



THE POETIC ART, CRAFTSMANSHIP AND VISION OF JAYANTA MAHAPATRA AS VISUALISED IN HIS WORLD OF POETRY: AN ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This paper focuses on prolific writer Jayanta Mahapatra's poetic art, craftsmanship and vision in the development of Indian English poetry by which his poetry appears to be complex because of its language of allusiveness, sex-exploration and self-discovery with a focus on the effective exploration of the realities of human life in all spheres by attempting to relate his life to his land of birth and making a search for the roots of his inner self.

Indian poetry in English has been known variously as Indo-Anglian, Indo-Anglican, Anglo-Indian, Indo-English Poetry since Henry Derozio, Toru Dutt, Aurobindo Ghose and Sarojini Naidu started themselves in this 'alien' language. These terms describe the poetry written in English between 1825 and 1945. But since then, the Indian poetry in English has come into its own and these nomenclatures have become obsolete. Poets writing in English have since drawn their inspiration from their own backyard (with Kapilar, Paranar, Allama, Kabir) as well as Browning, Yeats, Eliot, Pound, Anden, Williams, Stevens and Ginsberg. No doubt, modern Indian poetry in English has indeed, come into its own, contributing to the English language in ways that the British, the Americans, the Australians and the Canadians can not, to bring the language alive and rich in strange ways with its syntax. As K.R.S. Iyengar has put it, "The Profession of poetry is a consecrated endeavour and an exacting discipline. It is to the credit of the 'new poets' that they are prepared to take their vocation seriously" (P 649).

Modern Indian poetry in English is genuine and sincere in its communication though it is young in years. The Indian milieu forms a vital part of the language is foreign but the sensibility and the spirit which moulds the language to its need is vitally Indian. The garment is foreign but the flesh and bones and blood flow is Indian. The Indian poets have the courage to write in English though it is a second language, a foreign language. As Mahapatra admits in his poem namely "Even if No one takes my Poems Seriously":

"Yes, there's a poem growing
with a foreign Language which keeps my head up,
I don't try to explain
Whether It is the right thing to do or wrong"

In contrast to Ezekiel, Parthasarathy and Daruwalla, his concept of poetry is nothing but the record of an evolving consciousness, with all its distress, guilts, frustrations, contradictions and false starts. He puts emphasis on memory as a source. But in some of the concepts like 'the form of poetry, quest for roots', he identifies himself with other Indian English poets.

One of the best known Indian poets writing in English, Jayanta Mahapatra was born on October 22, 1928 in a Christian family in Cuttack (odisha). He was educated at Stewart European School and Revenshaw College, Cuttack and Science College, Patra. He taught physics in Ravenshaw College, Cutack. He began writing poetry at the age of forty in 1968. It is for this reason that he is called "a late bloomer in poetry like Shiv K. Kumar. Mahapatra's poetry is an eloquent expression of the eternal silence of the unknown. Commenting on his quest of the unknown, Mahapatra writes: "And this is how I feel: that one must somehow try to reach the border between the understandable and the ununderstandable in a poem, between life and death, between a straight line and a circle".

Being a prolific writer, Mahapatra's first volume of poems **Close the Sky, Ten by Ten** contains forty nine poems on a wide variety of themes. Through publication of this first volume, he emerged as a poet in the making, so as to reveal commendable capacity to mould the language like clay. Bruce King holds:

"The technique in **Close the Sky, Ten by Ten** is significant of the nature of Mahapatra's early work in which experiment with form, language, image, sound prevails over emotion".

His second volume published in 1971 showed signs of remarkable maturity of his poetic art and vision, bringing home the point that Mahapatra develops on recurring vocabulary in which words become concepts and symbols with some of his poems in this second volume exhibiting the qualities of clarity of perception, lucidity of expression, coherence and



evocativeness. His next volume of poems is **A Rain of Rites** published in 1974, which consists of forty nine poems exhibiting his maturity as a poet; some of his poems like Dawn, village, old places, A Rain, Listening, Summer, Main Temple Street, Puri, Dawn at Puri, Indian Summer poem are found to be conspicuous for restraint in the use of words, suggestive images and symbols, Indianness, especially the depiction of Orissa landscape, the rites and rituals in the temple town in Puri and a variety of themes. The volume namely **Waiting** published in 1979 consists of forty six poems, all of which exhibit and evince greater maturity and perfection both in Mahapatra's poetic vision and craftsmanship. Comparing **A Rain of Rites** and **Waiting**, Bruce King writes:

“**A Rain of Rites** balances inner with outer world;
In **Waiting**, the tension collapses in poems of
description and transparent statements”

The False Start (1980) which consists of forty three poems, does significantly devote a marked advancement of Mahapatra's poetic art and vision. Here 'Silence' as an idea haunts the poems in the entire volume. The poems like suppose, women in Love, A sail boat of occasions, A certain Refrain, The Moon Moments, The Abandoned British cemetery at Balasore, India are a few notable poems dealing with the palpable power of silence so as to hold the readers rather spell-bound.

Truly speaking, Mahapatra's sensibility is essentially Indian. The secret of his success lies in not disowning his Indian heritage, and not falling a prey to a felling of alienation. Having an unmistakable authenticity of tone and treatment in his work, his Indianness is at its best in his poems about Orissa where the local and the regional is raised to the level of the universal. As poverty, hunger and starvation have been chronic in India constituting the most significant facet of the life of the Indian masses, they do also constitute a major theme in Mahapatra's poetry. Other than the studies of male sexuality and exploitation of woman, consciousness of the poverty and suffering of the Indian masses, picturing of women as victims of male lust in a male-dominated society imparting a profound tragic-pessimistic note to his poetic cosmos, another important, but major theme of Mahapatra's poetry is human relationship and the theme of sexual love as depicted in “**Lost**”, “in The Logic” and “The whorehouse in a Calcutta street”. In a nutshell, it may be said that Mahapatra's poetry does neatly spring from deep personal experiences.

Born and brought up in Orissa, he was expected to write in Oriya but he chose the medium of English. As he himself said once,

“I am in love with English. And then,
my schooling was in English and I learnt
my language from British school masters-
mainly from English Novels... Further I feel
I can express myself better in English
than in Oriya” (P 59).

Indian English poetry is said to have emerged from the Indian soil. The Indian poets writing in English have their own background to write their poetry. Like other English poets, Jayanta Mahapatra too considers Orissa as the seed-ground of his flourishing art. He admits his indebtedness to the soil himself as;

“To Orissa, to his land in which my roots lie and his past and in which
lies my beginning and my end, where the wind keeps over the grief of
the River Daya and the waves of the Bay of Bengal fail to reach out
today to the firelight soul of Konarka, I acknowledge my debt and my
relationship” (Nirajan 65).

The focus of his poetic creativity is centered on the Naked Earth. The mythological, Symbolistic or aesthetic structures firmly rooted in that Naked Earth' of which Orissa and India form a significant part. The strength of his poetry springs, no doubt, from his living intimately with his place. The place, with all its ethos and myths, its lores and beliefs, superstitions and transitions have been the governing factor of Mahapatra's poetry. As Parthasarathy has pointed out, “Orissa is the hub of Jayanta Mahapatra's iconoclastic perambulations” (P 207). M.K. Naik further observes, “Mahapatra's poetry is redolent of the Orissan Scene and the Jagannath temple at Puri figures quite often in it” (P 207). In a good number of poems, he tries to evoke an atmosphere of lost glory, lost ecstasy of the culture of Orissa. Despite all these, Jayanta Mahapatra's sensibility is essentially Indian and his Indianness is seen at its best in his poems about Orissa. K.A. Paniker observes:

“An examination of the recurring images in Mahapatra's poems reveals
that he is oriya to the core” (P 118).



'Puri' is a living character in many such poems of his as "Indian Summer" "Poem" "This Stranger" "My Daughter". In the poem, "Taste for Tomorrow", the picture of Puri is portrayed with a number of symbols of reality,

At Puri, the crows
the one wide street
lolls out like a giant tongue

And at the street's end
the crowds thronging temple's door.

In such poems, the local environment becomes symbolic of India as a whole. What is happening in Puri as depicted in the poem is typical of India as a whole. "The poet's sensibility is both Indian and modern and his response to the Indian scene is authentic and credible" says one critic S. Viswanathan (Tilak 5). In the poem, "village", the poet creates a word picture which is at once native and emotive:

Carefully I cross
The palm trunk bridge over the Irrigation canal".

Poverty and hunger are the leit motifs of Mahapatra's poetry. In "Hunger", the old fisherman forces his fifteen-year old daughter to turn to prostitution on account of extreme poverty and hunger. So is the case with "Grandfather" who deserted the ancient faith namely 'Hinduism' and embraced Christianity during the Orissa famine of 1866. One of his most remarkable poems "Hunger" is characterized by extreme trenchancy and brevity of expression. There are three characters in the poem – the narrator – protagonist who is tortured by the desires of the flesh, the fisherman – father obliged to sell his daughter to keep body and soul together, and his fifteen –year-old daughter, a helpless and passive tool and victim of male lust. Extreme economy of means does characterize the poem, there being no verbosity or superb unity at all. The experience thus gains in intensity and authenticity. Telling images have been used to unify the emotional states of the protagonists. "the flesh was heavy on my back" conveys the torment of the sex-starved narrator-protagonist; "the white bones thrash his eyes" conveys the anguish of the fisherman-father luring customers for his fifteen-year-old daughter, whose passivity is conveyed by expressions like "her years were like cold rubber" and "she opened her wormy legs wide". Not many words are spoken. The poet achieves his eloquence through silence as;

I felt the hunger there,
The other one, the fish
Slithering, turning inside".

Hunger for food merges with the hunger for sex as the narrator – protagonist accepts the fisherman's offer of his daughter. In the poem "Summer", the poet pictures a typical rural scene:

A ten year old girl
Combs her mother's hair
Where Crows of rivalries
are quietly resting
The home will never
Be hers"

The quarrelsome nature of the mother is presented in contrast to the daughter's ignorance of her future. The girl is sure to leave her mother's house after her marriage. Lucidity of the language and directness of the image creates an impression that lasts for long, silence loneliness and passiveness of the Indian women are the central themes depicting the real condition of Indian women in India. Women are pictured also as sources of energy. They are the means to renew the desires of men and they are considered as 'Shakti'. A woman represents the divine force 'Shakti' and the ultimate consciousness which emerges in the times of need as pictured in the poem "Lost Sadness":

What rites of roots can reach your depths?

Can I look into the wild growths of your eyes
and recover the slender slants of light".

Mahapatra pictures the Indian women as he perceives them in his daily life and their silent acceptance of life and the phenomena of nature make him consider women not as individuals but 'species'. Unlike his men Mahapatra's women are religious and he skilfully paints a picture of Oriya women in the poem "Dawn":

"White clad widowed women



part the centres of their lives
are waiting to enter the Great Temple”.

A typical Indian situation is well-portrayed and the image of nameless old women ‘a mass of crouched faces’. The symbol of silence is more explicit in his portrayal of women. The images of women, which he pictures, are representatives of the Indian women as a whole.

“Lost” is a dramatic monologue in which the lover is speaking to the woman. It is quite possible that he is not really in love with her and is merely seeking sensual pleasure in her company. It is an unusual love poem, highly suggestive by presenting a certain situation to us without letting us into details of the love affair between the poet and his beloved, and the circumstances under which their relationship has soured. The dominant feeling in the poem is a sense of loss, though the situation has been vividly depicted through the felicity of word and phrase such as “lulling Silence”, “through intrigues at my fingertips”, “I watch your body ease off the seasons”, and “your body keeps shrinking in space”. The metaphor describing the lover’s diminution of initial confidence – “The first faith of a child gone wrong” – is excellent, as is the simile with a child’s mechanical toy gone wrong as is the present situation between the two lovers. “Lost” reminds one of Mahapatra’s two love poems on a similar theme in “Life Signs of that Love” and “The vase”. One remembers a body loved but not “lived in”; the other a body more lived in than loved.

“The Missing Person” is a nine-line imagist poem characterized by its shortness, conciseness and precision. It metaphorically presents the idea of a woman standing in a dark room with an oil-lamp in her hand. In this semi-darkened room, the woman cannot see her reflection in the mirror before which she stands. It is bed-time and she is feeling quite sleepy. Though the oil-lamp in her hand is burning, neither she herself nor the yellow flame of the oil lamp can see her spirit or her hidden personality which is hidden from view. The woman can see her body that is her physical appearance in the mirror. But she cannot see her inner personality in the mirror. The body is visible but the spirit is invisible; i.e., one can see one’s body reflected in a mirror but one cannot judge or fathom one’s inner personality and character. A mirror cannot show these things to a human being. Hence the little of the poem “The Missing Person”. Each one of us thus leads a dual existence – visible as well as invisible, according to Jayanta Mahapatra.

Being an original poet, Mahapatra was not influenced by any other poet and his poetry is remarkable for depth of feelings and true poetic imagination which embraces a wide variety of themes – Orissa landscape representing India’s cultural and religious past running into present, rootlessness and emptiness in modern existence, love and sex and relationships and superb poetic craftsmanship. As an Indian English poet, his position is unique and unsurpassable due to his artistic and literary skill in projecting such characteristic traits as typical Indian poetic sensibility, rich portrayal of variegated environment and landscape, coupled with cultural and religious overtones, symbolic and suggestion images, picturesque record of the variegated landscape of Orissa, portrayal of contemporary socio-political reality in India, sexual exploitation, economic disparity and gross social injustice, exploration of human relationships, consummation of love etc.,

Mahapatra’s poetry is out and out related with the existential dilemma of the modern men. He is intensely aware of alienation and isolation of the modern men who is coiled in the net of injustice and exploitation. The poet is aware of the unbearable pain and indefinable existential anguish of the modern men. His breath turns into iron choking him in the process. The yearning for light results only in further darkness and frustration.

“Darkness from shadows under the roof and loof from the fish’s belly
white against the hardness of water, from the salt in the blood which
carries the body forward like love”.

According to K.A.Paniker, “His dominant concern is the vision of grief, loss, dejection and rejection. The tragic consciousness does not seem to operate in the work of any other poet in English as disturbingly as in that of Jayanta Mahapatra” (P 171). His poems appear a continuous relation of aspects of the isolation, loneliness, solitude and alienation of the self from external realities in a world without apparent purpose. This is the existential dilemma of most modern literature”. The following lines from “Life Signs” reveal the existential dilemma:

“No man points to the sky
without being aware of the desire to live
in his belly where the earth-snake lies”.

The quest for roots is a significant feature in Indian English poets. The search for identifying himself and also the environment finds a place in every Indian English poet. The quest for roots is a trend in modern Indian English poetry which Jayanta Mahapatra shares with A.K. Ramanujam and R. Parthasarathy. His poetry represents the Indian sensibility right from



the hoary past to our own age. In “The Dispossed Nests” he deals more effectively with subjects like Punjab turmoil and the Bhopal tragedy summing up Mahapatra’s lasting contribution to Indian English poetry, Devinder Mohan writes, “considering the works through the progressive intentionality of poetic language rather than the chronology of publications of his poetry, there is a marked intensity and range of themes (temple, whorehouse nature and love) which diffuse into the poet’s consciousness of the dying process in history. The process refers specifically to the shattered myth of Hindu India... his poetic focus transforms what is regional in culture, myth and thought to a universal human predicament. His poems “Hunger”, “Myth”, “India” and “The Accusation” are flawless examples”.

Mahapatra’s poems demonstrate a remarkable concern for both structure and linguistic veracity. His symbols and images are evocative and suggestive, reflecting his love for the Orissa landscape with all the myths and rituals associated with it. He himself writes:

“These poems are just attempts of mine to hold a return a handful of earth
to my face and let it speak... perhaps this signifies a return to my roots
so that they reveal who I am”.

Mahapatra’s poetry is restrained and balanced. There are no verbal excesses, no redundant expressions, for example:

the startled spirit
the wild white thing
which rode away
across the warm speechless river
into the darkness of moods (The Making of My Poem)

No doubt, Mahapatra is a great and gifted poetic artist who has contributed a lot to the development of Indian English poetry. His poetic style is precise, lucid and pointed and he is a skilful practitioner of the montage technique and his images are haunting and evocative, precise and accurate:

“the acid sound of a distant temple bell
the wet silent night of a crow that
hangs in the first sun (Dawn)
cobras of a frozen, merciless faith
shither into sluggish eyes,
lurved into the cold shrines of skulls
(Orissa Landscape)

His poetic style is original and his command over English is something remarkable. He is endowed with the power of writing both in a scholarly style and simple plain and easy style with equal command and spontaneity. “The Abandoned British Cemetery at Balasore”, “Total Sun Eclipse” and “Moon Moments” are written in scholarly style while “Dawn at Puri”, “Hunger”, “Taste for Tomorrow”, “Bazar”, “S.P.M”, “Orissa”, “India Summer” are the poems written in simple and forceful plain and easy style. He never writes poems according to any critical “norm” or principle.

Mahapatra, like most of the Indian poets in English, writes in free verse. As Bijay Dumar Das observes, “Coming to the form of the poetry of Mahapatra it can be said with certainty that he avoids the rigours of material versa. The stanza pattern is irregular... There is no regular shyming scheme and the tone is almost colloquial and conversational” (P 19). He writes whatever strikes his mind. He never cares for the form and for him, the poetry is a world of words. He brings forth his notion of poetry in the following lines:

“Poetry was an unknown quantity for me and almost forty years except
the little Keats, Shelley and Wordsworth we studied at school when I
started writing my first poems, I did not know what poetry was... I
suppose I was carried away by what the English language could do. I
was so much obsessed by the feel for words, their sound qualities and
their silences... my first poems were in a way attempts in which the
language left the ideas of the poem behind them, lost in the depths of
words” (Syal 202).

The real context of his poetry is the environment which he encounters in his daily life. Eventhough he is a Christian, he loves the old lyrics of Radha and Krishna. He brings in the principles of Hindu religion. His poems often record a distance between himself and the customs of his surroundings. There are sounds of temple bells, the prayers of priests, the funeral pyres, of which he is not a part. Of his own local heritage, he writes:



“I don’t know much about it.
I know I love old lyrics of Radha
and Krishna written by Banamali
and others” (Normans 32)

Poetry is the juxtaposition of the abstract and the concrete the expected and the unexpected, the juxtaposition often stemming from what Eliot calls a “Unified Sensibility”. Mahapatra is obviously on a high romantic pedestal making familiar things unfamiliar by throwing over them, what Wordsworth calls ‘a certain colouring of imagination’. Every poet is a craftsman whether he admits of being or not and an Indian poet has to have greater self consciousness given the complex relationships he has with English. The grammar of Indian English poet is two sided. It has to look for actual sentences and the prosodic patterns and also toward social and cultural context. Jayanta Mahapatra succeeds in his attempt to cover both sides in his poetry.

Mahapatra, not only brings in the theme of male sexuality but also he treats human relationship. To explore the human relationship, he concentrate on the themes of sex and love. Love, marriage and sex loom large in his early poetical creations. His treatment of sex and love is unique for it seems to be guided by creativity. He treats sex and passion with imagination. Sex, according to him is a life –giving force, a creative urge, without which love or life cannot be perfect. His poetry is a mixture of love and fear of separation. Mahapatra admits:

“My poems were born of love, of love’s selfishness, and of a huge self-
pity like the poems of many others whom I admire” (P10)

He is of the opinion that love makes man hope for a bright future. Love is a source of joy and it brings him nearer to life. He wants to discover the real nature of love by asking thus:

“Can love grow old and tubercular with age?
or bad with the contortions of constant use?
Can love talk in odd and secret voice? (Bells)

Mahapatra’s poems on love speak out the inner burnings of heart – the feeling of the lover. The lover spends sleepless hours when the lady is sleeping quietly but still he is not willing to disturb her. He does not like to reveal his inner fear as he says in the poem”,

“However
I will not let her feel that absence
Whose dark roots
are scrabbling for poetic sacrifice” (Intimacy)

For Mahapatra, living is a miracle and love is a fresh wonder. In the absence of the lady love, the poet drowns in the pool of grief and he feels as if all springs of joy have dried up. The poet sincerely believes that life must stone in itself the precious wealth of love. Denial of love is the denial of living. Rejection of love wounds him and he is lost in the island of isolation.

“Unloved, undeterred
by the movement of your
own world
I close my eyes
to find myself alone” (11)

Like love, ‘death’ is a recurrent theme of his poetry. Fear of death, fear of aging, fear of losing touch with the world make his poetry humanistic. Death, for the poet, is instrumental to the creative and perpetuating urge hidden in nature. Even in death, man does not loose touch with life’s ‘shadowy senses’. Through death, the poet likes to taste the juices of life. “A man dies, but to find again, the five shadows/which avenge the cooled motionless blood” (Relationship)

The poet of love turns to be a post of life. He sees life in its various dimensions. His perception of love and sex gives room to the perception of the world. The world he perceived is that of India which is strewn with hunger, poverty and also exploitation of women. He wants to establish a link between him and the world. Poverty, hunger and starvation are the major themes of his poetry. The themes of hunger and poverty and starvation are well pictured in his poems especially in “Hunger”, ‘The Whorehouse’ in a Calcutta street, “man of his nights”. The poems depict not only poverty and hunger but they bring forth male sexuality and the suffering of the Indians and of woman as victims of male lust.



Mahapatra makes use of symbols to depict the reality of life. His symbolism rests on stone, rain, night, flower, river, sea and light stone always remains a symbol of permanence, rain is a symbol of creation, regeneration, passion and memory; night for darkness, passion and light for hope, living experience and spirituality. These symbols are functional in so far as they add momentum to the poem. They expose the ideas and explore the psyche and build a bridge. His revise form takes the readers from the reality of the present to the myth and legend which are strewn past and back to the real world. Through the character of chellammal in the poem "Temple", the poet seeks the identity of a woman under the system of beliefs and values associated with the concepts of 'moksha' and 'dharma'. He makes use of the past as the orbit of his poetry. He infuses it with the present and looks forward to the future. Bijay Kumar Das rightly holds:

"Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry at once encompasses the history, the myths and embodies a vision for the future" (P 36)

His diction is simple for he selects the words and places them in the right place. The tone is colloquial and conversational, captivating the mind and hearts of the readers.

To conclude, it may be said that poetry for Mahapatra is a craft and his poetry appears to be complex because of its language of allusiveness but his poetry is essentially nothing but that of sex-exploration and self-discovery with a focus on the effective exploration of the realities of human life in all spheres. Mahapatra is not only an Indian poet but also a common wealth poet attempting to relate his life to his land of birth and making a search for the roots of his inner self.

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