

SON OF THE SOIL DYNAMICS IN JAYANT MAHAPATRA'S RELATIONSHIP AND OTHER POEMS: A STUDY

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Abstract:

Jayant Mahapatra is known as a poet of his land Orissa for his incessant connection with the issues related to the mythical landscape. His poems vividly portray the various issues of his land Orissa in reality. His heartfelt legacy of the mythical past of his land appears live through his many poems. History, religion, traditions and culture of the soil of his birth weaves the fabric of his poetic imagination is the observation of his readers and critics unanimously. The poet concerns for the issues of poverty, deaths, diseases, corruption and the overall ruined life of his fellow human beings is the crux behind his poetic expression. Mahapatra's Relationship is an epitome of his being one with his land of birth. This poem invokes into the history, myths, legends and contemporary issues in the mysterious land of Orissa. The trend of representing one's own roots and soil appears to have imbibed by the poet whole heartedly. He justifies his poetry by calling the true call of his motherland. This paper probes through his selected poems from the view point of the concept of son of the soil dynamics.

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Introduction:

Every human being has an attachment of his place for his own reasons. In fact, the place of birth of everyone enshrines the psychological attachment with various issues in the mind of the individual concerned. In case of Mahapatra, this observation seems to be very much true. The poet wanders across the physical, historical, social and cultural landscape of Orissa, with his haunted imagination and perception. This gives him an identity of being a representative poet of Orissa and India. Nothing that exists remains unturned from the forbidding myths, the grand as well as embarrassing history, inexplicable faith with innumerable contemporary issues like poverty, orthodoxy, corruption, exploitation, domination with other responsible issues for the pathetic situation of Orissa and India ultimately. His deeply rooted relationship is exhibited through the words from Mahapatra's acceptance speech of Sahitya Academy Award for his *Relationship* in 1981: "To Orissa, to this land in which my roots lie and lies my past, and in which lies my beginning and my end, where the wind knees over the great grief of the River Daya and where the waves of the Bay of Bengal fail to reach out today to the twilight soul of Konarka, I acknowledge my debt and my relationship" (*Door...81-82*).

Son of the Soil Dynamics in Mahapatra's Poems:

Jayant Mahapatra is a poet of his land, for having a varied selection of themes from the landscape of his birth. His poems vividly portray the haunting evocations of the landscape, cities, the region with an ancient culture, and intensely reflective vision of life. In this context, he can be compared with Wordsworth. His belongingness to the being of his country, his sense of being one with the tradition, culture, myths-mythology, history, religion and the rituals with many other elements, go hand in hand to earn for him an identity of his own. Bijay Kumar Das, a famous critic of Mahapatra's poetry aptly quotes Judith Wright's observation in this context: "Before one's country can become an accepted background against which the poets and novelists' imagination can move unhindered, it must first be observed, understood, described

as it were, absorbed. The writer must be at peace with his landscape before he can confidently turn to its human figures" (Das, *The Poetry...* 08-09). Mahapatra no doubt has fulfilled the requirements mentioned by Wright. He is strongly based in his social milieu and has imbibed the cultural ethos in totality. Let's see how the son of the soil dynamics works in his selected poems in detail.

Mahapatra's *Relationship* (1980) is a true document of his being one with the land of Orissa. This poem invokes into the history and contemporaneity of his motherland. His deep concern and contemplation for the deprived people, adds into his soul relationship with the land of his origin. The poet got recognition for this very serious and illustrative work by the Central Sahitya Academy, New Delhi, with its prestigious award for poetry written in English in the year 1981. Mahapatra sets the tone of his poem borrowing a few lines from Walt Whitman to unfold the mystery of life. V. A. Shahane writes about the poem, "Its epigraph derived from Walt Whitman's title "Song of myself" is highly suggestive of the two basic concerns of Mahapatra's own poetry and his growth as a poet". He further remarks that, "Mahapatra appears to echo Whitman: "I exist as I am that is enough" (170). The poem is set in Orissa. First section of the poem, though complex with imagery, suggests the impossibility of unravelling the myth of life. The poet cannot wait for recalling the past riches of his land in the second part with a note of pain through the lines:

Time
And the boat,
And the initiation into the mystery of peace;
The sailing ships of those maritime ancestors
Who have vanished in the black bay without a trace,
That only live in the sound of the waves
Flinging themselves onto the dark fringes

Of this land from Chilika to Chandipur. (*The Lie...*60)

The poet gets puzzled with the defeat of his ancestors. He refuses to accept the history as available, and attempts to revitalise the same for the present generation. Bijay Kumar Das, a critic of Mahapatra observes, "*Relationship* is no collection of mere observation, a place here, a character there, an unstrenuous meditation or two, inevitable landscapes, but a determined, integrated set of sections built into the theme" (Das, *Perspectives...*28). Not only *Relationship*, but almost all his poems relate the poet closely to the issues of his land in the spirit of resolving

the same in its limit. Let's examine through ample examples, Mahapatra's relationship with his motherland Orissa in its manifold nature.

Mahapatra by virtue of his strong bond with the being of his motherland keeps on attempting various issues by means of discussion, evaluation and argument. The poet has deep concern for the issues related to poverty and inequality. In the poem, "Events" Mahapatra illustrates the present situation in the cities. The poet ironically appreciates the height of the moon in the cities. City dwellers, especially, people from high class speak of very irrelevant things. Whereas, the poor people in the same town are worried about the basic needs. The poet eventually becomes successful in exposing the hypocrisy of so called high class people, and their organizations. The poet refers to one such event in the lines:

In the second-floor conference room of the YMCA,
a Rotarian demands to be heard:
he describes the routine of American enterprise,
his face hanging in its gilded pride,
an unreal light. (*The Lie...* 40)

The poet refers to the social organizations owned by the rich people. They pretend to be doing something for the poor and needy. In their formal meetings, they boastfully discuss foreign life style and feel proud for knowing things from abroad. Issues related to the plight of poor in our society, have no priority on their agenda. Mahapatra also directs towards the contrary picture and describes in the words:

On the streets of allegiances
and hard labour,
a rickshaw puller picks
the fallen, littered footsteps
at his feet. (*ibid*)

Poor people in our society work hard on poor wages. The rickshaw puller is just an example; there are many other who fight day and night for their survival. This is common picture in our society. Mahapatra being a sensible man feels bad for those unfortunate people and, criticises the boastful attitude of the rich people. The poet intends to correct people and look into the matter for positive change at their level. In the last stanza, he underlines the rotundity of the town life. It matters very little for people in towns about the condition of deprived classes.

**SON OF THE SOIL DYNAMICS IN JAYANT MAHAPATRA'S RELATIONSHIP AND OTHER POEMS:
A STUDY**

Their days pass so soon, that they hardly pay any heed to the same around. So, the poet mentions in last stanza, the routine immoral things happening every day:

Soon moonlight lies everywhere,
the town reaches for its late-edition newspaper.
A rape penetrates the periphery of the jungle.
And thought looks up
dumbly at the toes of words. (ibid)

Mahapatra also marks, the atmosphere turned so ugly and menial and there is no place for thoughts. Rather, there is nothing called thinking before action. The poet deliberately interferes in the evils existent around with a view to stop the same somewhere.

Mahapatra, as told earlier, relates himself with the happenings and persistent problems around, so as to take them as themes for his poems. We have many poems having numerous issues hurting the poet and the sensible man. "A Country" is one such poem pondering over the poverty, starvation, rapes, female foeticide, naxalism and environmental problems together. The poet while handling all these topics related to the life of ordinary human beings widens his area of inquiry to include all the countries of Asia. The poet in the first two stanzas demonstrates the same problems of poverty and starvation from Turkey to Cambodia. There is no change in the situation of these countries year after year.

Mahapatra while talking about the grand past of these countries gets baffled to know the reality in the words below:

Here is my world, and it makes me dream as a child;
yet why do I wear myself out
feeling for the girls who die
before their breasts are swollen with milk? (The Lie... 51)

The poet here highlights the serious issue of female foeticide. It is a fact that most of the Asian countries have failed to ensure security for women and giving them equal rights with men. This grave reality Mahapatra underlines and expresses his disgust about himself. The poet firmly standing on the land of his birth, questions to his self about the painful problem of 'Naxalite Movement' in many states of India. He puts his enquiry in the words:

Why am I hurt still by the look
in the hand of that graceful Naxal girl
who appeared out of nowhere that winter,

holding a knife as old as history? (ibid)

The poet perhaps, wants to suggest that, naxalite movement has a history of exploitation, suppression and of deprivation. The "Knife" has been used by the poet as a symbol of protest against exploitation. Indirectly, the poet is aiming at the biased and partial decisions of the Governments in the last more than sixty years, resulting into the regional and communal imbalance of development. The Naxal movement is the problem aroused out of the said reasons. The poet here compels the reader, to listen to his call regarding the situation of his motherland. His poetry features to have that quality, Purnima Mehta in this context says, "...of all literary genres, poetry has the deepest connection with the oral and aural and Mahapatra's poems are to be experienced by the mind's ear rather than the mind's eye. In the case of Mahapatra, the connection between poetry and auditory imagination remains strong" (180). It is true that his words knock with an auditory image. Further, the poet when in isolation thinks about his country and earth, he has to accept the sacrifices of the soldiers in the war of seventy-two with Pakistan. The poet turns helpless for an answer to the problem and attains peace of mind in the lines:

Sometimes at night when all voices die
my mind sees earth, my country-
to accept sacrifice, the loss of friends,
and sons who vanished suddenly in seventy-two.

However much I provoke and curse
I am unable to force an answer out of you.

Wherever I try to live,
in pious penitence at Puri
or in the fiery violence of a revolutionary
my reason becomes a prejudiced sorrow
like socialism. (ibid)

Mahapatra is ready for penance to attain peace at Puri or at any place, but, he cannot help himself in finding an answer for the same question. He finds out the problem with his being a man of reasons. That has turned "a prejudiced sorrow like socialism". Ultimately, the poet with this unsettled mind comes to an end setting a parallel in-between the wailing hyenas and him, and awakening the reader into environmental problem in the following words.

like the still strange shapes of hills in the distance,

I, too, listen to the faraway wailing of hyenas
aware of the dying countryside around them, (ibid)

The poet as seen above is conscious enough and keeps many important issues in mind. His relating the unrest of mind to the wailing of hyenas due to the dying countryside is superb. Truly, he is an environmentalist in his approach.

Mahapatra being a positive and straight forward man appears bold in his expression about the state of affairs around. Whether it is about some social evil or some political fallacy, the poet never fails to register his regret through suitable and decent words. One such reaction of the poet could be cited from the poem, "The Land That is Not". The poet begins with an objection with his motherland and opines his unwillingness to continue with the same in the following lines:

The land some love to call holy
Is not the one I want to live in.
Today the land of shrines and temples
offers its troubled tombs of blood,
when I don't want to write my poem,
while a mob watches, cheering in delight
at the sight of Fara's rape
and mutilation limb by limb. (The Lie... 132)

The poet feels disgusting in his own land for the changed atmosphere. Initially, it was the land of temples and shrines, so the life had some hope and meaning also. But, with changed scenario, it has been transformed into "troubled tombs". He underlines the insensitivity of people through the example of Fara's rape watched by people in mob with cheers and delight. This hurts Mahapatra's sensitive heart and he reacts as mentioned in the first line. The poet seems to be haunted due to the changed nature of his country and society. Bruce King in this regard opines, "The basic problem haunting Mahapatra's poetry is the relationship of the self to the other, the distance felt by the consciousness between being aware and what one is aware of" (195). Further, the poet wishes so many things in his motherland for making his own and of all people's stay comfortable in the following lines.

I want the graveyard to flower without its corpses,
and the sunlit street
to shine without its shadows.

I want the flames to warm the empty heart
of love, not burn a city with pitiable hatred.
I don't want to sit bent over a page
to reflect in it my griefs,
more for myself than for others.
I want my government to hover
like a butterfly over a garden;
not be, as it is, like a wasp or snake. (ibid)

It is the desire of every human being to have peaceful atmosphere in the land of their residence. Mahapatra wishes to create heaven on earth by making people happy and not by making them grave with hatred. He also makes it clear, that his sorrow is not for the injustices done with him, but is a representation of the sorrows of ordinary people around. Finally, he expects his government to be clean and all inclusive without fear in the minds of people. It should not support the cause of 'haves' in the society.

Thus, the poet seems to be caring the interests of the poor and oppressed classes in his poems. Being a visionary and rooted democratic person, Mahapatra thinks for the well being of the last person. He is the last person to join hands with the so called socialists. His words safeguard him from being viewed as a socialist in the line, "my reason becomes a prejudiced sorrow like socialism (51). The poet seems to have crossed all the boundaries of religions and has attained the eternal mental state without difference as in case with nature. He illustrates in this connection through the lines:

I only want to renew myself
like this old river's quiet
that has emerged victorious
over a hundred layers of religion
in the airlessness of the dead. (ibid)

Thus, he is not pretentious in this regard but, unfastens his motives to shape the religious consciousness on common grounds of secularism. Hence, the true feelings he has for his land with all its living and non-living elements get strong presence in his poetic expression.

Mahapatra in his general approach is a poet of grief. Quite often in his poems, he points at the issues related to the pathetic life of underprivileged masses in the post-independent Indian society. The poet with illustrations, brings to the notice of the readers; how in the

changed times, these unfortunate people have been casted into the life of misery at the behest of our own traditions, customs, situations and people. The poet becomes a bit wider in his appeal and mourns the loss of ideals set before independence by the then visionary freedom fighters and, wails at the chaotic situation, the country has awakened into. His longer poem *A Requiem* is the best example of his concern for his motherland through its strange awakening into the absence of morality, assurances and faithlessness. The poet praises the achievement India had in nineteen forty-seven in the words:

Across the oceans
the word
was simply the sound of falling August rain.
And nineteen hundred and thirty-one
was cool and dark everywhere
like the souls of the rain-lashed trees
on the bank of the Thames. (*The Lie...*165)

With the freedom attained by the country, the dark moments of colonial rule, their resolutions and laws became one with darkness only to turn cold. Everything that belonged to the colonial rule, drowned like the "rain-lashed" trees on the bank of Thames. This expression of the poet stamps the exhilarating joy poet felt with the achievement of his country's freedom. He appreciates the tasks taken by the country to manage things after the freedom. But, at the same time, records his regret for the brutal practices in the society in the following lines:

In my familiar mirror,
the eyes peer through a mask
that approves of my acts,
a scrutiny we cruelly practice
on one another. (ibid, 166)

Mahapatra is unhappy in the aftermath of freedom. Our own people try to scrutinize the activities against one another and on the basis of vested interests approval is given for certain things. The poet, not by naming blames Mahatma Gandhi like many others do, for his lapses in the decisions taken during the freedom struggle. He goes to the extent of expressing as follows:

Defending you today,
Hurts my tired eyes....
Even the iron that pierced your frail chest

had a human voice.
I was never aware of it.
It was quiet and deep,
and it spoke of the places
where its people lived.
They were my people,
but had different disguise. (ibid, 167)

Though, it is unfortunate, but, the country witnessed brutal assassination of the father of the nation within a very short span of time after independence. The poet for his own reasons supports the act performed by the person for his own sufferings. Still, the selfless sacrifice is remembered by the countrymen. Niranjana Mohanty, a critic of Mahapatra writes in this context, "Mahapatra possibly tries to allude to the values which Gandhiji represented and advocate that one's selfless sacrifices is meaningful, redemptive in its own way. The embittered poet realises that grief is inescapable" (66). Further, he understands the friendly nature of life with grief and proceeds. It is never ending subject of discussion for historians, scholars, and many others related to the past and future of the country. Their criticism is the result of their broken dreams. The poet out of disgust puts his emotions in the words:

Today the voice that points a finger at you
floats over the breath of discarded ideals,
the breath of dead flowers day after day at Raj Ghat;
it becomes the breath
that the children of Kalahandi breath
in their dreams in their interminable starvation sleep, (ibid, 168)

The set ideals were found under feet within a very short period of independence. The places like Kalahandi and Gopalpur with countless others have been suffering continuously of starvation. No firm steps have been taken by the Government in the last more than sixty years. The poet has in his mind and soul the forbidding picture of his people, their dying images make him unrest and fragile to shatter into words very transparent

Conclusion:

Thus, Mahapatra's *Relationship* and other selected poems exhibit his strong relationship with the land of Orissa in its totality. The physical landscape of Orissa with countless temples, its dried rivers, the paddy fields, the psychic with historical and cultural residues, the mythical implications, traditions, rituals, rites, Lord Jagannath with all its associations and the prominent contemporary issues like poverty, hunger, exploitation, corruption, prostitution and deaths appear vividly in the poems of Mahapatra. In a way, his poetry hosts the essence of life as existed in the land of Lord Jagannath. Mahapatra's poetry is a voyage within and voyage without. His mental landscape with the physical landscape of Orissa is reflected through his poetry. His continuous search for his roots, his honesty and sincerity towards the issues concerned to his motherland, appear in crowd through the poems selected for this study. He never hesitates while attacking the false traditions in his time and exhibits his anguish against the bizarre set-up of the society. No doubt, he has emerged as the true son of his soil having deep and very serious concern for the issues of his land Orissa and India together.

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