

THE POETRY OF JAYANTA MAHAPATRA: A STUDY

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Jayanta Mahapatra (1928) was born in the city of Cuttack in Indian State of Orissa where he received his education and subsequently became the professor of Physics. At the age of forty he turned from Physics to poetry and gained distinction and eminence in the new arena. As a prolific poet he has been publishing volumes after volumes still today. Over a period of more than thirty five years he has brought out a series of volumes of verse. They are *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) and so on. Mahapatra's thematic concerns in his poetry are many, and in dealing with them he has shown extraordinary dexterity. The superb artistry matches the dignity and significance of his multidimensional themes. Orissa constitutes the most important theme of his poetry. Besides this regional outlook, his poetry deals with human relationships, Indian social problems, love, sex, marriage, morality, human nature and so on. This thematic range is wide enough to prove Mahapatra a successful Indian poet writing in English.

Orissa constitutes the core of Mahapatra's poetry. Mahapatra has been living in Orissa since his birth. Virtually the Orissa landscape – with Puri and Konarak occupying a conspicuous position – has a strong presence in his poetry. His 'Dawn at Puri' depicts the picture of the Puri sea-beach viewed at dawn. The realistic picture comprises 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
(*The Best of Jayanta Mahapatra* 29).

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

(*The Best of Jayanta Mahapatra* 36).

“Evening Landscape By The River” depicts a scene by a river in Orissa. The poet surveys this 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. In a nearby hut an infant begins to crawl on the floor waking up from its sleep. Mahapatra’s “Indian Summer Poem” presents the pictures of the phenomena which are supposed to occur in summer in this country especially in Orissa. First, one can find the picture of a mournful wind blowing and producing moaning sounds. Next he can find the priests chanting louder than before. The third picture is that 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 comes the picture of the good wife lying in bed in the long afternoon and dreaming in siesta. 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. They are burdened with universal significance though they are categorized as regional. The landscape, the seasons and the environment become the starting point that gives Mahapatra’s poetic imagination free play and encourages him to contemplate on his personal moods. There are so many other poems depicting the Orissa landscape. They are ‘Dawn’, ‘Village’, ‘Old Places’, ‘A Twilight poem’, ‘The Captive Air of Chandipur-on-Sea’ and so on. The temple, the priest, the beggar, the fishermen, the crow, the leper, the rickshaw puller – all rise before us in all their objective reality and concreteness. They transform themselves, almost imperceptively into living characters. Landscape in Mahapatra’s poetry becomes vital point for the understanding of his poetry. Mahapatra portrays inner reality by alluding to the landscape. His poem entitled ‘A Country’ presents such 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

(*Life Signs* 29-30).

Mahapatra's imagination is recurrently evoked by his sense of the earth. The earth of Orissa, the rocks, the stones, the fertile soil, the woods, the rivers all corroborate Orissa as the creative home or a creative Island 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 (*A Rain of Rites* 37).

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. It is a place of Lord Jagannatha, the presiding deity of Orissa. The Hindu devotees find redemption and celestial peace at Puri. Mahapatra marks this unflinching belief of the Hindus in "Dawn at Puri":

her last wish to be cremated here
twisting uncertainly like light
on the shifting sands (*The Best of Jayanta Mahapatra* 29)

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 (*Waiting* 29).

Mahapatra tries to capture the eternal relationship between the landscape of a region and the people living around it. His poetry is an attempt at exploring this relation and as such, it turns out to be his search for self. A sense of belonging to the places of homeland encourages the poet within Mahapatra to relate them to his poetic craft:

A man does not mean anything.
But the place.
Sitting on the riverbank throwing pebbles
into the muddy current,
a man becomes the place (*A Rain of Rites* 42).

The history of Orissa, the myths, legends and rituals associated with its places draw Mahapatra's attention and the poet tries to revive them in his poetry. With a sense of nostalgia, he fervently remembers the heroic past of Orissa. He exhibits the glory and pride of the ancient Orissa in his poetry. He recalls with reverence the prowess of his ancestors who fought the Kalinga War in 261 B.C. that converted the emperor Ashok into a deeply religious man. In this connection, he refers to the river Daya which serves as a witness to his ancestors' heroic effort that has acquired a mythic dimension. Mahapatra laments the fact that the immensity of that glory achieved by the ancient heroic race has now become just memory and nothing more and that the successors in the present age have proved unworthy to keep up that glory. Thus, Mahapatra points to the sharp contrast between the success of the past and the failure of the present thereby showing the painful picture of decay and deterioration in ideals 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 (*Relationship* 14).

The myths and rituals associated with the numerous temples of Orissa – the myth of Lord Jagannatha and His annual car festival (*ratha-ride*), the myths of the sun associated with the Sun Temple at Konarak and the famous erotic engravings of men and women in close physical embrace, the myths of Shiva-- all have touched Mahapatra's poetic spirit. His "Konarka" articulates the legend of the 12-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 12- year-old boy since the efforts of all the artisans had failed. This mythological legend has been described in his 'Konarka':

Konarka, 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 (*Waiting* 22-23).

In Mahapatra personal experience, racial consciousness, myth and history of the land merge together and constitute a pattern of poetry that explores his deep relationship to time, to land and to generations of men who have passed before him and who will appear after him. It is through this relationship that Mahapatra discovers his identity as a poet, as a man of this soil.

... my existence lies in the stones
which carry my footsteps from one day into another,
down to the infinite distances ... (*Relationship* 11).

Sex and love shape another conspicuous 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' captures the unrequited love and the lover's longing for the beloved whom he has lost. The lover pathetically laments:

Your absence
is a part of growing older, and this October
a time for measuring an indefatigable memory

(*The False Start* 19).

'Hunger' is a poem to describe the enjoyment of sex by the protagonist with whom a poor fisherman makes an agreement to offer his teenaged daughter as a sexual partner. The fisherman's financial stringency compels him to push his young daughter towards prostitution. Hunger bears ambiguous meaning – the hunger of the belly and the hunger of the sexual organ. In this poem Mahapatra shows that love is mere carnal passion with an irresistible desire for sexual gratification. Here it is not a spiritual bond but a business for transaction of sexual pleasures. This sex business has also been shown in 'The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street'. In the poem a customer enters the premises with a great hope of seeing pretty faces of the whores as advertised on posters and public hoardings. But he experiences a sense of guilt and shame and learns something more about the women 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 (*Waiting* 44).

The contemporary reality is a great concern for Mahapatra. He is unhappy to observe the overwhelming decline of human values in his time. He is amazed at the ungrateful attitude of the modern Indians who do not pay homage to the national leaders who had sacrificed their lives for the cause of the nation. In his early poem on Gandhi Mahapatra expresses his compunction:

We have burst open his blood

to bleed
We are on his side, perhaps
We hate him
We do not know it (*Close The Sky, Ten By Ten* n. pag.).

Mahapatra's India appears to have been engulfed by anti-nationalistic activities, bloodshed, violence, destruction and disintegration. Everywhere prevails an inhuman set-up that crushes the Indian masses. 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 turbulent. He obviously refers to the anti-nationalistic violence in the name of Khalistani Movement in 1980s 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 wheatfields
the cool night wind snips off the skin
from the firm fruit of reason (*Dispossessed Nests* 15)

Both 'Hunger' and 'The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street' show Mahapatra's distress over poverty which is undoubtedly the greatest problem in our country. He obviously feels much perturbed by poverty and destitution of the Indian people. His dark view of the state of affairs in his motherland finds space in his poems like "The Twenty-fifth Anniversary of a Republic". The poet ironically asks if anything goes wrong with his country which became a republic twenty-five years ago. He mocks at the fact that nothing substantial has been achieved by the country. The jungles here have been made harmless because the wild beasts have been destroyed unlawfully. The women are no longer satisfied with their meek and humble existence. They have become desperately haughty and independent-minded in their attitude. They do no longer hesitate or feel shy to make a display of their body. They have forgotten the stories and legends about the exploits of the Indian queens and brave warriors. Mahapatra wants to reform his society anew; he wants to rebuild it on the groundwork constructed by the predecessors' idealistic philosophy, message of socialism and spirit of 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 ...?
(*The Best of Jayanta Mahapatra* 48)

Some critics often mark him as an obscure poet. According to them the readers cannot reach his poetic communication. But a critical analysis of his imagery can clearly express the

transparent pattern of meanings inherent in his poetry. His poetry is vibrant with suggestions. It is through images that his poetry attains a strong suggestive power. Image is the soul of his poetry. His images are the expressive medium of his vision. *His Close the Sky, Ten by Ten* is built of variegated images. Here loneliness becomes his major obsession. The first poem in this collection ‘Loneliness’ expresses a series of images:

Loneliness is where the wings
suddenly catch the fire of the summer sun
and then are swiftly air – borne,
loneliness is where the wheels
gripped amid the cogs of other wheels
lost their vision of ticking time,

.....
loneliness is of now, of the noises
of the graves , of the silence of the waves,

.....
loneliness is a face alive
labelled from my other selves,
flames from the pyre of plundered seconds.
(*Close the Sky, Ten by Ten*. unpaginated)

The images 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 wheels gripped amid the cogs of other wheels’ suggest loneliness where the wheel of progress is obstructed. His *Swayamvara and Other Poems* presents the typical Indian themes and thus points to Mahapatra’s tradition-bound vision. The title 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 ‘Sunworshipper’ presents an image of Indian religious life. It shows how the Indian people worship the sun by offering water at the dawn:

with case 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.
(*Swayamvara and Other Poems 24*)

His ‘Traffic Constable’ is an important poem on an Indian Traffic constable. Similarly ‘The Blind Singer in a Train’ draws a typical Indian scene that generates sorrow and sympathy. Mahapatra is deeply mortified at the sufferings of women in India. He shows their plight and predicament through multiple images. The image of women has been recurrently drawn in *A Rain of Rites*. Sometimes she is the persona’s own grandmother or ailing mother. Sometimes she is his daughter. Besides, the whores, housewives, rustic, girls, widows, nuns and old women also serve Mahapatra’s poetic purpose. They intensify the poet’s sense of the tragic lot of Indian 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
(*A Rain of Rites 2*)

The Poet is strongly reactive against the social corruption 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.

(*Life Signs 47*)

River is an important image in Mahapatra. It suggests tradition or heritage. Thus the poem 'Dead Riiver' creates a sense of dead tradition or lost tradition. It obviously points to the real dead river at the feet of the Konarka. 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' (*Waiting 8*). 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 Konarka, Bhubeneswar, Dhauligiri 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.

(*A Rain of Rites 13*)

The monuments of stone crumble in course of time. But the stone remains amidst the ruins. It generates a nostalgic vision. The poet ruminates 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.
(waiting 8)

The stone is a silent witness of the flow of time. It becomes a silent message for the poet. He constantly tries to capture the language of the stone in terms of his poetry.

From the very beginning to the present, Indian poetry in English has progressed as a successful literary genre in which one can find a gradual evolution on process. In the process the genre has acquired a number of salient features to which the poets skilfully adhere. As an Indian English poet Mahapatra worships his motherland India and expresses his heightened love for the country. In terms of poetic utterances he reveals the myths, legends, history, philosophy, religions, culture, environment and so on that are Indian. He looks back to the past of the country with a view to reviving the glorious past in the present scenario in which he feels alienated. In

order to overcome the sense of alienation, he takes resort to rumination of the antiquity. Thus in his poetry we get both the past and the present of his country, the glory and grandeur of the days that are gone and the languor and languishment of the days that are present. This dichotomy helps the poet to present his vision, to explore and express himself as a poet belonging to the school of Indian English poetry. The exploration can be termed as a journey for the roots that are ultimately found underlying in the depth of the soil where the poet is born and brought up. The poetry concerned functions as a creative medium and depicts the poet's search for the soul. It is a kind of pilgrimage that brings him towards the heart of his homeland and explains to him the immensity of his being, the meaning and significance of his life and living.

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