

Fluid Meanings: Poetics of Water in Jayanta Mahapatra and Susheel Kumar Sharma

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Abstract

This paper comparatively examines the poetics of water in the poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra and Susheel Kumar Sharma. In Indian cultural and literary traditions, water functions as a sacred, life-giving, purifying, and regenerative force. However, modern poetry reinterprets this inherited symbolism through experiences of ecological degradation, cultural disillusionment, psychological conflict, and social change. In poems such as “On the Bank of the Ganges,” “Way of the River,” and “Song of the River,” Mahapatra presents water as an inward and existential presence. His rivers evoke memory, alienation, fragmented identity, and the uncertain search for spiritual wholeness. In contrast, Sharma’s poems, including “Chasing a Dream on the Ganges,” “A Pond Nearby,” “The Kerala Flood 2018,” and “The Fountain Square,” represent water as a material, ecological, and socially shared reality. Drawing on cultural studies, myth criticism, ecocriticism, phenomenology, and postcolonial theory, the paper argues that Mahapatra internalizes water as a metaphor for consciousness and existential uncertainty, whereas Sharma externalizes it through ecological crisis, mythic continuity, and ethical responsibility. Together, their poetry reveals the changing relationship between tradition, nature, society, and the modern self.

Keywords

Water poetics; Jayanta Mahapatra; Susheel Kumar Sharma; Indian English poetry; Ecocriticism; Myth and tradition; Existentialism

Introduction

Water has long held a central place in the Indian cultural imagination as a material necessity, sacred presence, and potent literary symbol. From the Rg Veda’s hymns invoking it as life-giving and purifying to its role in ritual and myth, water has shaped religious consciousness, aesthetics, and philosophy in Indian literature. In Indian English poetry, it manifests as river, rain, flood, or sea, serving as a metaphor for identity, memory, spirituality, and ecological crisis. Poets Jayanta Mahapatra and Susheel Kumar Sharma compellingly engage this symbolism, blending inherited traditions with modern sensibilities.

As a pioneer of Indian English poetry, Mahapatra reconfigures water introspectively and unsettlingly in poems like “On the Bank of the Ganges,” “Way of the River,” and “Song of

the River.” Here, rivers embody psychological and existential tensions, intersecting ancestral memory, personal identity, and cultural disillusionment. Ambivalent — sacred yet sullied, continuous yet fragmentary — water mirrors the modern self: alienated, searching, and suspended between tradition and modernity.

In contrast, Susheel Kumar Sharma’s *Unwinding Self* portrays water as a dynamic, socially embedded force in poems such as “Chasing a Dream on the Ganges,” “A Pond Nearby,” and “The Kerala Flood 2018.” Integrating cosmology, myth, and politics, Sharma addresses Anthropocene realities — drying rivers, devastating floods, commodified resources — while critiquing degradation and affirming water’s restorative potential. Unlike Mahapatra’s inward focus, Sharma’s poetics is outward, emphasizing collective experience and ethical re-evaluation of human-nature relations.

This paper offers a comparative analysis of selected poems to explore water as a symbolic and thematic axis. It addresses: (1) How do Mahapatra and Sharma reinterpret water’s traditional sacredness in modern Indian contexts? (2) In what ways does it site tensions between tradition and modernity? (3) How does it mediate psychological, ecological, cultural, and existential dimensions? (4) What do their similarities and divergences reveal about shifts in Indian English poetics?

The central argument posits that, despite shared heritage, Mahapatra internalizes water as a metaphor for consciousness, memory, and existential uncertainty, while Sharma externalizes it amid ecological crisis, mythic continuity, and ethical engagement. This lens reveals water as a dynamic medium articulating evolving ties between self, society, and nature in Indian English poetry.

Conceptual Framework for the Comparative Study

This study employs an interdisciplinary framework to analyse the poetics of water in the works of Jayanta Mahapatra and Susheel Kumar Sharma, situating their poetry at the intersection of tradition, modernity, ecology, and subjectivity. Water, as the central trope, functions more than mere imagery; it constitutes a dynamic symbolic system mediating spiritual, cultural, psychological, and environmental dimensions of human experience.

The framework establishes its foundation in the cultural-symbolic significance of water within Indian thought, conceptualized as both material and metaphysical. Rooted in Vedic cosmology and sustained through myth and ritual, water signifies purification, regeneration, continuity, and cosmic order. Rivers like the Ganga embody sacred entities, divine presence, and civilizational memory. This inherited symbolic reservoir forms the common ground for both poets, who reinterpret it divergently. Thus, water is recognized as an archetypal, culturally embedded sign, whose meanings are historically and contextually inflected, not fixed or singular.

Building on this cultural foundation, the study employs myth criticism to examine how both poets engage with and transform traditional water narratives. In Sharma’s poetry, myth operates as an explicit structural and thematic device: references to Ganga’s descent, *Pralaya*, and Ram Setu position water within a cyclical cosmology of destruction and renewal, serving as interpretive frameworks for contemporary ecological crises. Mahapatra’s engagement, by contrast, is often indirect and ironic; while the sacred river persists, its aura is destabilized by

images of decay, alienation, and disillusionment. Myth criticism thus explores how shared cultural symbols are re-signified — either as sites of existential questioning (Mahapatra) or sources of ethical continuity (Sharma).

A second major component is ecocriticism, particularly relevant to Sharma but applicable, differently, to Mahapatra. It analyses water as an ecological reality shaped by human intervention, technology, and degradation. Sharma's poems depict water as flood, drought, and commodified spectacle, reflecting Anthropocene contradictions and positioning water as both victim and agent — depleted, diverted, or unleashed destructively. This highlights water's ethical dimension, articulating questions of sustainability, responsibility, and coexistence. In Mahapatra, ecocritical concerns are more existentially inflected; polluted or exhausted rivers metaphorize cultural decay and spiritual emptiness. The framework accommodates this by expanding ecocriticism into an eco-phenomenological perspective, where nature is a lived, subjective experience, tracing water's transformation from ecological entity to psychological/ontological condition.

To address this interior dimension, the framework incorporates phenomenology and existential theory, especially concerning Mahapatra. Water intertwines with consciousness, memory, and identity, becoming a "field of force" acting on the mind, a repository of ancestral presence, and a metaphor for self-fragmentation and the search for wholeness. Phenomenology emphasizes perception, temporality, and embodiment in experiencing water. Existential theory deepens this by situating water within the tensions of isolation, meaninglessness, and the desire for coherence in a disenchanted modern world. Sharma's poetry, though less introspective, engages with collective existence and ethical responsibility, adapting existential concerns to communal and socio-political contexts where water crises reflect broader governance, moral, and identity conflicts. Thus, Mahapatra's existentialism is introspective and individual, while Sharma's is ethical and collective.

The framework also incorporates a postcolonial perspective to examine how both poets negotiate tradition within a modern, globalized context. Postcolonial theory analyses the reinterpretation of inherited symbols like the Ganga in response to urbanization, industrialization, and ideological conflict. Mahapatra often expresses cultural dislocation and ritual scepticism, reflecting the fractured postcolonial subject. Sharma asserts a more assertive reclamation of indigenous knowledge and mythic frameworks, using them to critique the present. Both poets are situated within a continuum of postcolonial engagement, actively reworking tradition rather than rejecting or accepting it uncritically.

Finally, the study adopts a comparative methodological approach across three axes:

1. External vs. Internal: Ecological reality vs. psychological interiority.
2. Continuity vs. Rupture: Faith in restoration vs. experience of fragmentation.
3. Collective vs. Individual: Social ethics vs. existential selfhood. These axes provide a structured analysis of convergence and divergence, allowing fluid movement between texts to identify patterns, contrasts, and intersections in water imagery.

In sum, this framework positions water as a multivalent, mediating symbol connecting diverse domains of meaning. By integrating cultural, mythic, ecological, phenomenological,

and postcolonial perspectives, the study demonstrates that the poetics of water in Mahapatra and Sharma is constitutive of their poetic vision. Through this lens, water emerges as the site where tensions of modern Indian experience — past/present, self/society, nature/culture — are most vividly articulated.

Cultural and Mythic Foundations of Water

Any meaningful comparative study of the poetics of water in the works of Jayanta Mahapatra and Susheel Kumar Sharma must begin with an understanding of the cultural and mythic matrix within which water operates in Indian thought. In the Indian imagination, water is never merely a physical substance; it is simultaneously a cosmic principle, sacred entity, ritual medium, and cultural memory. Its symbolic density arises from a civilizational history spanning Vedic hymns to epic narratives, ritual practices, and daily life. Both poets inherit this symbolic reservoir but engage with it differently — one interrogatively and inwardly, the other reconstructively and ethically outwardly. This section establishes the cultural and mythic foundations of water as a shared framework informing their poetic reconfigurations.

In Vedic cosmology, water is conceived not merely as an element but as a primordial generative force. The Ṛg Veda's *Āpaḥ Sūktam* (10.9.1-9, Hymn to the Waters) celebrates water as life-sustaining, purifying, and healing, invoked as a maternal force — nurturing, protective, and divine. Water is an active principle nourishing body and spirit, associated with fertility, abundance, renewal, and the power to cleanse moral and physical impurities. This establishes a foundational duality: water is both material and metaphysical, tangible and sacred. This conception resonates across later Indian traditions, shaping perceptions of rivers, rains, and oceans.

Water's status as one of the *Pañca Mahābhūtas* (five great elements — earth, water, fire, air, and ether) further reinforces its ontological significance. As *jala*, water is integral to the universe and the human body alike, symbolizing fluidity, adaptability, and cohesion. It elevates water beyond a resource to a fundamental principle of existence. In ritual contexts, this manifests in acts of worship, purification rites, and life-cycle ceremonies, such as *tīrtha* (holy water), *abhisheka* (ritual bathing), or daily ablutions, mediating between the human and divine, profane and sacred.

Closely tied to ritual significance is the mythic personification of rivers, especially the Ganga, Yamuna, and Saraswati, revered as living goddesses. The Ganga holds a particularly exalted position, her descent through Shiva's matted locks encoding multiple meanings: water as a bridge between cosmic realms and divine grace, yet so immense it must be contained, embodying both creative and destructive potential. This nurturing yet overwhelming duality recurs in literary representations.

Rivers are also deeply connected to civilizational memory. Settlements and cultures developed along riverbanks, making water a silent witness to history. Rituals like immersion, pilgrimage, and cremation embed rivers into collective consciousness. Ganga bathing, for instance, is believed to cleanse sins and facilitate *moksha*, linking water to life, death, and rebirth. Thus, rivers function as physical lifelines and temporal conduits of ancestral memory and cultural continuity.

Indian myth, however, does not present water as unambiguously benevolent. *Pralaya* — cosmic dissolution in a primordial ocean—introduces ambivalence, with water as an agent of destruction erasing forms for renewal. Similarly, the *Samudra Manthan* (churning of the ocean) portrays water as both poison and nectar, danger and immortality. These narratives underscore water's paradoxical nature — sustaining life yet capable of annihilation — a paradox modern poets use to articulate contemporary tensions.

Beyond pan-Indian myths, water is embedded in regional and local traditions, acquiring specific cultural meanings. Rivers feature in daily prayers, festivals, and oral narratives, reinforcing their presence in communal life. The invocation “Ganga, Yamuna, Godavari, Saraswati, Narmada, Sindhu, Kaveri”¹ symbolically unifies India's sacred geography, though regional diversity persists, with each river carrying unique associations and resonances.

Against this backdrop, modern Indian English poets like Mahapatra and Sharma engage with water imagery, negotiating tradition and modernity, sacred aura and degraded reality. Their poetry reinterprets, questions, and reimagines myth rather than merely repeating it.

Mahapatra destabilizes water's mythic foundations. The Ganga, traditionally a purifying mother, appears polluted, exhausted, and stripped of sanctity. Bathing becomes mechanical, devoid of meaning, reflecting disillusionment with eroded symbolic power due to modern neglect and decay. Yet, Mahapatra retains the mythic framework as a tension between tradition and reality, the river mirroring cultural fragmentation — memory of sacredness and experience of loss.

Sharma, conversely, affirms mythic dimensions while critiquing modern disruptions. References to Ganga's descent, *Ram Setu*, and *Pralaya* serve as living frameworks for understanding present crises. Water retains sacred and ethical significance, emphasizing human-nature interconnectedness. Sharma acknowledges modern distortions — drying rivers, floods, commodification — yet invokes myth not to escape the past but to assert a moral and ecological vision rooted in cultural memory.

Both poets, then, draw on water's cultural and mythic foundations but read them in opposite directions. For Mahapatra, continuity fractures under degradation, and the sacred river becomes a site of alienation and uncertainty; for Sharma, myth persists as a counterpoint to modern crisis, offering critique alongside hope. In both cases — the sacred river becoming ecological degradation, life-giving water turning destructive, purification becoming pollution and commodification — water functions in this poetry not merely as image but as a dynamic, historically rewritten symbol of modern Indian experience.

Water as Sacred vs. Desecrated

One of the most compelling axes for comparing the poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra and Susheel Kumar Sharma is the tension between the sacred and the desecrated in their representations of water. Rooted in a shared cultural tradition that venerates water as purifying, life-giving, and divine, both poets inherit a symbolic framework where rivers — especially the Ganga — embody spiritual continuity and civilizational identity. Yet, in their poetic reworkings, this inherited sanctity is neither preserved intact nor wholly discarded; instead, it becomes a site of contestation, revealing the fractures of modern existence. Through divergent aesthetic

strategies, Mahapatra and Sharma explore how water transitions from sacred presence to desecrated reality, and what this signifies for the individual and the collective.

In the traditional Indian imagination, water's sacredness is inseparable from its ritual function. Rivers are pilgrimage sites where bathing cleanses sins and facilitates spiritual renewal. The Ganga, in particular, is revered as a divine mother, whose waters carry purificatory and liberatory power. This sacrality is experiential, embedded in daily and collective practices. However, in the modern context, this sacred aura is undermined by ecological degradation, urbanization, and the mechanization of ritual. Both poets locate their explorations within this tension between ideal and reality.

In Mahapatra's poetry, the sacredness of water is often presented only to be subverted and destabilized. In "On the Bank of the Ganges," the river initially appears as a site of traditional ritual, crowded with "pious bathers" performing purification. This invokes the cultural script of the Ganga as a sacred space for redemption and divine connection. Yet, this sanctity is immediately questioned. The river is described in terms of neglect and decay — its banks "mildewed," its presence diminished, its dignity compromised. The striking image of the river as "an abandoned doll, / used abused by delinquent children" encapsulates this transformation: the sacred mother is reduced to a discarded object, stripped of agency and reverence.

This shift from sacred to desecrated is not merely environmental but a reflection of cultural and spiritual exhaustion. The ritual acts appear mechanical, driven by habit rather than faith. The bathers' faces are "blank and waxen," suggesting a loss of individual consciousness and emotional engagement. The river, once a mediator between human and divine, becomes a mirror of alienation, reflecting the emptiness of ritual divorced from meaning. Mahapatra's desecrated water is thus both physically polluted and symbolically hollowed, its sacred significance eroded by the practices that once sustained it.

Yet, Mahapatra does not entirely abandon water's sacred dimension. Instead, he retains it as a latent possibility, a memory haunting the present. The speaker's desire "to be whole, to know how the water lies" signals an ongoing quest for integration amid disillusionment. The river's ambiguity — simultaneously sacred and sullied — becomes the ground of this quest, embodying the tension between inherited belief and modern scepticism, between transcendence and its absence. In Mahapatra's work, the desecration of water is inseparable from a crisis of meaning, where the loss of sacredness reflects a broader fragmentation of the self.

This dynamic deepens in other river poems, where the sacred is internalized and abstracted. In "Song of the River," the external river yields to a "sacred river" that "grows silently in my mind." Here, the sacred is no longer in the physical world but in consciousness. The desecration of the external river — its pollution, its loss of vitality — necessitates this inward turn. Yet, this internal river remains elusive, its "rhythm of dark waters" suggesting mystery rather than clarity. The sacred persists but is detached from communal ritual, relocated within the uncertain terrain of the self. Mahapatra thus redefines the sacred not as inherited certainty but as a fragile, subjective experience.

In contrast, Sharma's poetry presents a more dialectical engagement with the sacred and the desecrated, foregrounding material and ecological dimensions. Water retains its sacred associations — linked to myth, ritual, and cultural memory — but is constantly confronted with environmental degradation and human intervention. The sacred is not lost but threatened and violated, and the poet's task is to expose this violation while reaffirming water's underlying sanctity.

In "Chasing a Dream on the Ganges," the river is framed as a site of spiritual quest, evoking mythic and religious significance as a medium for transcendence. Yet, this journey is disrupted by modernity's noise — the "honking of trucks," crowded ghats, urban intrusion. The inability to perform rituals in peace signals a rupture in sacred space, where the external environment no longer supports the inner quest. Unlike Mahapatra, Sharma does not present this rupture as irreversible. The sacred persists as an ideal, even if difficult to access.

The tension intensifies in "A Pond Nearby," where water appears through its absence. The drying rivulet and stagnant pond represent ecological crisis and the erosion of the sacred. The pond, once a source of life and communal activity, is reduced to a "scummy" remnant, devoid of vitality. This reflects human intervention — diversion for technological and industrial purposes — and highlights the fragility of the natural order. The sacredness of water is implied through its loss; its absence becomes a desecration, revealing how ecological violation undermines both physical and cultural life.

In "The Kerala Flood 2018," Sharma explores excess as desecration. Water, no longer absent, is overwhelmingly present as a destructive force, devastating lives and landscapes. The flood, triggered by the Idukki dam's failure, exposes human control's limits and challenges water's harnessing without consequence. Yet, the poem frames the catastrophe within a mythic context, invoking *Pralaya* — cosmic dissolution preceding renewal. This dual framing presents the flood as both destructive and potentially restorative, a form of divine or natural retribution clearing the ground for regeneration.

Here, the sacred is not negated but reconfigured. The flood becomes a reckoning, forcing confrontation with ethical and spiritual failures leading to ecological imbalance. The questioning of divine presence — whether God has "vanished" or "abandoned his abode" — reflects a crisis similar to Mahapatra's, but the resolution differs. Instead of internalizing the sacred, Sharma situates it within a larger cosmic cycle, where destruction precedes renewal. Water, even destructively, retains sacred connection, functioning as transformation rather than annihilation.

A similar dynamic operates in "The Fountain Square," where water is commodified into a controlled aesthetic spectacle. The musical fountain, with coloured lights and choreography, masks the violence and exploitation underlying its existence. The revelation that water cuts marble in quarries, injuring workers, exposes the hidden cost. The desecration is ecological and ethical, implicating labour and power systems. The sacred element is reduced to an instrument of profit and display, its deeper significance obscured by surface aesthetics.

Yet, Sharma invokes myth — the *Maya Sabha* of the *Mahabharata* — suggesting such illusions are not new but part of a recurring pattern of deception. By linking the modern fountain to myth, he reintroduces the sacred as a critical lens through which contemporary

realities can be understood. The desecration becomes a call to recognize and reclaim water's deeper significance.

Both poets, then, register water's sacred erosion — through pollution, mechanized ritual, ecological crisis, or commodification — but respond to it differently. Mahapatra's existential introspection treats the sacred's irretrievability as a crisis of personal meaning, turning the river inward until it survives only as memory. Sharma, more interventionist, maintains that the sacred is recoverable: desecration is a problem to confront through cultural memory and ethical action, not an endpoint to mourn. The sacred–desecrated tension thus shows how traditional symbols are reconfigured in modern Indian English poetry, water becoming a contested space where cultural memory, ecological reality, and individual consciousness intersect.

Water as Ecological Reality vs. Psychological Interior

A central dimension of the comparative poetics of Jayanta Mahapatra and Susheel Kumar Sharma lies in the shifting location of water — from external ecological reality to internal psychological space. This is not a rigid opposition but a continuum along which both poets operate, with sharply differing emphases: in Sharma's poetry, water remains insistently material — it floods, dries, stagnates, and is diverted by human intervention — while in Mahapatra's work it undergoes interiorization, becoming a metaphor for memory, consciousness, and the fractured self.

This inward movement is clearest in “Way of the River” and “Evening Landscape by the River.” In the former, the river is a presence that “acts on my life,” an intimate, dynamic force that shapes the speaker's thought and identity rather than a landscape merely observed — a phenomenological shift from objective description to lived experience. In the latter, water intertwines with mortality: described in terms of darkness and stillness, it blurs the line between life and death, presence and absence, so that the speaker's contemplation of the river becomes a contemplation of the self, marked by isolation and vulnerability. (Mahapatra's parallel interiorization of the sacred river in “Song of the River” is discussed above.) In each case, the river is less a geographical entity than a field of consciousness reflecting the self's complexities.

Despite this emphasis on psychological interiority, Mahapatra's poetry does not entirely sever its connection with ecological reality. The physical river remains present, often neglected or decayed, providing the backdrop against which the self's drama unfolds — the polluted or diminished river reinforcing a sense of cultural and spiritual decline even as Mahapatra ultimately privileges the internal register.

In contrast, Sharma's poetry foregrounds water's physical presence and its altered states within environmental crisis. The Idukki dam's breach in “The Kerala Flood 2018,” the drying rivulet and “scummy” pond in “A Pond Nearby,” and the commodified spectacle of “The Fountain Square” — its choreography masking the marble quarries where water injures labourers — are discussed in detail above; here they matter as evidence that water in Sharma remains materially consequential, shaping lives immediately rather than serving as a private symbol.

Across these poems, Sharma's treatment of water as ecological reality is characterised by material immediacy and ethical urgency: water is embedded in concrete situations, shaped by human action, and capable of eliciting collective response. His poetry aligns with ecocriticism in emphasising human–non-human interconnectedness; even when it invokes myth or spirituality, those elements remain grounded in water's physical realities.

Comparing the two, the contrast between ecological reality and psychological interior emerges as a key divergence: Mahapatra's poetry is inward-looking, using water to explore the complexities of individual consciousness, while Sharma's is outward-looking, grounded in the material world and concerned with collective experience. The contrast is not a rigid opposition but a complementary one — together the two poets show that water can function simultaneously as ecological reality and psychological interior, connecting the material and the metaphysical, the collective and the individual, and reflecting a broader shift in modern Indian English poetry as environmental urgency increasingly joins, without replacing, the inward turn of earlier decades.

Water as Paradox

The poetics of Jayanta Mahapatra and Susheel Kumar Sharma position water not as a static signifier but as a profoundly paradoxical element — at once creative and destructive, pure and dissolving, continuous and erased. Mahapatra situates this paradox within the psychological and existential realm, a mirror for inner fragmentation; Sharma treats it as a material and dialectical condition, grounded in the ecological crises and socio-political tensions of the Anthropocene.

In Mahapatra's work, this paradox recurs across his central images: the Ganga of "On the Bank of the Ganges," at once revered and, in the figure of the "abandoned doll," materially debased; the river of "Way of the River," which shapes the speaker's life yet yields no coherent narrative, fostering estrangement even as it connects; and the water of "Evening Landscape by the River," which sustains the community even as it receives their remains, holding presence and erasure together. What these instances share is a refusal of resolution: the search for certainty in "how the water lies" is perpetually thwarted, the fluid element resisting the fixed meanings a modern subject craves.

In Sharma's poetry, water's paradoxes are transposed from the individual psyche to the material and ethical sphere. The oscillation between the devastating flood of "The Kerala Flood 2018" and the depleted stagnation of "A Pond Nearby" are not opposite accidents but interconnected consequences of human mismanagement — the life-giver becoming a source of suffering in both excess and absence. A parallel paradox governs "The Fountain Square," where water revered in tradition is treated as a disposable instrument in the marble quarries its choreographed fountain conceals; Sharma frames this, via the *Maya Sabha* of the *Mahābhārata*, as a historical recurrence of illusion rather than a new failing. Underlying both is a paradox of control: the collapse of the Idukki dam is a reminder that water exceeds human calculation, which is why Sharma turns to the mythic frame of *Pralaya* — destruction read not as an end but as a component of renewal.

Comparing these visions reveals a fundamental divergence in poetic strategy. Mahapatra internalizes the paradox, converting it into an existential condition in which the river mirrors

the self's instability — the lack of resolution a reflection of fractured modern identity rather than a failure. Sharma externalizes the paradox, treating contradiction as a diagnostic tool for societal critique: his poetry seeks not closure but an expansion of awareness, urging recognition that flood and drought, sacredness and desecration, belong to a single interconnected ecological logic.

Despite these differing emphases, both poets share a commitment to water's fluid, irreducible nature. Neither flattens it into a singular emblem; instead, the paradox of water becomes essential to its power as a poetic symbol, a medium for articulating the pressures of modern Indian experience — tradition against change, faith against scepticism, the individual against the collective — as a fluid process rather than a fixed destination.

Water and Human Condition

In the poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra, water serves as an intimate, unsettling medium for exploring the fragility of the human condition. His rivers navigate the interiorities of consciousness, bearing the weight of memory, history, and existential doubt — an element that holds together the individual's search for identity, the burden of ancestral legacy, and the alienation of contemporary existence.

This condition is defined, first, by a fractured mirror of the self: rituals once imbued with collective spiritual meaning now appear as hollow gestures — bathers moving with “blank and waxen” faces — exposing the disjunction between inherited belief and lived reality, and leaving identity a fragile, ongoing negotiation rather than a fixed inheritance. It is compounded by memory's paradoxical pull: rivers are traditionally temporal conduits, yet Mahapatra's waters disrupt continuity as often as they sustain it, leaving ancestral traces fragmented and only partly assimilable. And it is deepened by an existential isolation that persists even within crowded, communal spaces — water, conventionally a symbol of unity, becoming here an agent of separation, a loneliness at the heart of community.

Moreover, Mahapatra links water to the inevitability of human finitude. Rivers function as the threshold between life and death — sites of cremation and immersion — where transience is ritually acknowledged but never mastered; the river absorbs human traces even as it carries them downstream, becoming a symbol of both presence and dissolution. Yet Mahapatra's vision remains anchored in restless seeking: the river's refusal to yield clear answers sustains a persistent desire for inquiry, as if the search for meaning matters as much as its elusive attainment.

Conversely, Susheel Kumar Sharma situates the human condition within a collective, ethical framework, where water operates as a shared resource rather than a private mirror, reflecting the systemic entanglements of the contemporary world.

A central theme in Sharma's work is the breakdown of the human–nature relationship through exploitation and technological hubris: the drying of rivulets, the stagnation of ponds, and the destruction of floods are material manifestations of a moral crisis, the state of our rivers a barometer of our ethical failures. Unlike Mahapatra's scepticism, however, Sharma's poetry retains a sense of restoration's possibility — myth and cultural memory function not as relics but as living frameworks for interpreting and addressing present crises, so that the human

condition becomes not a static alienation but a dynamic one, shaped by the choices made regarding collective survival.

This is further underscored by Sharma's focus on communal resilience. Where Mahapatra emphasizes individual solitude, Sharma depicts water as a catalyst for collective experience: events like floods collapse social distance, revealing vulnerability while affirming the necessity of solidarity — meaning constructed here through shared labour and mutual responsibility rather than excavated from the depths of a single psyche.

Despite these disparate orientations, both poets converge on water's fluidity as the ideal vehicle for human complexity, capturing mutability, uncertainty, and the desire for continuity amid rapid change, and acknowledging the limits of human knowledge in a world that resists finality. Ultimately, the contrast between them reveals two faces of the modern condition — one turned inward to confront the psychological anxieties of the post-traditional subject, the other turned outward to the material and ethical imperatives of the ecological age — together offering a fuller picture of a life that is, like their shared subject, fluid, multifaceted, and forever in flux.

Water as Temporal Force

In Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry, water functions as a potent temporal force, rendering time not as linear progression but as a fluid, layered, unresolved continuum. His rivers move through the depths of consciousness to carry the sediment of ancestral memory, the persistence of the past, and the uncertainty of the present — articulating a modern consciousness haunted by historical echoes it cannot fully inhabit.

This temporality is carried by the same poems discussed above, in a different register. In "Way of the River," time is not an external sequence but an internal force shaping the self, memory persisting as detached residue rather than a stable foundation. In "Evening Landscape by the River," this temporality shifts into stasis, the river's stillness intensifying existential doubt as flow gives way to a charged, uncomfortable silence. And the interiorized "sacred river" of "Song of the River" completes the shift: detached from chronological sequence, it renders time as nonlinear, past and present intermingling within the speaker's consciousness — duration lived rather than merely measured.

Conversely, Susheel Kumar Sharma presents water as a temporal force grounded in cyclical natural patterns, historical crisis, and collective social experience. Where Mahapatra's temporality is introspective and fragmented, Sharma's is situated within the interplay of ecological cycles and the anthropogenic disruptions of the present, registering the rhythms of the environment alongside the violent interventions of modern development.

A defining feature of this treatment is Sharma's reliance on cyclical, mythically framed processes: the drying rivulet of "A Pond Nearby" and the excess of "The Kerala Flood 2018" mark ruptures in a natural rhythm that Sharma, through the concept of *Pralaya*, situates within a larger cosmic scale — contemporary disaster read not as an isolated endpoint but as a moment of destruction and renewal within a recurring pattern. Against this, the engineered temporality of dams and the choreographed spectacle of "The Fountain Square" represent a shift from organic to controlled sequence, water registering the transition from ecological interdependence to technological manipulation.

Despite these disparate orientations, Sharma's poetry retains a sense of forward momentum absent from Mahapatra's stillness: his crises read as moments of transition, the destructive flood clearing ground for a potential realignment — a vision of time that is urgent yet transformative.

When considered together, these two visions offer a complementary understanding of water as a temporal force: Mahapatra's rivers introspective and layered, emphasizing the subjective fragmentation of time as it intersects with identity and memory; Sharma's waters grounded in the collective and material dimensions of time, reflecting ecological cycles, historical process, and mythic pattern. Both poets ultimately demonstrate that water — capable of flowing, stagnating, or overwhelming — is uniquely suited to expressing time's complexity, charting the human condition as an ongoing negotiation with the past, the present, and the unfolding uncertainties of the future.

Conclusion

The comparative study of Jayanta Mahapatra and Susheel Kumar Sharma demonstrates that water is not merely a recurring natural image in their poetry. It is a complex and dynamic symbol through which they examine culture, memory, identity, spirituality, ecological crisis, and the human condition. Both poets inherit the rich symbolic significance of water from Indian religious, mythological, and cultural traditions. Rivers, ponds, floods, and sacred waters carry associations of purification, continuity, regeneration, and cosmic power. At the same time, their poems reveal that these traditional meanings cannot remain unchanged in the modern world. Pollution, urbanization, technological intervention, commodification, and social neglect transform the sacred into the desecrated and the life-giving into the destructive.

Mahapatra's poetry primarily turns water inward. His rivers become spaces of memory, psychological conflict, cultural disillusionment, and existential questioning. The polluted or diminished river reflects the fractured condition of the modern self. In poems such as "On the Bank of the Ganges," "Way of the River," and "Song of the River," water connects the speaker with ancestral memory and cultural tradition, yet it also exposes the loss of certainty and spiritual coherence. The sacred survives, but often only as a troubled memory or an inward experience. Mahapatra therefore presents water as a metaphor for an incomplete search for identity and wholeness.

Sharma, by contrast, gives water a more external, material, and collective presence. His poems address drying water sources, floods, technological control, labour, environmental damage, and the unequal consequences of development. Through references to the Ganga, *Pralaya*, and other mythic frameworks, he connects present ecological crises with older cultural understandings of destruction and renewal. His poetry does not treat tradition as a fixed inheritance; rather, it uses tradition as an ethical resource for interpreting contemporary problems. Water becomes a call for responsibility, ecological awareness, and collective action.

The comparison, therefore, reveals two complementary directions in modern Indian English poetry. Mahapatra emphasizes internal fragmentation, while Sharma stresses ecological and social responsibility. Mahapatra's water is introspective and existential; Sharma's is ecological and ethical. Yet both poets understand water as fluid, paradoxical, and resistant to

a single meaning. Their poetry finally suggests that the crisis of water is also a crisis of human relationships—with nature, culture, memory, and one another. Through their different poetic visions, water emerges as a vital medium for understanding the changing realities of modern Indian experience.

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¹ गङ्गे च यमुने चैव गोदावरि सरस्वति । नर्मदे सिन्धु कावेरि जलेऽस्मिन् संनिधिं कुरु ॥ *Gṅge ca yamune caiva godāvari sarasvati | Narmade sindhu kāveri jale'smin saṁnidhiṁ kuru* || Tr. “O sacred rivers — Ganga, Yamuna, Godavari, Saraswati, Narmada, Sindhu, and Kaveri — please be present in this water.”