

ECO-CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE WORKS OF JAYANTA MAHAPATRA

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Abstract

Eco-consciousness has figured in Indian writing in English frequently interwoven along with other themes. In Jayanta Mahapatra's works too, his awareness of and concern for ecological well-being is tied up with the other issues that feature in his works. Jayanta Mahapatra (1928-2023), was a prolific poet whose poetry gave expression to his personal experiences and anguish as well as the pain of the downtrodden, the marginalised. While his works highlighted the unique cultural experience of Orissa, they also debunked the social and religious conventions as exploitative and unjust. The Orissa to be found in his works is not just limited to the temples and the places of pilgrimage as it has also been explored in terms of its scenic landscapes, which frequently are entangled with the thematic implications of his works. This natural scenery stands for its own material presence too. The eco-consciousness to be found in Mahapatra's works is overt at times while in other instances, he pits the sphere of nature as a comforting foil to the treacherous human society. This paper explores the poetic instances where Mahapatra's ecocritical awareness can be witnessed.

Keywords- Nature, Ecology, ecocriticism, landscape, marginalised

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Jayanta Mahapatra (1928-2023) a stalwart of the Indian English literary scene passed away this year, leaving a sprawling body of work which bears testimony of his stature. A bilingual poet Mahapatra wrote in English and in his mother tongue Oriya. Most of his poetry revolves around the environs of Orissa as expressed in the following excerpt:

The important places of his state, Cuttack, Puri, Bhubaneswar and Konark, the Chillika lake, its legends, history and myths, its tradition and culture, its past, present and future, have been integrated into his mental landscape. ... The tradition of Orissa, her history and culture and what is more, her historic past, have been associated with these places, from which his poems have originated. Mahapatra has given ample evidence of this awareness in many poems, particularly in "Evening in an Orissa Village," "The Orissa Poem," "The Indian Poems," "The Indian Way," "Dawn at Puri" and so on. (Padihari 170)

While Mahapatra paid attention to the physical features in the settings of his poetry but he remained faithful also in his representation of the contemporary society wherein he incorporates the socio-cultural scenario as he found it. There is a strong sense of the place and its history to be found in Mahapatra's works. In an interview given to Neeru Tandon, Mahapatra's response to a question about his bilingualism betrays this attachment to the country, its history and its culture. He says: "I will like to mention that Oriya is my mother tongue ... as the medium of my education was English. I felt I had a better command over English language so I started writing in English. Still, I consider myself as an Oriya poet" (Tandon, 4)

His poetry also spoke for the marginal, the destitute, and dismantles the privileged centre in the process. His poetry was as much an outlet for his personal anguish as a medium for him to express the pain of the have-nots. The extract given below traces the style employed by Mahapatra and the kind of motivation behind his art:

His identity is a fractured one, rooted in his Hindu ancestry and inherited Christianity; the self, defined by doubt, dilemma and ambivalence. There is attraction to mainstream Hindu society and culture. At the same time, many of his poetic personae feel repelled by sectarian or creedal Hinduism. In particular, the underdog, the dispossessed, the infirm, the diseased that throng Hindu temples everywhere, produce in him a profound irony seen through a detached eye. ... The image of the disabled and the infirm incessantly populate this landscape. In "Taste for Tomorrow", the irony is incisive: "Five faceless lepers / move aside / as a priest passes by" (Mohanty 122-124).

As can be seen from the extract quoted above, Mahapatra's outlook towards his native place is not rose-tinted. His descriptions of the environs of Orissa are interspersed with scathing commentary on the bleak sociological conditions he sees around himself. It is this tendency to speak for those who can't that as we will see further in the paper allows him to be able to extend his innate sense of empathy towards the other than human, the ecocritical relevance of his works have been analysed in this paper.

In "Landscape as Memory: The Mapping of Process and its Representation in a Melanesian Society", Susanne Kuchler specifies the use of landscape as an important poetic tool, as can be seen in the extract below:

In our consideration of landscape, we are imprisoned by long-standing assumption about its nature as a record of, or stage for, significant human actions. ... Defined in terms of landmarks of ecological, historical or personal validity, landscape becomes the most generally accessible and widely shared *aide-mémoire* of a culture's knowledge and understanding of its past and future. (Kuchler 85)

The kind of value that described above is comparable with the kind of significance the landscape enjoys in Jayanta Mahapatra's literary oeuvre. In Mahapatra's portrayal of both, our golden history and the present situation, the picturesque Orissa backdrop is present. Though the poet doesn't flinch from showing the squalor of human settlements where nature has been overlaid by a polluted landscape created by people, he usually prefers those areas which see less of human presence. Natural phenomena in Mahapatra's works is inextricable from his outward projection of his own mental landscape. Whether he engages with childhood memories, personal pain or the gradual relentless movement of time, the material landscape amplifies the poetic portrait of his mental landscape with stark effect. A variety of events and thought processes represented are mirrored through the calm or turmoil, the beautiful or the distasteful in the elements of nature. Mahapatra's search for meaning and his effort to trace the larger pattern to life is symbolised powerfully

through his interaction with the elements around him. The national concern, the postcolonial spirit are anchored in his attachment to the land of his origin. The following statement, points out the importance of place in Mahapatra's work: "The sense of place has immensely affected and influenced the writer which is the typical nature of post-colonial writers of the age" (Ranjit 5).

"Mahapatra's imagination is almost continually evoked by his sense of the earth, the "earth" of Orissa, the rocks, the stones and the alluvial soil of the fertile land which encompasses within it the racial and cultural consciousness of its people and their gods and goddesses, and the history of a civilization which has risen and fallen like a stupa, a pillar of past glory, and of present decay" (173), In these lines Vasant Shahane speaks of Orissa as Mahapatra's muse. For the most part, the environment which finds representation is of a variety that shows a comparatively lower degree of human intervention as can be seen from the following quotation:

Mahapatra is the poet of the small town and village, making his choices clear—the solace of the forest and the tang of the seashore preferred to the mechanic and automated noises of the big cities. The small town—the reviled and despised entity of city dwellers with their own notions of the good life, status and power—is Mahapatra's choice of landscape. It is far 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 sequester himself. (Mathur 123)

These lines show how Mahapatra bases his works in areas in which the pattern of life has not been overlaid by mechanistic patterns of a modern economy. The paragraph quoted below seeks to explain the deeper significance of Mahapatra's use of natural images in his work:

Thus, landscape has a great significance in Mahapatra's poetry so far as it enables the poet to search for his own self in order to understand the world in its proper perspective. ... Sun and moon, dawn and dusk, day and night, heat and dust, mountains and sea, river and hills, sky and earth all are incorporated into the texture of his landscape poetry in his effort to depict the predicament of modern man in an irreligious milieu. (Das 378)

This identification of the environment with the human self and its society and culture is iterated again and again and the following observation about Mahapatra's poetry too presents a similar view: "He explores his identity in ruins of temples and within the landscape of Orissa" (Singh 1).

Beyond his seemingly passive voice, Mahapatra is clearly an interpreter of the condition of humanity as encrypted in the culture of which he is a part. And this culture is a complex one as far as he is concerned. ... Yet, from behind this shadow, Mahapatra looks eagerly at nature and childhood as his anchors. They seem the mainstays of his poetry against the “designs of success” and the “freedom of power” that have afflicted today’s world. He seeks images of freshness and hope in his dreams of the untainted nature that lie beyond all that is gruesome and grotesque in the world about him. (Raj, 260-61)

In the analysis of his works provided above, we find he has been credited with positing nature as a panacea for societal and civilisational evils. In the section quoted below we find that Mahapatra has been lauded for foregrounding nature in a remarkable way:

The key to understanding of the world lies in nature. For Mahapatra the dichotomy of human and non-human dissipates. The power and working of nature is all pervasive. He laments:

No more do men go out onto the earth
to be close enough to the mountain’s quiet
and wait for an answer. (Misra 2)

Nature’s healing influence is something that comes up repeatedly in the works of Mahapatra. In this poem given below, Mahapatra effectively posits the natural world as a foil to the cultural world and also situates the environment as a source of solace and beauty:

Beyond the trees,
the river
is a vision of purpose
moving on its won knees
trying to keep a world
further from anything
bent on the freedom of
power,
of footsteps whose plots
merely shape designs of success (Raj 261)

Dr. Mukul Kumar Sharma, while exhibiting the importance of the recurrent imagery of the “stone” in Mahapatra’s poetry, quotes Meena Alexander “Stone is crucial to his cosmogeny. ... It is the impenetrable permanent” (Sharma 100). Sharma considers ‘stone’ as a “symbol of the self” which is a “mute observer to the experience of the multitudes of

generations and has a silent role in the both creative and destructive rounds of time". Here we find that the stone has been portrayed as something which has outlasted generations of human existence, it outdates us. Mahapatra's use of natural imagery is not exotic. He portrays those images which belong to his regional settings and enhances the effect of his semantic patterning. Given below is an extract from Mahapatra's poem "A Grey Haze Over the Rice fields":

A grey haze over the rice fields.
 The black cow grazing with her new-born calf,
 long-legged, unsteady—

 such things only claim
 that I am looking out in search of memory,
 Those little kisses on our cheeks
 my long-dead grandmother gave me, or
 the soft dampness of my tears when
 my mother did not notice me
 from beyond the closed door of her youth.

 But at times I see a shadow
 ... a shadow freed
 from the past and from the future,
 that contains the footsteps of that childhood
 so light I can only think of squirrels
 slipping in and out of the mango trees. ("Jayanta Mahapatra poems" 5)

This poem speaks of the familial experiences of the persona as a child. In this poem natural imagery enlivens a nostalgic description of a person's childhood memories. The nostalgia associated with family is also associated with the natural setting. The poem begins and ends with the mention of non-human entities like the cow, the calf and the "squirrels". While the "cow" and the "calf" are associated with lived memories, the image of the squirrels has been used in a descriptive way to describe past experience. The natural here becomes an entangled with the personal quite intricately, which is true of all of Mahapatra's poetic creations.

These natural images at once help concretise the poet's feelings and musings while at the same time allowing them to remain understated and universal. Durga Prasad Panda in his observations about *Bare Face*, Mahapatra's sixteenth collection of poems, mentions how the poet explores the past in the poem "Collaboration". Panda says:

Mahapatra is painfully aware of his past; memories, personal or otherwise come to him as a legacy of burden, a journey backward through time in a dream-like state such as the haunting memories of his father along with whom he planted a mango tree, a childhood he claims he has not left:

The mango tree my father and I planted
drifts blindly along the monsoon rain (180)

In this poem the poet shares with us a memory which is both personally and ecologically significant. Many of his poems revolve around the religiously significant sites of Puri, Konark etc. among other places from Orissa. In the excerpt given below from one of his well-known poems "Dawn at Puri", we can witness the unconventional picture of Puri that the poet presents:

White-clad widowed Women
past the centers of their lives
are waiting to enter the Great Temple

Their austere eyes
stare like those caught in a net
hanging by the dawn's shining strands of faith. ("Jayanta Mahapatra's
Poems")

In this poetic piece Mahapatra correlates the plight of the widowed women with fish caught in a net. While women are the victims of a gender inequality in society, fish suffer at human hands.

Many of Mahapatra's poems employ the imagery of rain and it has a plethora of connotations in his oeuvre. Like the stone, rain too is a very crucial part of Mahapatra's poetic set up. Dr. Homen Baruah and Sumitra Jyoti in their paper "Symbolism and Imagery of 'Rain' in Jayanta Mahapatra's Poetry", while expounding about the prolific use of the image of rain in his poems, conclude that there are myriad significations which are associated with this imagery. The following section from the abstract of the paper suggests as much:

The metaphor of 'rain' can be considered as the mirror of the poet's psychological condition. His use of the metaphor of 'rain' finds fine expression in his numerous poems. Rain is an all-diffusive metaphor in Mahapatra's poetry. Rain not only binds man with the universe as a suggestive symbol of fertility, but also evokes his past and reminds him of the suffering he had faced in life. In Mahapatra's poetry the symbol of

rain got manifold directions. The image of rain is used by the poet to symbolize both creative and destructive. (Baruah 544)

From the section quoted above, we can see that 'rain' for Mahapatra is one of such images which has been used to signify different things in different poems. The depiction of rain as a "symbol of fertility" clearly has ecological significance. One of the various ways that Mahapatra presents rain is as also as something that purges. Given below is an extract from one of the rain poems by Mahapatra "A Rain of Rites":

Sometimes a rain comes
slowly across the sky, that turns
upon its grey cloud, breaking away into light
.....
The rain I have known and traded all this life
is thrown like kelp on the beach. ("Jayanta Mahapatra's Poems" 7)

The rain portrayed here is linked to the persona's personal experiences, which they have "known and traded all their life". Similarly, "rain" has also been interpreted as "a past experience that, though painful, is often remembered" (Mathur 126). In a similar manner, "River Daya in his poem takes the role of a bearer of history and is the memory of the past valour and glory of Orissa" (Ranjit, 2). Elements of ecology are inextricably linked to personal, social, cultural and historical experiences throughout Mahapatra's oeuvre.

In the paper "Nature Unbound: A Study of Jayanta Mahapatra's Selected Poems", Monu Berwal, lists instances from Mahapatra's works which suggest an awareness of the other than human. The writer cites the poetic instance from Mahapatra's oeuvre given below to illustrate the "struggling state" of nature owing to humans who have manipulated and are now "reconstructing our surroundings which ultimately forces nature to shrink and surrender into manmade frames":

The autumn night struggling with its breath,
The fireflies pulsing and drawing back
To reveal the fallen teeth of the forest,
And the moon, to whom we owe
the tempests of light among the shadows,
seeking refuge
In a narrow window of our wakefulness (Monu)

One of the poetic pieces, where Mahapatra's appreciation of the non-human over the human is obvious is the poem, "Winter in the City" where the poet while describing the cityscape, locates Siberian geese in a lake. Remarkably he commends the geese for their contentment as in his words as they are "not taking more than what they need". This

description is in direct contrast to the previous line in the poem which points to the ceaseless human hankering after achievement. This inflexible attitude is more often than not unwholesome as it harms nature eventually. While Mahapatra as can be seen in the line included here, includes the term “wholeness” in the description, his subsequent mention of the satisfaction of the geese renders the “sense of wholeness” humans enjoy in their voracious search for more, quite suspect: “Tireless corporate offices/ keep thundering with a sense of wholeness of life” (Mahapatra 2018).

Chittaranjan Mishra while discussing the use of the stone image by Mahapatra observes how “Like stone, the objects of non-human nature get heavy with weight of meanings inscribed on them. The imposed meanings change the face of nature” (112). Remarkably he points out how Mahapatra deviates from such usage through the example of the poem “The Stones”. The poem is quiet significant as we see the poet critiquing the cultural process of transformation of cultural, political and social institutions into uncompromising monoliths which are usually used by the powerful to crush the existence of the vulnerable under. An extract he includes from the poem is given below:

Beneath the bloodied walls of history
 nothing can happen more dreadful
 than stones turned to gods through prayers
 Stones, whose eyes have had no expression in them
 Stones, like governments, who have no honour at all
 Stones, whose long arms easily batter and kill
 a young woman accused of adultery (113)

Mishra points out how Mahapatra “seems to be restoring the ‘stoniness’ to the stones – to look at stones as stones and not gods”(113). Another example of Mahapatra’s openness to nature that Misra provides is from his poem “One Evening”, the extract he includes is given below:

One Evening
 I was a mango tree with a clutch of troubled, reluctant leaves
 And the stormy wind suffered my tremors and tears (114)

The porousness of the identifier “I” used here, wherein the existence of a non-human entity becomes associated with it, whereas it is usually treated as the sole domain of the human subject, indicates a more fluid human subjectivity. Misra goes on to reiterate that “Mahapatra privileges external nature against all intellectual and conceptualized views of nature” (116) and exemplifies it through the following extract from “The Land That is Not”:

I only want to renew myself

like this old river's quiet
that has emerged victorious
over a hundred layers of religions
in the airlessness of the dead (116)

In this poem the independence worth of nature other than the human cultural associations foisted upon it has been asserted. The various poetic pieces which have been ecocritically analysed in this paper, point to the the same conclusion that a study of his works reveals Jayanta Mahapatra's ecoconsciousness.

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