

Panorama of Human Relationship and Significant Facet of Life in Jayant Mahapatra's Selected Poems

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Abstract

Jayanta Mahapatra, like many other Indian poets writing in English, is a bilingual poet.

Mahapatra's sensibility is essentially Indian and his Indianness is seen at its best in his poems about Orissa VBa where the local and regional is raised to the level of the universal.

The sun of the eastern coast of India shines through his poems. The eastern sea sends its morning wind through them. Mahapatra, a child of the sun and the sea delights in invoking the God of Fire and the god of water in many of his poems about Orissa. Themes such as those of the living non living suffering Indian women, the cycle of birth and change with an underlying pattern of fixity and permanence and of certain kinds of hypocrisy and prudery characteristic of the Indian are frequently found in his poems. Poverty, hunger and starvation have been chronic in India and they are the most significant facet of the life of the Indian masses. They also constituted a major theme in Mahapatra poetry. Another major theme of Mahapatra's poetry is human relationship and these Relationship Centre round sexual love.

Love, marriage and sex loom large in the poetry of Mahapatra. His interest in politics is revealed by an early poem on Gandhi.

Mahapatra's presentation of love as a moral presence in a sex taunted world avoids the usual sentimental blabber. His essentially Indian sensibility, his a mastery of English, his imagination, his economy of rising and startling images are all the signs and symbols of a great poet which he continued to write are bound to take him to heights not attained by any other Indian English poet.

Keywords: Mahapatra, Indian poets, Human relations, Life, Sea coast.

Jayanta Mahapatra, like many other Indian poets writing in English, is bilingual poet. Before taking to writing in English he had been writing in Oriya, his mother tongue, and his Oriya poetry also ranks very high. He has also translated into English the works of a number of noted Oriya poets. He has matured rapidly, and both the quality and quantity of his poetic output indicate that with the passing of time poetry would come to be recognised as the best in Indian English. A. K. Paniker says:

"his work has registered such a fast improvement in its intrinsic quality that today he is easily regarded as one of the top ranking writers of Indian poetry in English. It is no exaggeration to say that he is one of the few poets in India writing in English in whose case we don't have to over emphasize the foreignness of the medium to secure a sympathetic or concessional hearing for the work itself". **(Panikar:86)**

The genuineness of his sensibility and his language are alike doubtful, and he often resorts to devices, both in his matter and manner, which may be called gimmicks as so many attempts to sell Indian English poetry from abroad. R. Parthasarthy rightly points out;

"The true poets among Indo Anglicans seem to be those who write in English as well as in their own language. They are poets in their own right who have something significant to say, and know how to say it, both in English and their native tongue. They are not out to 'sell' their poetry through a skillful manipulation of words and the employment of sophisticated techniques". **(Parthasarthy:46)**

Mahapatra belongs to this small group of genuine poets. He is a bilingual writer, the secret of whose success lies in his not disowning his Indian inheritance, and not falling a prey to what has been called a feeling of alienation. He has, by and large, steered clear of the pitfalls and the result is an unmistakable authenticity of tone and treatment.

Mahapatra's sensibility is essentially Indian, but he does not create impression of Indianness by bringing in such traditional items as tigers, snakes, snake charmers, Jugglers, crocodiles etc. He is really Indian, because he does not consciously try to be Indian and thus he is

able to avoid many a hackneyed cliché and posture. His Indianness is seen at its best in his poems about Orissa, where the local and regional is raised to the level of the universal. **Orissa Landscapes, Evening in an Orissa Village, The Orissa Poems, Dawn at Puri** are Oriya first and therefore Indian too. Of how many other Indo English poets could we say something like this with equal validity?

In Mahapatra's best work the language is English but the sensibility is Oriya. An examination of the recurring images in his poems reveal that he is Oriya to the core. The sun of the eastern India shines through his poems. The eastern sea sends its morning wind through them. Mahapatra, a child of the sun and the sea, delights in invoking the god of fire and the god of water in poems like **Sunburst, The Exile, Indian Summer Poem, This Stranger, My Daughter and The Beggar Takes It As A Solace**. Puri is a living character in several of these poems. The temple, the priest, the beggar, the fisherman, the crow: these rise before us in all their objective reality and concreteness and then slowly transform themselves, almost imperceptibly, into monuments like images and symbols.

Taste For Tomorrow, for example, is a vignette of Puri with a number of such symbols of reality:

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 crowd thronging the temple door
 a huge holy flower
 Swaying in the wind of greater reasons.

In such poems he is an Oriya poet first, at last, but he is Indian too, because by a careful selection of details the local become symbolic of India as a whole. What is happening in Puri in the poem quoted above is lyrical of India as a whole. Similarly, **Bazaar 3 PM Orissa** is about Orissa but it is also about India as a whole. The Prostrating Woman, the Crawling People, the exhausted Rickshaw puller are not merely Oriya, they are Indian also. In **The Indian Way** the woman is idealised in a typical Indian way. The lover buys her a lotus and says that he would not even touch her before marriage as he would do the other one, the whore. The bringing in of the lotus romanticises the beloved, and double standard of the Indian male are revealed by the fact that he would not hesitate to touch the other woman, but he would not touch his lotus woman before the wedding night. Hunger and starvation which characterize the life of the Indian poor form the theme of a number of Mahapatra's poems. S. Vishwanathan points out,

"the poet's sensibility is both Indian and Modern and his response to the Indian scene is authentic and credible. The rendering of Indian vignettes, whether it is that of a village landscape as in **Village** or that of a city or town street scene as in **Main Temple Street, Puri, Dawn at Puri** or **Sunburst** is invariably an authentic evocation of the object and the individual response of the poetic self to it alike". (Vishwanathan:28)

Themes such as those of the living- not living, suffering Indian woman, the cycle of birth and change with an underlying pattern of fixity and performance, and of certain kinds of hypocrisy and prudery characteristic of the Indian, though recurrent, are by no means strained out of the finely rendered landscapes but well communicated through them and the poet's apprehension of them.

Poverty, hunger and starvation have been chronic in India and they are the most significant facets of the life of the Indian masses. They are also constituted a major theme in Mahapatra's poetry. The theme is studied from various angles and points of view and its varied nuances and poignant realities are brought out with intensity and credibility as in **Hunger, The Whorehouse in Calcutta Street** and **Man of His Night**. These poems are also three different studies of male sexuality and the exploitation of women. Consciousness of the poverty and the

suffering of the Indian masses, and of women as victims of male lust in a male dominated society, imparts to Mahapatra's poetry a tragic- pessimistic tone.

K.A. Panikar points out; "the poet's 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 Indian poet in English as disturbingly as in that of Jayanta Mahapatra".(Panikar;96)

The sombre wind, the darkened room, the intrigue at my finger tips,- these objects and images put their unmistakable emphasis on the sombre vision. The recurring portraits of women in his poetry point specifically to this aspect, they are drawn with sympathy and with precision:

The good wife
lies in my bed
through the long afternoon:
dreaming still, unexhausted
by the deep roar of funeral pyres

In the darkened room
a woman cannot find her reflection in the mirror.

Commercial exploitation of sex makes woman's destiny a tragic one and she takes it all mechanically, tired, bored and insensitive. She is merely a passionless tool, and she suffers both as a wife and as a whore. S. Viswanathan rightly points out that, when the poet deals with the themes of trade in flesh, poverty, and destitution his fineness does not fail him.

"He avoids making a tickling poetic opportunity of such themes and scenes which practically exploiting the experience of his response to such and handling them in his poems with a stern, unsentimental compassion. It is perhaps this quality of the true poet's social concern which matches Mahapatra's engagement with the cultural pressures of the Indian, especially those caused by the generational compulsions and constraints, that lends real substance to the body of his verse and elevates it to major status." (Vishwanathan;87)

Another major theme of Mahapatra poetry is human relationship, and these relationships centre round sexual love. Mahapatra often excels in love poems, especially those expressing, through the accoutrements of rhetorical irony, the fragility as well as the stasis of interpersonal relationships. The stasis is never accounted for in terms of tangible common places such as infidelity or incompatibility: more often it results from a staleness that enters life through the systemic certainties of familiarity and routine. In **Lost** the speaker observes:

"I watch your body ease off the Seasons
stretched out on the stone of my breath
going nowhere"

The encounter between man and woman is grippingly presented. Mahapatra's treatment of sex and love is quite a contrast to the calculated cynicism of Ezekiel, the flaunting sick melody of Kamala Das, or the sly indulgence of Shiv Kumar. In **The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street** we find the man who wanted to know more about women, turn into a statue and the body disobeys:

You fall back against her in the dumb light,
trying to learn something more about women
while she does what she thinks proper to please you ,
the sweet the little things the imagined
until the Statue of the man within
you've believed in the throughout the years
comes back to you, a disobeying toy
and the walls you wanted to pull down,
mirror only of things mortal, and passing by
like a girl holding on to your wide wilderness.

There is a moral anguish here which has been absent for a long time in Indian poetry in English. Mahapatra's presentation of love as a moral presence in a sex taunted world avoids the usual sentimental blabber. Here is an art that has justified itself by providing the exact contour of the inner self. In the process of the self understanding lies the way to an integration.

Love, marriage and sex loom large in the poetry of Mahapatra, but his more recent poetry shows a considerable widening of his interest to include contemporary reality in all its immense variety. His interest in politics is revealed by an early poem on Gandhi. More ambitious attempts at interpreting contemporary reality are to be found in two longer poems, **The Tattooed Taste** and **The Twenty fifth Anniversary of a Republic**. Indian poets writing in English usually evade or avoid inconvenient topics of this kind.

Mahapatra is a sincere, painstaking artist who revises and re-revises, polishes and re-polishes still perfection is achieved. For example, in **The Whorehouse in Calcutta** expressions like 'the little turning of blood' at 'the far edge of the rainbow' and 'her lonely breath thrashed against your kind' are terse and suggestive. His choice and arrangement of words cannot be bettered. His diction is remarkable for its economy and brevity.

His use of imagery is startling in its freshness and originality. The landscape of Orissa, more particularly its sea coast with its colourful sunsets and sunrises is imagined in all its glory and wonder. Stress laid on carefully selected details makes them symbolic of the scenes and sights of India as a whole. The sun of the eastern coast of India shines through his poems. The eastern sea sends its morning wind through them. Mahapatra, a child of the sun and the sea delights in evoking the God of Fire and the god of water in his poems like **Sunburst, The Exile, Indian Summer Poems, This Stranger, My Daughter, The Begger Takes It as a Solace**.

Puri is a living character in several of these poems. The temple, the priest, the begger, the fisherman, and the crow -these rise before us in all their objective reality and concreteness and then slowly transform themselves into monuments like images and symbols.

Mahapatra is a poet of promise. His essentially Indian sensibility, his mastery of English, his mythopoeic imagination, his economy of phrasing and startling images are all the signs and

symbols of a great poet, which are bound to take him to the heights not yet attained by any other Indian English poet.

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