenal reality, and the surrealistic world. The way these two worlds are related is equally significant."⁶ His poem entitled "A Country" presents inner reality that is both gloomy and pathetic:

Sometimes at night, when all voices die
my mind sees earth, my country –
to accept sacrifice ...

...

Wherever I try to live,
in pious penitence at Puri
or in the fiery violence of a revolutionary
my reason becomes a prejudiced sorrow
like socialism.

And not understanding myself,
Not understanding you,
like the still strange shapes of hills in the distance,
I, too, listen to the faraway wailing of hyenas
aware of the dying countryside around them,
tortured by hunger and the reek of decay in the air
after the age-old myths have been told all over again.⁷

Nature gives the poet a platform for great flight to his imagination. The land of Orissa, the rocks, the stones, the fertile soil, the woods, the rivers all ratify Orissa as the creative home for Mahapatra. Landscape enables Mahapatra to continue his search for his own self as well as to understand the world

he lives in. It also helps him to forget the painful burden of suffering. His poem “Evening” evidences that:

I would forget the causes of suffering, mine and others,
to justify my evening’s spirit, searching the landscape
for the leaf’s green, the stone’s ochre,
for what I would not make of myself.⁸

Puri, Konark and Cuttack supply the chief ingredients to weave the fabric of Mahapatra’s poetry. Legends, history and myths associated with these places constitute the central theme of his poetry. Puri is a place of pilgrimage of the Hindus of India who find here redemption and peace. It is a place of Lord Jagannatha, the presiding deity of Orissa. Mahapatra marks the unflinching belief of the Hindus in “Dawn at Puri”: “her last wish to be cremated here / twisting uncertainly like light / on the shifting sands.”⁹ In another poem entitled “The Temple Road, Puri” the poet describes the crowd of common men on the road to the temple and the form of their prayer. He says:

as the shrine’s skeins of light
slowly close their eyes,
something reaching into them
from that place they learn to bear;
the lame lamp post
to the huge temple door,
the sacred beads in their hands
gaping
at the human ground.¹⁰

Mahapatra tries to capture the eternal relationship between the landscape of a region and the people living around it. His poetry is an attempt to explore this relation and depicts his search for self. A sense of belonging to the places of homeland encourages the poet. In the deep recesses of his mind the poet relates the natural region to his poetic art:

A man does not mean anything.
But the place.
Sitting on the riverbank throwing pebbles
into the muddy current,
a man becomes the place.¹¹

Just like the great dramatist Girish Karnad, we find that the historical consciousness in Jayant Mahapatra. We find that he had deep interest in the myths, legends and rituals associated with his place of origin. The poet tries to revive them in his poetry. Thus he has synthesized history with present. He exhibits the glory and pride of the ancient Orissa in his poetry. He recalls with reverence the warriors of the Kalinga War in 261 B.C. that converted the emperor Ashok into a religious man. He refers to the river Daya which serves as a witness to his ancestors’ heroic actions. Mahapatra laments the loss of ancient glory which is in contrast to the contemporary scenario. He shows the painful picture of deterioration of principles and values:

It is hard to tell now
what opened the anxious skies,
how the age-old proud stones

lost their strength and fell,
and how the waters of the Daya
stank with the bodies of my ancestors;
my eyes close now
because of the fear that moves my skin.¹²

The myths and rituals associated with the numerous temples of Orissa – the myth of Lord Jagannatha and *ratha-yatra*, the myths of the sun associated with the Sun Temple at Konark and the famous erotic engravings of men and women in close physical embrace, the myths of Shiva – all these have touched Mahapatra's poetic spirit. His "Konark" articulates the legend of the twelve year old boy, the son of the chief architect of the great Sun Temple. According to belief, the crowning slab of the temple could be fitted in its proper place only by a twelve year old boy as the efforts of all the artisans had failed. This mythological legend has been described in his "Konark":

Konark, black in sleep,
cold beacon of my silent land,
messenger of death.
Here the little boy in a dream
waved to the Man once
and death hung its peace;
...
while
the shadows in the stone
are wrenching the light away
from its roots,
and inside me
is the boy I found,
tracked by stone,
the ceremony finished,
his thin black cry
pointing at my life.¹³

The poetry of Mahapatra forms a pattern. His personal experiences are intermixed with racial consciousness, myth and history of the land. Through his poetry the poet searches for his deep relationship to time, to land and to generations of men of past and to future generation. It is through this relationship that Mahapatra identifies himself as a poet and man of this soil: "my existence lies in the stones / which carry my footsteps from one day into another, / down to the infinite distances."¹⁴

Love and copulation shape another prominent theme in Mahapatra's poetry. In most of his poems love is a feeling of disappointment. His "Lost" is a love poem where the lover is shown to have lost the love of his lady-love. The lover seems to suffer in languishment that undermines his vitality, his confidence. "Another Evening" is a search for love which is lost. In deep grief, the lover laments: Your absence / is a part of growing older, and this October / a time for measuring an indefatigable memory.¹⁵ "Hunger" is a poem the title of which has two connotations. Hunger bears double meaning – the hunger of the belly and the hunger of the physical gratification. A poor fisherman makes an agreement to offer his teen aged daughter for coitus to a visitor due to financial constraints. In this poem Mahapatra shows

that love is mere carnal passion with an irresistible desire for physical gratification. Here it is not a spiritual bond but just a business. This sex business has also been shown in “The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street”. In the poem a customer enchanted by posters and public hoardings enters the premises in the hope of seeing pretty faces of the whores. But he experiences a sense of guilt and shame. He perceives greater reality as the whore asks him to hurry up and finish his turn so that she may be able to go away for another customer. In Mahapatra love is not always sensual. It is at times solemn. In a poem entitled “The Indian Way” he considers love as a pure relation based on the union of two hearts. For him, it is such a passion that prepares the minds of the lovers to abide by the conventional rigidity about consummation. This is evident from a situation in the poem where the lover offers a lotus to his beloved without touching her physically:

You know
I will not touch you,
like that
until our wedding night.¹⁶

The contemporary reality is a great concern for Mahapatra. The poet is sad to observe the decline of human values. He is surprised to see the ungrateful attitude of the modern Indians who are reluctant to pay homage to the national leaders who had sacrificed their lives. In his early poem on Gandhi Mahapatra expresses this. He finds the country gripped by anti-national activities, bloodshed, violence, and disintegration. The poet visualizes the horrific presence of death in his nation. Death is a recurrent symbol of *Dispossessed Nests*. Here the frustrated poet notes that though the southern states in India are to some extent peaceful, the north western states are highly disturbed. He indirectly refers to terrorism in Punjab:

In these parts down south
we say we are calm people
who go to sleep without misgivings.
We never take our lives seriously.
Or perhaps
we don't let ourselves get carried away.
But somewhere
amidst bewildered wheat fields
the cool night wind snips off the skin
from the firm fruit of reason.¹⁷

Both “Hunger” and “The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street” show Mahapatra’s distress over poverty which is undoubtedly the greatest problem in our country. His sadness on the state of affairs in India finds place in his poems like “The Twenty-fifth Anniversary of a Republic”. The poet ironically asks if anything has gone wrong with his country which had become a republic long back as there has been no remarkable achievement. The forests here have been made harmless because the wild beasts have been destroyed unlawfully. The women demand equality. They have become considerably extrovert and independent-minded in their attitude. Their self esteem increases with physical display. The old legends on brave women have been forgotten. The poet advocates social reformation based on equality and universal brotherhood:

Yet time is not clairvoyant,

and if it has the answer to our lives, proud
 in its possession of that potential which can change our natures,
 beating the visions of childhood out of us,
 the socialism and the love,

...

How can I stop the life I lead within myself ...?¹⁸

Jayant Mahapatra's imagery is highly suggestive. It is the soul of his poetry. His *Close the Sky, Ten by Ten* is built of multiple images. Here loneliness becomes his major obsession. The first poem in this collection "Loneliness" expresses a series of images. He compares loneliness to a wing which catches the heat of summer sun and creates great pain and is killing. It is like the noises of the graves and like silent waves. The images drawn by the poet of fire, summer sun, air, graves, waves and flames have been drawn from nature. They intensify the height of his vision. The vision of ticking time and the pyre of plundered seconds refer to loss and decay that lead to our frustration and sense of loneliness. In the same way the poet talks of the wheels gripped amid the cogs of other wheels. It suggests loneliness where the wheel of progress is obstructed. His *Swayamvara and Other Poems* presents the themes based on Indian tradition. The title of the poem relates the tradition of royal culture in ancient India where the princess could choose her husband from a number of princes. The poem tries to contrast that royal dignity of women with the modern situations. The poem entitled "Sun Worshipper" presents an image of Indian religious life. It shows how the Indian people worship the sun by offering water at the dawn:

with ease he pulls off a silver
 of orange sun in two necessary hands,
 cups them over his head, together.
 The water runs down in vertical lines.
 the dawn suddenly is normal again.¹⁹

"The Blind Singer in a Train" draws a typical Indian scene that generates sorrow and sympathy. The suffering of women in India is a matter of great concern for the poet. With his artistic use of images, he has presented their plight. The image of women has been recurrently drawn in *A Rain of Rites*. Woman is shown as grandmother, mother and daughter. To serve his poetic purpose of taking the issue of sufferings of women, he has shown them as the whores, housewives, rustic, girls, widows, nuns and old women.

Beside the low mud walls of a hut,
 Radha, in the hurt-filled light
 Of an early November sunset,
 In the sterile sameness
 Of the grass-lined call of children.²⁰

The Poet is strongly reactive against the violence inflicted upon women:

Before the morning paper comes I know
 that Lata's rapists and killers
 have been set free, for that is how
 it has always been.²¹

River is an important image in Mahapatra. It suggests tradition or heritage. Thus the poem "Dead River" creates a sense of dead tradition or lost tradition. It obviously points to the real dead river at the feet of

the Konark. The rivers like Daya, Debi, Chandrabhaga and Mahanadi find recurrent mention in his poetry. As spatial images the rivers represent the elements of nature as well as the ancient reality associated with Orissa. About stone Mahapatra says himself: "stone is the theme."²² In *A Rain of Rites* stone appears in the ruins of temples and shrines. Stone is also recurrent in *Waiting* in the forms of the monuments like Konark, Bhubaneswar, Dhaulagiri and so on. The Stone symbolically indicates immensity and oneness: "At the touch of stone / the immensity becomes your own : gods, fathers, sons, / binding into earth, becoming one and centre."²³ The monuments of stone crumble in course of time. But the stone remains amidst the ruins. It generates a nostalgic vision. The poet presents its glory:

Easy on the eye, the rains of temples everywhere,
defeat the tale of memory and dream

.....

Where stones have been lost and won
to reappear inside our separate births.²⁴

The stone is a silent witness of the flow of time. The poet constantly tries to capture the language of the stone in terms of his poetry. Meena Alexander notes:

Stone is crucial to Mahapatra's cosmogony. It was there at the beginning. It is the penetrable permanent. He inhabits an earth where monuments of stone crumble and crack, yet survives in the same realm as human beings, the glory of stone glimpsed momentarily by consciousness. Stone does not vanish as flesh does, yet to reach the still point it must be transcended just as the self must be emptied out.²⁵

With the very evolution, the Indian English poetry has achieved great success. Jayanta Mahapatra has contributed much in this genre. His poetry is loaded with myths images and symbols having deep metaphysical connotation. "Poetry shall always remain an attempt to remove the burden of time from this world, and poems will continue to be written, to do this through images, metaphors, symbols. Time, ever present, ever passing, making us wakeful while we are asleep, making us hear our pulse in the silence of night."²⁶ The various contrasts have been handled very well by the poet. He balanced between science and metaphysics. There is an intermixture of western and Indian cultures in his writings. We find his search for identity through Hinduism and Christianity. The poet has deep perception of his surroundings. He has used it in his background to put forth his poetic ideas. His major themes are taken from Indian history, religion, mythology, culture, environment and society. "Apart from the preoccupations with childhood, history and tradition of his people and their rites and rituals, he becomes deeply concerned with his contemporary social reality."²⁷ We find that natural images are highly dominant in each poetic piece of the poet. The background of Physics has given compression to his poetic expression and also given him a sharp intellectual vision. He himself said, "Physics did teach me a certain discipline. And when I started writing poetry, my science training pushed me to an excessive compression in my poems. But it has taught me to see inside things. It made me realize how objects like a butt of wood or iron, so inert on the outside, hides whirling electrons inside."²⁸ There is rich use of symbols for delineating Indian culture. It is through his rich imagery and symbolism that we get the vision of his poetic world. Through the use of these poetic tools, the poet has opened up his inner self. His poetry is a journey from subjectivity to the objective world. His images have deep layers of meaning

and give us a peep into the issues taken up by the poet. His poetic images evoke emotions and through them the poet travels to realms of mystical world. With his poetic world, Mahapatra has tried to explore the permanent reality. His poetry is a hankering of an isolated individual in search of his origin. In his conversation with Abraham the poet accepts, "It is simple for me to begin a poem, with some phrases or an image perhaps; but then the going becomes difficult as I grope around from word to word, line to line; as though I had been left behind in a dark room and was trying desperately to find a way out into the light."²⁹ Thus, we find him to be one of the most analytical poets, having deep vision and rooted to his native land who takes up a journey in search of ultimate truth.

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