

MODERN SENSIBILITY IN INDIAN ENGLISH POETRY WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO JAYANTA MAHAPATRA

Prof. Supriya Agarwal
Professor
Department of English
Central University of Rajasthan,
Ajmer, Rajasthan, India

It is best to see Indian poetry in English as a phenomenon, valuable for what it symbolizes as for its own achievements. It speaks about our struggle against colonialism and oppression, with great national leaders and thinkers as poets including Derozio, Aurobindo, Tagore, and Sarojini Naidu. It is also the site for the continuing indo- western encounter and the evolving culture of post-colonial India. Over the years, Indian poetry has carved a place of great importance for itself, giving expression to modern aspirations and sensibilities, access to national consciousness and to some of the best minds produced by this country. Makarand Paranjape in his introduction to *Indian Poetry in English* offers a periodization to mark the various phases of Indian Poetry in English, calling the first phase “Colonization” (1825-1900), the next as “Nationalism” (1900-1950), “Modernism” (1950-1980) and the post 1980 poetry as “Post-Modernism”. (8-27)

One of the main subjects of modern poetry is nature, self and society. “Lyotard distinguishes between the modern and the postmodern sublime by arguing that in the former the unrepresentable is ‘invoked only as absent content (1992:14) while the latter ‘invokes the unrepresentable in presentation itself’ (1992:15). In other words, modern art presents the fact that there is within the culture in which it exists something that eludes presentation but does so in a form that remains familiar to the reader and the viewer” (Malpas: 28). Fulfilling the demands of the present day world which brings into play a modern sensibility in confronting the confusion, bewilderment, and disillusion of the times, Mahapatra transfers poetry from its bucolic habitat to an urban one, adopting a form which adequately displays the subtle modulations of pace, strength and of free verse, setting a new trend. Basically rooted in his land, Orissa he in his poetry has very intrinsically connected human reality, spirituality and landscape. The kind of relations displayed in the poem “Elements” between the natural and the human is rare in the Indian English Poetry; giving shape and order to his experience, extracting harmony out of chaos around him. Few poets have been able to do what Jayanta Mahapatra has done, turning poetry away from statements towards a delicately layered utterance and affecting thereby a noiseless rupture with the dominant tradition of Indian English Poetry with the metropolis as its source and centre. In other words, Mahapatra’s modernity is characterized by a revolt against the poetry of

statement. The purpose of this paper is to analyze, Mahapatra as a poet of Indian milieu and culture and how he co-relates his poetry to the context of Indian sensibility.

During his visit to Jaipur in 2009 Jayanta Mahapatra, on being questioned on his versification of the self and the other in poetry, said “I wanted to make sense of the life which lay in fragments before me, I was urged to seek answers for myself, testing my feelings by striking them against the fabric of the poem.” Mahapatra, a bilingual poet and translator, feels that poetry often suffers from clichéd content resulting in distancing the readers from social commitment and obligations. Therefore, in his poems, he contextualizes topical events, enabling the respective ...to face reality with empathy, courage and conviction, thus excelling in writing indicative texts. Poems like “Defeat”, “The Quest”, “Bazar Scene”, “Heroism, the Unease of Quite Sleep”, “About my Favorite Things”, and a few other poems in his book of verse, *Shadow Space* are examples of indicative texts. For instance, Mahapatra depicts the drought stricken Kalahandi, a prominent place in his poetry other than Cuttack, Bhubaneswar and Puri. In his poem “About my favorite Things” which describes the anguish of the underprivileged people. Thus, he writes in agony:

Last December, around Christmas
 I felt I should go down the drought stricken
 Kalahandi countryside and watch my eyes fill with flight
 A tiny straw hut in the fallow fields looked at me. (49)

Apart from the thematic significance, words in Mahapatra’s poetry are often endowed with associative force as much as that of a stone dropped into a still pool of water causing ripples of water from the center into which the stone fell. The images of the poem evoke reverberations of associated ideas and emotions. The structural dissimilarity between the mystery, the wonder-arousing immemorability of the Egyptian pyramid and a tiny pyramid of straw in the under developed Kalahandi ditrict of Orissa draws attention to the strength of the poem in the conception and execution of a figure of speech which rests on contrasts and balances of ideas. The very choice of the word Pyramid whether it refers to the Egyptian grandeur or the odor of a frail pyramid of coarse straw, suggests that all the paths of glory or poverty lead but to the grave. The personal experience of the poet regarding a specific place helps him see the globe in a grain of sand, for the straw like life could be a common phenomenon among companions in distress. Mahapatra is profoundly moved by anarchy, which is based upon the religious world on account of the multiplicity of scriptural debates and controversial faith resulting in:

...another set of January death
 When a father and his two children
 Were burnt alive
 Just because they had another faith.
 (“For Days Together”, 121)

The poem substantiates that the three charred corpses indicates that fanatics are allies of evil. Apart from religious intolerance, another contemporary event which needs to be exorcised is the plight of child labour. Mahapatra like the Romantics regard childhood as an image of innocence and purity for it is a period of pure sensations and joyous affirmations of life.

Mahapatra like Dickens and Lamb takes cognizance of the theme of child labor which serves as a means to protect against the disturbing and dehumanizing economic factors in the society. Factors of space and time contribute to the growth of his art based on the observation and experience of the writer. Contemporaneity is at the center of his poems, holding the unity of his work. Since the poet, intensively relates himself to his province (Orissa) and the nation, the

bitter experience of the anti-national activities in Punjab in the name of Khalistan movement in the year 1980, hurt him beyond measure that he delineates the inhuman set up which is personified: the procession of the emaciated cows which are being taken towards the municipal slaughter house with: “their feet slipping, their eyes following the vague light into silence”. (123) The poem “A Monsoon Day Fable” reminds us of Keats’s “Grecian Urn” where the heifer is decorated and led to the green altar reiterating the intractable truth that the cult of sacrificial offerings or the victor-victim practice be it animals or human beings is the repetitive pattern of the world without sense and sensibility. (Sarangi, 124)

Mahapatra is also sour about the governing body of the nation, which indulges in verbal embellishments, and about the man of letters, who in lieu of imposing order upon disorder have been merely gloating over literary acknowledgements and monetary gains with ‘plagiarized smiles.’ The artist has to experience the thorn of life so that his sweetest songs tell us the saddest thoughts. For instance, Mahapatra’s use of “plagiarized smiles” refers to poets who are in their comfort zone, and indicates that amidst dishonesty even smiles are begged borrowed or stolen. Mahapatra chooses collection of the abstract and the concrete to describe strange meanings and therefore his language of poetry sounds fresh, energetic, and exciting. (Sarangi, 124)

Mahapatra who is caught in the whirlpool of time describes the life of the ‘doldrums’ in the poem “The Lost Children of America” who

Wonder bare eyed
Smelling of incense and living on grass and flowers...
With their appearance of sibyls and witches
Limp and cold with the ablutions of another
separate world. (Narasimhaiya, 26)

He further says :

We gaze at each other in silence, the lost child and I;
Who knows who is playing a token on whom?

Mahapatra’s sibyls and witches recall T.S. Eliot’s Sibyl of Cumae, his epigraph to *The Waste Land* which presents the theme of death in life. The heart of a socially obliged poet aches to sit and hear each other’s groan. On the other hand, the high-collared bureaucrats who are elected to govern the nation, or they who ride the tiger, refuse to dismount from their seat of power. (Sarangi, 124)

The poet evokes mournful memories in a few other poems like “The Fifteenth of August”, “Of Independence Day” “Red Roses for Gandhi” Mahapatra bleeds to see the image of Gandhi being relegated to the background and expresses his regret over the fact that the observance of his birthday has become a mere ritual. The poem “Red Roses for Gandhi” is occasioned by the immolation of eight students on October 2, 1990, the day of Gandhi’s birth anniversary. Lying wreaths on Gandhi’s grave has become an annual feature. Thus, he writes:

Three roses tremble in the Prime Minister’s hand now
As he steps carefully
Toward the bitten marble of silent years.

The significance of martyrdom is lost upon us and therefore with a note of melancholy and pathos Mahapatra seeks inspiration from Gandhi, though the world may consider Gandhi as a spent force or his ideals as anachronistic.

Thus he writes:

The photograph of Gandhi in the new airport lounge
Is more than forty years old

Every time I look into the old man's eyes,
He calmly hands my promise back to me.

(The Fifteenth of August)

The only way of experiencing peace and harmony of existence is to rededicate oneself to Mahatma's philosophy and practice. Life has become a heap of broken images because the present has forgotten its ancestral glory. Yet, it can be countermanded by regeneration if the present transforms itself into something higher and nobler. Mahapatra feels that an in-depth faith in the power and glory of the ancient history, its heroic myth and vision can either recharge or reframe man's search for the roots. (126)

Mahapatra's poetry has been asserted by critics and reviewers from various angles emphasizing among other things the wide spectrum of his theme, the Indianness of his sensibility, the exploration of myth and its conjunctions with symbols, his sense of time and timelessness, his sense of renewal of life and of human relationships. The dehumanized happenings in Punjab and the heart rendering Gas Tragedy in Bhopal and the brute massacre at Nellie in Assam bewilder him that the poet like the simple pendulum "tries his utmost to replace the semblance refrain of hate by the amazement to be alive," as expressed in his poem "Dispossessed Nests". The poem is an excellent example of the brevity and the companion that a figure of speech can achieve, for it succeeds in helping the readers to visualize human dilemma. However, the poet looks askance at the role of poetry. Questioning the role and value of poetry Mahapatra states in "Last Night the Poem:

But what use is a poem
Once writing so done?
Words looking for what
In the dark of the soul?
Like the sound of a match
Striking, then over
I know that much,
When all else has failed,
The poem words are per-hopes justified. (Sarangi 127)

Mahapatra's view is that life is subject to clutches of time and mankind falls prey to the vicissitude of life. Time is not successive, it is imminent and he dwells on the notion of the temporal with reference to the eternal. This notion of time derives from the existential concept of Kierkegaard who looks upon eternity as something which is an unending extent of time, as something entirely timeless and as something which includes time and at the same time transcends it (David, 251). As a modern poet he connects with the contemporary world and searches for identity and at the same time he is aware of what is going on around him, the poverty, the greed, the unnecessary violence, the cruelty, the injustice etc. Mahapatra voices his concern about the wasteland of India fraught with hopelessness dependency and unpredictability.

This day is an instant which possesses me,
from which I cannot escape, who knows
what part of this day lives in the coming night
who knows when the day would begin
it's darkening, for him? (*The False Start*,15).

Works Cited

David, P.C. “The concept of Time in *The False Start*”, *The Poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra: A Critical Study*. New Delhi: Sterling, 1986.

Mahapatra, Jayanta. *The False Start*. Bombay: Clearing House, 1980.

_____. *Selected Poems*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987.

- *Shadow Space: Poems*. D.C. Books. 1997.

Malpas, Simon. *The Postmodern*. London: Routledge, 2007.

Paranjape, Makarand. Ed. *Indian Poetry in English*. India. Macmillan India Limited. 1993.

Sarangi, Jaydeep & Gauri Shankar Jha. *The Indian Imagination of Jayanta Mahapatra*. Sarup & Sons, New Delhi. 2006.