

AN ECOCRITICAL STUDY OF POETRY OF JAYANTA MAHAPATRA

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Endowed with enormous talents, Jayanta Mahapatra undoubtedly is a distinguished poet on the contemporary commonwealth literary scene. He ranks with such eminent Indian English poets as Nissim Ezekiel, Ramanujan, R.Parthasarthy and others. Like Nissim Ezekiel, Ramanujan, Mahapatra is widely read and discussed both at home and abroad. But unlike Ezekiel and Ramanujan, Mahapatra is difficult to read for obscurity, complexity and allusiveness in his poetry. He is rather in the company of Shiv K. Kumar and Keki N. Daruwalla in creating contrive images and learned vocabulary that immediately sets him a class apart from most of his contemporaries. At the same time, in his desire to adapt an indigenous tradition to English language and create a new Indian English idiom he shares some of the concerns of the well known Indian English poets. He has influenced a number of Contemporary Indian English poets and brought recognition by winning the first ever Award by the National Academy of letters for his book of verse, *Relationship* in 1981 and earlier the Jacob Glatstein Memorial award of 1975 for his poems published in *Poetry*, a distinguished Journal of Chicago . In order to study his poetry in its proper view one should take the background and development of Indian English poetry into consideration to arrive at a balanced judgment.

Born in 1928, Jayanta Mahapatra is a creative poet. Though he began writing poetry rather late, he has not looked back since he published his first book of verse, *Close the sky, Ten by Ten* in 1971. Like many Indian English poets he does not read much poetry in his life. Without being shy, he admits it in an interview with N. Raghavan:

You see, I haven't read much poetry in my life. As a matter of fact, I haven't read any poetry until I started writing myself. No not even poets like Eliot or Whitman or Tagore. I was trained to be a physicist. But I have veered away from physics in a way. (Tenor 1, June 1978, Pg.60)

His other volumes in quick succession, *Svayamvara 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), *Shadow Space* (1997), *Bare Face* (2000) and *Random Descent* (2005). His poetry saw the light of day in various parts of the world, ranging from Chicago to Victoria and from Manchester to Melbourne before the Indian Government honored him with the Sahitya Academy Award.

His poetry shows a continuous development both in theme and technique. Mahapatra is a conscious poet who looks 'before and after' and endlessly revises his poems in order to make

them more effective and meaningful. Mahapatra's poetry is resonant with the Orissa scene and the Jagannath Temple at Puri. His most characteristic note is one of quiet but often ironic reflection mostly concerning love, sex and sexuality in the earlier poetry and the social and political scene in the later poems.

Jayanta Mahapatra has an open mind and perhaps a willing ear in choosing the themes for his poetry in his effort to acclimatize English language. Mahapatra has chosen for his theme various subjects beginning from landscape of his country to International problems. A poet's response to the landscape of his country, his sense of tradition and culture of the land of his birth and many other factors go together to make him assume an identity of his own. On this underlying statement Judith Wright thus observes,

Before one's country can become an accepted background against which the poet's and novelist's imagination can move unhindered it must first be observed, understood, described as it were, and absorbed. The writer must be at peace with his landscape before he can confidently turn to its human figures.

In some of Mahapatra's poems Indian Landscape, Seasons and Environment become the starting point giving his Imagination a free play to reflect on his private moments of desire, despair, guilt and illumination. The poems which belong to this category are 'Dawn', 'Village', 'Old Places', 'Summer', 'A twilight Poem', 'Appearance', 'Silence', 'Indian Summer Poem', 'Evening', 'Evening Landscape by the River', 'The Captive air of Chandipur' where he says,

And what is it now that scatters the tide

In the shadow of this proud watercourse?

The ridicule of the dead?

Susurrant sails still whisper

legends on the horizon: who are you,

occupant of the silent sigh of the conch?

The ground seems only a memory now, a torn breath,

And as we wait for the tide to flood the mudflats

The song that reaches our ears is just our own.

The cries of fishermen come drifting through the spray,

Music or what the world has lost?

Mahapatra does not view nature uncritically. The poem, “Story at the start of 1978” records how life and property have been lost or damaged due to the great cyclone that lashed the Andhra and Orissa coast in 1978 and left behind a great destruction. Landscape has sharpened Mahapatra’s sensitivity so much so that he has devoted a full book, *Dispossessed Nests* to the hard realities that one encounters in the country in present time. This has been witnessed in the following lines:

In Dispossessed Nests one hears these wails of a world shattered within a human heart. Like burning rods of truth, Mahapatra’s poems branded the screens of our consciousness. In these poems we find deeply anguished outpours of an acutely sensitive man aspiring to capture a disintegrated world in the light of metaphors deriving their heat either from the torturous memory of the country’s recent past or from a minute observation of the natural components.

Bloodshed, violence and destruction have become the hallmark of today’s world. Death is all pervasive force in *Dispossessed Nests*. Death is the only thing that lasts. Mahapatra depicts the horror of life due to violent Khalistan movement and Bhopal Gas tragedy in all the details. Life has its charm as it is beset with danger and uncertainty. The poet thus writes:

I can hear the broken voice of the night,
Crying in my hands, bloody and black,
And carrying with it the Joint smells
Of flowers well pasta their best.

Though Mahapatra has not written many poems directly on the theme of death, he has written two significant poems on this theme. These poems are “Song of the Bones” and “Talking of Death”. Death to Mahapatra is a deliverer, which helps mankind in recalling the past, and dreaming for the future and at the same time making them conscious of the present.

No Indian English poet has written so many poems on rain as Mahapatra has done. ‘Rain’ is a favorite metaphor with which he thinks. His well known rain poems are “In a Night of Rain”, “Four Rain Poems”, “The Rain Falling”, “After the Rain”, “Another Day in Rain” and “Again the Rain Falls”. Apart from evoking traditional themes and making an indigenous tradition available in English, Mahapatra also writes on contemporary situation and problems that one encounters in day-to-day life. Poems like ‘A Monsoon day fable’ are a case in point. The theme of ‘time’ makes an interesting reading in Mahapatra’s poetry. He does not believe in linear development of time when time passes like an arrow in the direction of past, present and future. Instead he believes in the circular motion of time where present becomes the central point of past, present and future. As P.C.David has rightly pointed out,

Mahapatra presents time choosing today as the focal point of time and also as a repository of past, present and future. The poem is characteristically entitled ‘Today’ in which

he brings all the experience of the past years to concentrate on one day and then projects the future through 'Today'.

When one scans the whole range of Mahapatra's poetry one notices a wider variety of themes covering a large number of subjects. Love, death, tradition, rituals and contemporary reality all attract him and he has taken all these as themes. But what gives an identity to his poetry is the breadth of his understanding, the temper of his mind and the depth of his vision. He sees life 'steadily and sees it whole'. There is a clear development in the poetry of Mahapatra beginning with *Rain of Rites* and culminating in *Relationship*. Mahapatra's variety, continuity and achievement remain unmatched in contemporary Indian English poetry as he has a few peers and not many equals among recent Indian English poets.

The contemporary poet encounters a complex world and his poetry is always an outcome of his interaction with such a world and hence his poetry becomes difficult, complex, obscure and allusive. Jayant Mahapatra explains his position in a straight forward manner and underlines the value of symbols and images in his poetry, "Today's poem utilizes a number of images and symbols to form a whole, leaving the reader to extricate himself with the valid meaning or argument from them this is true of much of the poetry I have written". He further states, "a seemingly obscure poem does in its content, contain the hidden voice for its ultimate understanding". It is clear from the following lines that Mahapatra lays emphasis on the technique of the poem and takes care of imagery and symbols in his poetry. He seems to have been influenced by the Imagist movement and particularly by Eliot and Ezra Pound to lay emphasis on the images of the poem. He states his position very clearly in the following lines,

Perhaps I begin with an image or a cluster of images; or an image leads to another, or perhaps the images belonging to a sort of group the image starts the movement of the poem but I do not know where I am proceeding in the poem or how the poem is going to end. It is as though I am entering a region of darkness, a place of the mind which I have never visited before. Or if I have visited it, I have not been able to see into all the corners of that solace. Therefore, without a conscious reasoning, I grope from one level to another in my mind and try to reach the end. That's how the end of a poem of mine comes about and it is exploratory no doubt I don't know myself how the poem is going to be. (Quoted by Devindra Kohli, "Landscape and Poetry" the Journal of Commonwealth Literature. April 1979, Pg. 54).

As a significant poet rooted in the tradition of Orissa, Mahapatra makes use of religious imagery and symbols in his poetry. He has acknowledged that, "the entire land literally spills with ancient temples and their ruins and Puri continue to be the hub of Orissa's cultural religious life, around the Great Temple of Jagannath". Mahapatra's poetry is significant because of the symbols, myths and imagery which make it different from the poetry of other contemporary poets.

Images play a vital role in Mahapatra's poetry. His images are subtle, controlled, apt and moving. They heighten the significance of the meaning of the poems by hinting at it in a cool and ordered manner. The shadows of W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot loom large in his poetry. Images of sleep, twilight, phantom darkness, half light of rain, the pallor of dreams the granite eyes are needed to see the stones throb, remind us of Eliot's imagery in "The Hollow Man" and of Yeats in 'Sailing to Byzantium' and influences Mahapatra's imagery in 'Relationship'. That is why Ajit Khullar makes an observation:

Mahapatra has taken Eliot in his stride and reduced his voice to one among many that "go in and out of the city gates" of Relationship. When one reads of "this brassy October afternoon", Eliot's "April is the cruelest month" starts vying for attention. Eliot's influence pervades Mahapatra's lines about 'loneliness' on an October afternoon when he sees "the secret coves on the naked beach/charred by old fires and littered with picnic paper and empty bottles". Such images as "a galvanometer needle/between the zero and the hundred of gloom" and "shameless fevers whose viruses tear the skin like paper" are all Eliotian.

Symbols play a vital role in enriching Mahapatra's poetry. Circle, sky, dawn, sun, moon and rain are recurrent symbols in his poetry. Eliot seems to have influenced Mahapatra in choosing some of his symbols like circle and sky. Most of Mahapatra's symbols are personal symbols used for specific purposes. They are dynamic and keep on changing their meanings. Symbols and myths play a very important role in Mahapatra's poetry particularly when he tries to come to terms with Hindu Mythology. Mahapatra seems to believe in the Hindu belief that the universe is boundless and everything occurs simultaneously and all possibilities may exist without excluding each other.

All through his poetic development Mahapatra has skillfully employed myths, images and symbols in keeping with the changing modes of his poetry. His poetry is rich with thought provoking images and dynamic symbols that keep on changing as his muse advances. Bruce King makes an interesting observation in this regard:

While Mahapatra's world is filled with personal pain, guilt, remorse, hunger, desire and moments of renewal, his environment is filled with symbols of belief by the ordinary lives of the people of Cuttack, the temples, the Hindu festivals, the ancient monuments. The poems are varied attempts to bridge an epistemological, phenomenological gap to know, be part of, experience, with the world and the other, whether it be a woman, temple, stones, a Hindu priest. The skies, the wind, time and waves are symbols of the world of change and flux and which raise questions of nature and purpose of life as represented by the unchanging, fixed, rooted (stones, trees, the past) but these questions can never be answered by the mind, its perceptions and emotions.

Mahapatra avoids the rigors of metrical verse. He, like most of the Indian English poets, writes in free verse. The stanza pattern is irregular and the style is elliptical. There is no regular

rhyiming scheme and the tone is almost colloquial and conversational. But the reading of his poems is not clogged by clumsiness. The words are often difficult and the imagery is obscure as are the symbols. But the voice that speaks through them is sincere and thoroughly honest. There is no attempt at camouflaging and irony is almost absent from his poetry. In his attempt to come to terms with himself, Mahapatra sees the world with detachment and comprehends the reality that he encounters in the modern world and portrays it objectively. He tries to evoke the native tradition and myths of the land with its recurrent symbols in his poetry in order to recreate the past in modern terms. There is no attempt at sentimentalizing the past but he tries to evoke the Indian tradition and write poetry keeping India in his bones. He, in his poetry, makes an attempt to get into the roots by turning inward. It is in this sense he is with A. K. Ramanujan, R. Parthasarthy and Kamala Das in trying to evoke a native tradition in English Language. Most of his poems are set in Orissa. That is why Panikar remarks, "Jayant Mahapatra is an Orissan poet writing in English".

Mahapatra speaks to us of an indigenous tradition in his poetry particularly in *Relationship* and tries to extend it by his individual talent. Mahapatra has overcome his local obsession and native cultural preoccupation by using national myths in Temple and writing patriotic poems concerning the nation and on the father of the nation in his book of verse, *A Whiteness of Bone*. Mahapatra seems to have transcended the place (Cuttack, Puri and Bhubaneswar – the golden triangle) by writing about the country as a whole. Mahapatra tries to identify himself with modern India so that he can speak with confidence and reach many a readers all through the country. Mahapatra broadens his thematic range here. Some of his poems strike the readers most by evoking contemporary situation. Mahapatra seems to be identifying himself both with modern India and the landscape of the country. He is truly a modern who creates his poems out of contemporary reality.

If creating new national myths is a part of post-colonial writing, Jayanta Mahapatra can be truly called a postcolonial poet. As a humanistic poet, he wrote about what happens around the world. He is a keen observer of contemporary life and situation and does not mince words in describing socio-political scene that diminishes humanity. He reminds us of T. S. Eliot in his *Wasteland*, when the latter spoke of "the horror and boredom of life, devoid of glory". Mahapatra is frank and candid in describing the country and the world around him in realistic terms. He sees life steadily and sees it whole. in poems like, "Defeat", "The Quest", "Bazaar Scene", "Heroism", "The Unease of Quiet Sleep", "About My Favorite things" and a few others in his book of verse, *Shadow Space*. Hence these poems can be appreciated and analyzed better as cultural studies. He was appalled by the misery that had befallen the people of underdeveloped Kalahandi district of Orissa.

Mahapatra's *Shadow Space* clearly shows that he is one of the best post-colonial poets. The desire to write about an indigenous tradition and culture and establish an identity independent of the colonizer in the recent history immediately puts him on the forefront of post-colonial poets in the country. Mahapatra's poetry, to borrow a term Raymond Williams, is largely an 'indicative'

text which reflects the contemporary society in its totality. To read his poetry is to acquire a kind of empathy with the contemporary life. Mahapatra has successfully made his poetry a vehicle for the expression of Indian scene in the post-colonial era.

Speaking of the depiction of culture in his poetry, it can be said that he has largely dealt with Orissan culture in his poetry. Indian myths and topography are not missing in his poetry. For example, he writes about the myth of golden deer taken from Ramayana, the Putana myth taken from Mahabharata and Himalaya peak which is supposed to be the abode of gods in his poetry. Indian myths taken from the epics are employed successfully in his poetry.

The Orissan landscape steeped in history, myths and legends contributes a lot to the poet's understanding of his environment and finally his self. In order to understand the present and apprehend the future, the poetic self makes backward journey into the past and present day realities is attempted to be explained through images, symbols and allusions drawn from the unconscious region of the mind because of the poet's belief in life being governed by "the unconscious which in more ways than one acts like a power generator ...".

The poetic endeavor starts from *Close the Sky, Ten by Ten and Svaymvara and Other poems*. These two volumes aim at exploring the obsessive romantic self. In "A Father's Hours", it can be seen the poet dealing tentatively with the theme of his relationships with his parents, friends and the society at large. Such attempts yield a sense of despair at the apparent impossibility of apprehending a successful relationship because of the poetic self's unpreparedness. The brooding poet's thoughts centre upon the lives of the people in Orissa immersed in overpowering rituals in the volume *A Rain of Rites*. 'Rain' here becomes a motif drawing its origin from the tropical rain that influences the lives of the people inhabiting this agricultural land to a large extent. This powerful regenerative force of nature breaks forth from the mind of the poet associating itself with images of "unfulfilment", "unhappy memories", "deprivation", "thwarted sexuality" and "repetitive rituals observed by people". Therefore images of earth and stone abound in the next volume waiting signifying his attempted poetic exploration of the earth of which the stone is manifestation. This attitude that inhibits real spiritual growth and isolates man from his dreams has to be given up in preference to a life of action involving the true spirit. The beginning of this direction has to be made by loving the earth of one's birth, playing with it and enjoying its abundance to the full. There has to be an imaginative journey beyond this time to reveal the real. Tentative beginnings in this direction are marked by the volume *The False Start*.

However prudent one's movement may be, it seems difficult to free oneself from the clutches of time. It seems to be an inevitable and inescapable force limiting one's consciousness to the present. It turns each moment of the present into a past of tortuous memories. The future is rendered equally uncertain. In order to seize an opportune moment in the flux of time, the poet makes an imaginative backward and forward journey revealing at times an insight into the meaningful present. All these poetic endeavors of this period attain a climatic expression in Relationship that integrates all previous experiences, puts those against a broad canvas of

personal memories and racial myths, views them from a timeless dimension and metamorphoses them into lively metaphors, symbols and allusions of one single fused experience in one melody. The self in its journey through the manifold realities of experience is helped by its comprehensive awareness of its multiple heritages. With *Relationship*, Jayanta Mahapatra seems to have completed a full circle of his poetic journey. Recoiling to the decaying and degenerate world of his living, he finds how life signs in an opaque light. In “Life Signs”, Mahapatra draws images from his ambience to depict his endless search for meaning in life that confronted with a great void groans under ennui. In the collection of his poetry, *Dispossessed Nests*, Mahapatra recreates the buried horrors of the recent past, the merciless killings in Punjab and the gas-tragedy in Bhopal in startling images drawn from contemporary chaotic life.

The scene of suffering comes alive in images of nature set against the backdrop of an inhuman set-up. In “Burden of Waves and Fruit”, the poet is seen abandoned to time and his ripening age: “It is no use trying to put off the instant/ when it comes, or even taking it by force”. He seems to preach a life of detached action.

Thus an in depth study of Mahapatra’s poetry is likely to reveal the vast range of his outlook, the multifarious themes and above all his distinct style. Repeating images, symbols in an attempt to lull the reader into the realm of mystery, moving suddenly from the descriptive to the deeply reflective mode of expression, using the natural world to illustrate his mental landscapes – are some of the significant aspects of his poetry. The use of private symbols and seemingly opaque images demand a thorough and close reading. He has consistently struggled with language to develop and use a human language in his poetry.

In fact Mahapatra has invested the English language with the semantic possibilities of his own Indian especially Orissan culture. Besides he has consciously cultivated an indeterminate approach to poetry. This springs from his existential, skeptic attitude to the universe. Mahapatra’s uniqueness as an Indian poet writing in English lies in his rootedness. The details of landscape that come out alive in his poetry suggest the voice of true insides. This landscape has been used in its profundity to symbolically suggest the true human condition in the honest language of the poet.

It goes without saying that Jayant Mahapatra is closer to the modernist movement that swept the first half of the century. Some traits of his poetry are also closer to the post modernist movement. It would be very apt to call Mahapatra a contemporary Indian English poet. He like other leading post-colonial Indian English poets believes that ‘our identity be symbolized anew’. He has realized the world and felt it in his pulse. Poetry becomes a medium to interpret life and source of sustenance for him. Thus he makes a bold attempt to depict the reality in this harsh world Jayanta Mahapatra like his fellow post-colonial poets is a translator. He is a bilingual poet writer and translator. but he is first Indian English Poet who is read along with other post colonial poets like Exekiel, Shiv K.Kumar, Ramanujan, Daruwalla and others at home and Derek Walcott,

Margaret Atwood, A.D.Hope, Zudith Wright, Christopher Okigbo, Gabriel Okare and others abroad.

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