

LONGING FOR BELONGINGNESS AND PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN JAYANTA MAHAPATRA'S WORKS

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Abstract:

The present article is to contour and hyphenate the contemporary Indian English poet Shri Jayanta Mahapatra. An attempt is made to touch upon the dominant aspects of his biography to define the streak of creativity irrespective of his diverse academic credentials. It is thought provoking to note what are the elements that crowd the poetic canvas of Mahapatra. The richness and class of language, the softness and delicacy of the words chosen, systematized orchestration of authenticated experiences through the exact palpability of images, the sincerity of harping on the 'feel' of the experiences instead of on their 'thought', the sweetness of music emerging from a fountain-like flow of the verse-form contribute to the greatness and ingenuity of Mahapatra's poetry. He is absolutely free from imitation, borrowing and derivativeness. These elements are dwelt along with others and a detailed analysis of his poem Freedom is presented to amplify the assertion and assessment.

Keywords: contemporary, experiences, authenticated, assessment, .etc

He had his early education at Stewart faculty, Cuttack. After a primary category Master's Degree in Physics, he joined as a teacher in 1949 and served in different Government colleges of Orissa. All his operating life, he taught physics at different colleges in Orissa. He retired in 1986. Mahapatra has authored 18 books of poems. He started writing poetry at the age of 38, quite late by normal standards. The publication of his 1st book of poems, Svayamvara and alternative Poems, in 1971 was followed by the publication of shut the Sky, Ten By Ten.

His collections of poems include A Rain of Rites, Life Signs and A Whiteness of Bone. One of Mahapatra's better remembered works is the long poem Relationship, for which he won the Sahitya Academy award in 1981. Besides being one in every of the foremost common Indian poets of his generation, Mahapatra was conjointly a part of the trio of poets United Nations agency set the foundations of contemporary Indian English Poetry. He shared a special bond with A. K. Ramanujan, one in every of the best poets within the IEP

tradition. Mahapatra is additionally totally different in not being a product of the metropolis faculty of poets. Over time, he has managed to carve a quiet, tranquil poetic voice of his own clearly totally different from those of his contemporaries. His wordy lyricism combined with authentic Indian themes puts him in an exceedingly league of his own.

His recent poetry volumes embrace Shadow area, Bare Face and Random Descent. His lone revealed book of prose remains The inexperienced Gardener, a collection of short stories. The magazine is known as once Chandrabhaga, a prominent but dried-up river in Orissa. He is also the editor of some other literary journals and newspapers. A special issue of Rock Pebbles in the year 2011 was published on him. He has published a collection of short story (The Green Gardener) in English and composed poems in Oriya to campaign and win the love, affection and support of local people. Besides, he has also trans-lated poems from Oriya and Bengali into English, which signifies his trilingual possession.

Thus Jayanta Mahapatra is a greatly respected Indian poet. He was born in Orissa, India, lives in India and writes about India, observing her closely. He is India's most celebrated poet and one of the best known abroad. Jayanta Mahapatra began writing poems rather late in comparison to his contemporaries. His poems have appeared in most of the reputed journals of the world. He is the first Indian poet in English to have received the Central Sahitya Academy Award (1981) for his long poem Relationship.

Mahapatra is one of the leading contemporary Indian poets writing in English. In his early poems it can be seen that the strands of love and preoccupation with self etc. do not always work positively. His sphere of pursuits is very wide. His poems are peopled by the street cobbler, hungry street children, a woman in pain.....all that goes to make up the intricacies of the everyday life of real people caught up in the whirlpool of human emotions. For him, the air is filled with the ringing of temple bells and the tumult of the sea waves. It is through the local that he reaches the universal. Like the English Romantics, Mahapatra anchors his poetry in the sights, sounds and experiences of ordinary life and the ordinary man. We may miss observing this in the daily run-of-the-mill kind of existence but they come to us with an echoing force when we encounter them in his poetry.

Critics, authors, analysts and readers complain about the lack of humour in his poetry. For this, he has his own reason and defense. Mahapatra's visionary world as constructed in his poetry is full of metaphors and symbols. He is absolutely free from imitation, borrowing and derivativeness. His poetic canvas is broader than any of his contemporaries - Nissim Ezekiel, Kamala Das, Shiv Kumar or Ramanujan.

Mahapatra is the poet of town and village, making his choice clear - the solace of the forest and the tang of the seashore preferred to the mechanical and automated noises of the big cities. It is away from the noise and with the continuity of an ancestral tradition that washes over his blood and beats against his bones that he would like to seize himself. For him the ancient Gods are still a living presence whose spirits can be encountered drifting through the bustling, twisting, narrow bazaars.

If we take a bird's eye view of the title of his volumes of poetry, we can easily understand the theme and matter of his poetry. Most of them imply tragic vision of life to which the poet is predominately and essentially committed. They connote bleak, barren, loneliness, silence, frustration and repentance. *Close the Sky, Ten by Ten, Waiting, The False start, Shadow Space, Bare Face* etc are the perfect examples.

Mahapatra is a fine craftsman with a superb control over his medium in a fair response to his poetry. His sensibility is both Indian and modern; and his response to Indian scene is authentic and credible. He has won several laurels and distinguished awards inside and outside the country. The list of important selected honors and awards conferred is very long, which includes Jacob Glatstein Memorial Award Poetry, Chicago, 1975, Sahitya Academy Award, National Academy of Letters, New Delhi, 1981, First Prize Scottish International Open Poetry Competition, 1990, Padma Shree Award India's Padma Shree Award, 2009.

His attitude to Orissa, the place to which he belongs is, however, a matter of deep concern. It is rightly pointed out, Mahapatra's poetry is 'redolent of the Orissa scene' and even the titles of his copious poems demonstrate the unmistakable hallmark of Orissa: *Dawn at Puri; Bhubaneswar; Orissa; Main Temple Street, Puri; Konarka; Rains in Orissa; In an Orissa Village; Living in Orissa; Deaths in Orissa; The Chariot Festival at Puri etc.*

A characteristic trait of his poetry is the depiction of India and Hindu religion, with its various rituals and myths. Linguistic multiplicity and cultural diversity in India may apparently contribute to a poet's identity; but in reality, these forces remain committed to defining, and authenticating a distinctive identity. Jayanta Mahapatra is a Christian, living in a Hindu society-- a society which pays maximum homage to Lord Jagannatha, the presiding deity of Orissa. Jayanta Mahapatra's grandfather accepted Christianity out of compelling forces of famine and poverty. There is always a sense of insecurity and alienation in his poetry. He perpetuates his quest for identity and he is keen on the assertion of his self-emanating from a veritable part of his holy land and its rich socio-religious traditions.

The poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra describes and evokes what is closest to him and which only he can render with a brilliant, off hand ease. These are the magnificent temples, the sea-washed beaches and the crowded streets of his native state of Orissa.

The realization of a necessity to identify with a specified place along with its social, geo-historical and traditional background is obviously the epicenter of a matured creative writer's consciousness. Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry celebrates the essence of an Indian sensibility-- a sensibility fostered by "The rain and the sun who seem to do nothing new to the earth" (*Summer Dusts*), a sensibility shaped by a reckless innocence, and a sensibility so exquisitely tethered to the belief that things happen as the consequence of things that happened before, and the nothing can change the entire sequence of things, amidst temples and shrines, with their festivals, feasts and fasting. His identification with Orissa is total. Orissa has been a most pleasant and painful experience for him.

Orissa is the hub of Jayanta Mahapatra's iconoclastic perambulation. Jayanta Mahapatra's penetrating eyes don't leave any aspect of Orissa's culture unvisited. The temples in ruins, priests behaving like crows, lepers clotting at the gate of the Great Temple, widows standing outside the temple in a queue for "darshan" of the deity, rearing of the cows, the great car festival in puri, the ghastly effects of the kalinga were rituals of marriage all these images appear amply.

Moreover, he is the avid fan and follower of Mahatma Gandhi's thought and ideology. Gandhi and Gandhism is the recurring captions, theme and essence of his multitude poems: *The Twenty-fifth Anniversary of a Republic: 1975; Gandhi; 30th January, 1982: A Story (M Gandhi); The Fifteenth of August; Red Roses for Gandhi and Bewildered Wheat fields.*

Jayanta Mahapatra is not swayed by emotional notions of freedom and independence of his country. In his poem titled *Freedom* he laments:

*Not to meet the woman and her child
in that remote village in the hills
who never had even a little rice
for their one daily meal these fifty years*

Thus independence loses its sheen and sense in the present context. Freedom from hunger is the mark of real independence for a country like India. The poem begins in a reflective note where the poet laments the situation prevailing in the country. He personifies India and says that the body of his country is floating down somewhere on the river. The poem though titled *Freedom* depicts the bleak picture of the society. Rather than singing praise of independence India has acquired the poet questions the real essence of being

independent. According to him independence is not just a status to be possessed but something more meaningful where people lead a content life.

Mahapatra resonates in his poem when poverty, deprivation, social injustice, the plight of the Indian woman improves than India will become independent in true sense. As the miserable plight around him constantly pains him and his self is awake to the dull reality around. Ignoring the deprived lot he cannot write about 'better things' of life or celebrate independence looking only at the prosperous upper strata of the society. The societal reality is a clarion call to his poetic genius and he strives to raise voice against the injustice prevalent by depicting it in his poetry.

Mahapatra is shattered at the deteriorating and declining moral and conduct of the people of India, which is in defiance of the Gandhi's preaching and contemplation. You see, we were brought up on Gandhi, Dostoevsky and Tagore. Today, any trivial act ends up in violence; there is no more tolerance in people, or in organization. Gandhism is a word, a metaphor for people. We appear to have lost our ideals."

Pain remains an integral theme in his poems. The past that is such a tangible presence in his poetry, is the source of much of his pain whether it be entirely personal or impersonal in which Gods and priests and history play such a major role. Uncertainty is another powerful note that sounds through his poetry. His approach to poetry is not that of an emotional aesthete such as Keats or Shelley, but that of a scientist, with the scientist's analytical, objective eye marking him out as – if I may dare to label one who cannot really be shackled him with labels – a postmodernist.

Jayanta Mahapatra probes deep into the recess of the human mind. He sees life as an objective realist – life as it really is without making it sound or look more like they would be or desired version of many other writers, and also as a naturalist (because of his scientific bent of mind) – presenting and documenting his characters entirely in minute experimental detail who are following the order of nature – taking pleasure in the atmosphere or milieu he has created in the stories.

In the poem *Freedom* Jayanta Mahapatra in a reflective mood highlights the stark realities existing inspite of the country proclaiming its independent status. He throws light on the disparity and shows the paradoxical state of existence. Mahapatra presents the 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 process of freedom is a complex construct for Mahapatra. For him freedom does not stand for freedom only. For him freedom coincides with a consciousness of the rich past heritage. For him freedom does not hold any meaning without this aesthetic realization.

Freedom for Mahapatra is a freedom to reconstruct golden glory both of past and present in which its future lies. In the title there is a touch of irony. He ridicules the independent status of the country which according to him is a farce. It is not in practice and is unreal like the shadow without life. His poetry is a reminder about the values and identity of the nation.

In a conversation with Sudeep Ghosh, he reveals: “Oh well, maybe I was made that way. It is difficult for me to be humourous in the poems I write.

Mahapatra's indirect dig at the poem or the poet's unconcern for human misery hints at the social and moral responsibility of the poem or the poet. Engagement with words must not banish sympathies, of the poet. Possibly, Mahapatra intends to advance that both poetry and poet must be steeped in human sympathies. The poet, probably, tries to establish a bond between poet, poetry and the terrifying face of the real world. Without this veritable link poetry is likely to remain a pretext of unconcern'. The poet tries to show how his poetry stems from human concern and that is precisely why he wants to be alone is *Freedom*:

*In order for me not to lose face,
it is necessary for me to be alone.*

*Not to meet the woman and her child
in that remote village in the hills
who never had even a little rice
for their one daily meal these fifty years.*

*And not to see the uncaught, bloodied light
of sunsets cling to the tall white columns
of Parliament House.*

His poetry is poetry of exploration where the need for survival with dignity in the midst of disease, corruption and decay seems to be basic preoccupation. Thus Mahapatra's poem *Freedom* is a depiction of the societal situation. The irony of independence and the paradoxical state is very well captured by the poet.

Although there is an improvement in cultural aspects, Orissa is an entrapment of the staunch patriarchy. The male-dominated world in Orissa believes the emancipation of a woman only within the parameters of patriarchal structures. A common man in Orissa can never accept the fact that a woman is on the same grounds as his counterpart. This is the most significant reason for the essence of the life depicted that of 'bruised presence'. In Orissa it is very tough to create an identity as counterpart of the man and in such a context, a real meaningful life for women is far from reach. Blending his romantic imagination with the ironic symbolism, he evokes the limits of enunciation for the patriarchal society.

Mahapatra not only talked about these ostracized women but in general he describes the conditions of women who are exiled at home. He uses his poet's voice to give their thought a narration. They are the sufferers in a relationship. Whether a wife, a daughter, or a mother; the male dominated world of Orissa has deprecated the limits of existence of the women. The role of a wife is reduced to mere ironic existence.

The wife is alienated from the freedom that she enjoyed before marriage. She struggles to overcome the psychological loneliness. The unfathomable love-lorn world into which she is thrown is an outcome of reliance on several dominant factors. One of them is definitely she makes a very big mistake by accepting the bare fact that her husband's world is everything for her. This is where the over-expectations and dreams relating to the relationship with the dominant patriarchal world fail. The confrontation with such a traumatized life comes from the feeling of minimal freedom that she enjoyed even before marriage.

Writers like Mahapatra are trying to break these notions of the society with their creations. Marriage, homemaking, child rearing, and maintaining the traditional etiquette of the family etc. are some of the dictums that define her as a woman in the prevailing Oriya culture of the patriarchal society. A male-dominated society fails to look deep into the pathos that the women undergo in fulfilling the responsibilities that are being imposed upon them in the name of tradition and culture. This conventional authoritative phenomenon is very common not only in Orissa but in some parts of the north of India. Here women exist sacrificing their dreams and desires. Being a poet of emotions, sentiments and feelings, Mahapatra heightens the psychological constructions of women. From self-realization to self-pity, the distance that women travel in the psychological space has been expressed imaginatively. The male-gaze that an unmarried woman confronts develops from rapid subjective feelings to deep anxieties and insecurities.

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