

**JAYANTA MAHPATRA: THE VOICE OF AUTHENTICITY IN
INDIAN ENGLISH POETRY**

DR. SHRIKANT B. SAWANT

PRINCIPAL,

GOGATE WALKER COLLEGE, BANDA

DIST-SINDHUDURG (MS) 416511.

Abstract

Mahapatra derives the strength of his poetry from living intimately with his place. Legends, history and myth associated with those places become the nerve centre of his poetry. The early phase of his poetic career really began with Close the Sky, Ten by Ten (1971), Svayamvara and Other Poems (1971) and A Father's Hours the period which is largely derivative in nature. From A Rain of Rites (1976), Waiting (1979) and The False Start (1980) begins his a period of inventiveness and experimentation and his recent poetry — Relationship (1980), Life Signs (1983), Dispossessed Nests : The 1984 Poems (1986), Selected Poems (1987), Burden of Waves and Fruit (1988) Temple (1989). A Whiteness of Bone (1992). The Best of Jayanta Mahapatra (1995), Shadow Space (1997) and Random Descent (2005) presents Mahapatra's profound maturity in thought and expression, deepening vision, contemplative mood and brooding tone. Mahapatra's poems demonstrate a remarkable concern for both structure and linguistic versatility. His symbols and images are evocative and suggestive. Jayanta Mahapatra's contribution into development of India English poetry is marvelous and comprehensive.

Key Words : Myth, Legends, Ritual, Landscape, Images, Symbols.

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- DR. SHRIKANT B. SAWANT

Jayanta Mahapatra is one of the greatest poets in modern Indian English Poetry. He belongs to the tradition of academician and turns to poetry in his forties. He widened the scope of poetry by composing well knit, compact and precise poems on a wide variety of themes. His memorable contribution lies in poetising the vivid and varied vignettes of the Orissa landscape, conspicuous for rich religious and cultural heritage. He is a poet of remarkable power and vision working altogether on different plane and both the quality and quantum of his output bear the imprint of a distinctive individuality.

Mahapatra seems to 'listen to the silence inside himself', the dynamic silence which opens up new vision and revisions. 'His poetry becomes the visible encompassing of diverse strands of experience ranging from his purely personal relationships to the eponymous registering a feeling of vision' (Amga 90).

In Mahapatra's first collection *Close the Sky, Ten by Ten*, there are 49 poems exhibiting varying degrees of lyrical qualities: internal assonance and end-rhymes are common devices used here. He is aware of the difficulties that baffle and novice in the art of writing poetry.

'Love' becomes a representative poem wherein in spite of his best efforts 'words will not turn to a sentence'. There is an obvious dichotomy between his experience and expression.

LOVE

like a poetry

leave thought alone

to find the meaning (2)

In 'Gandhi', he uses the language and syntax creating people's ambivalence towards the Mahatma.

We have burst open his blood

to bleed

We are on his side, perhaps

We hate him

We do not know it (12)

'Gandhi's bleeding becomes the emblem of the bleeding gone into making of Konarka Stones'(Mohan 33).

'The Circle' presents an anguish in the male dominated relationship - 'Drawing a circle he places the woman inside' (13). In 'Woman' two parallel statements are juxtaposed without any comment by the poet

Even

When she is

Even

When she is not (44)

Mahapatra is determined to do 'something new to words'. The themes of his poems become moving even in the titles — 'On the Death of A Boy', 'The Indian Eye', 'Sanctuary', 'The Farewell'. Jayanta Mahapatra is a serious writer who wants to establish an independent style of his poetry. However, his self gets confined to a limited calculated area 'ten by ten' and loses contact with the 'sky' an image of vastness' (Padhi 15). Bruce King observes,

For all its obscurity and paradoxical images *Close the Sky, Ten by Ten* reveals a lyrical sensitivity towards the moment and its unarticulated possibilities : There

are also recurring vocabulary which provide links within the volume. Many poems treat of distance between language and the reality of experience. Taken as a whole, the poems are built on contrast between ordinary lives and excitement of the imagination (1986, 4-5).

Jayanta Mahapatra's second volume, *Svayamvara and Other Poems* consists of thirty three poems, makes the beginning of his search for a poetic language more pronounced and more concrete images and symbols. The poem 'Peace' is a better example of lyrical sense and earned power of language:

Peace is a sad voice
when the seething uranium plunges into
its waiting limbs, on your paralyzed world
arranges itself for the intense arrangement
of life taken up by a device for faith. (1)

The poem 'Traffic Constable' is an attitudinal shift to contemporary social issue.

"The mouse who tries to cross
the street is a nuisance
that splits his monochrome watch'. (26)

The poet reveals the common knowledge that law ensnares only the helpless, poor and weak. S. K. Desai rightly observes that 'In the second volume, *Svayamvara and Other Poems*, Mahapatra appears to move towards precision, by releting his craft move to the concrete than to the abstract, both in terms of themes and expression' (119-120). Commenting on his first two books Mahapatra says:

My first two books of verse were mainly experimental; it was the language again
I wanted to exploit, because I felt I would mould it like clay, and I suppose Adil

Jussawalla was right in his own way when he said in a review that I was a 'poem maker' (N. Raghavan 60).

In his next Volume *A Father's Hours*, Jayanta Mahapatra carries his experimentation a step further by attempting to write longer poems like 'Performance', a poem with VII sections / 145 lines and 'The Twenty fifth Anniversary of Republic : 1975' with XX sections / 158 lines. Jayanta Mahapatra gradually grows into a poet of substance. His obsession with the past-cultural, social and individual makes him a natural outsider in the present. A sense of guilt, fear and death looms large in this volume.

Mahapatra's next collection *A Rain of Rites* deals with a network of themes such as death- in- life, the lacerations of the Indian women, the cycle of birth and death, of change and flux and all kinds of hypocrisy and prudery. The poems 'Myth', 'India', 'Hunger', 'The Whorehouse in Calcutta Street' representing thematic substance of the volume.

The very first poem 'Dawn' talks about the passivity of accursed womanhood-'an Indian woman, piled up to her silences,/waiting for what the world will only let her do. (1)' The lines aptly summarise how Indian women are treated in the country.

Woman is the substance of *A Rain of Rites*. The Indian womanhood by and large, has been synonym for subjugation and suffering at all stages because society is uniformly ungrateful and unkind to her, Woman in Indian society has either been deified as Goddess and Mother or debased as Evil incarnate but never treated as human being with an individuality of her own (Bhat 43).

The characters that crowd in his poetry are typical of the Indian milieu, and the title of some of the poems point to his concern with the locale : 'Main Temple Street', 'Puri', 'Five Indian Songs', 'Dawn at Puri', 'On the Bank of the Ganges'. 'Indian Summer Poem', 'India'. Mahapatra declares his total identification with the place in 'Somewhere, My Man'.

A man does not mean anything.
But the place.
Sitting on the river bank throwing pebbles
into the muddy current,
a man becomes the place. (42)

The volume *Waiting* consists of 46 poems. Mahapatra tries to establish relationship with his land, its history, myth, legends and people in the poem like 'Orissa', 'Dhaulagiri', 'Konarka', 'Story of the Start of 1978' and 'Strike your Secret Earth'. History stands mute in its countless ruins of temples all past grandeur and ceremony. The Sun Temple of Konarka, too has its dark side. Legends exist that the crowning slab of this 13th century temple to the Sun God could only be fitted into place by the 12 – year – old- boy, the son of the chief architect of the work, after all attempts to do so by the 1200 artisans had failed. Later, the boy jumped to his death from the finished temple to save his father's name and honour. Hence, Konarka is the 'messenger of death'. In the words of Laxminarayan Bhat-

In *Waiting* Mahapatra attempts to equate the general and specific, 'the remote past and the immediate present', placing himself at the centre of the artistic meditation which defines the aesthetics and the nature of Mahapatra's poetic pursuits (47).

In *The False Start* published in 1980, Mahapatra continues his search for meaning, both of life and his relationship with the external world. Time, immortality, desire, passion, the mutability of life and the fear of ageing are the themes among of the volume. Reviewing *The False Start*, C. B. Cox says that Mahapatra's poetry 'reflects a form of quietism, a sense of inevitability which is peculiarly Indian.... In poems like these the process of creating a proper unity, a truly Indian English, takes a significant step ahead' (90 -91). James Finn Cotter feels that 'with these poems in this book the reader is 'mesmerized', that

the poems offer no 'easy solution' and further that move 'from abstract to sensible imagery' (478).

The False Start also justifies Mahapatra's opinion that 'most of us have taken a false start in our life, and need to be called back to the point-to begin the race of life afresh'. Bruce King observes that

basically these are the poems of shapes of solitude, the life within the self in its variety, recurrences, obsessions, anxieties, desires, imaginings, dreams, speculations, memories, betrayals, bursts of illumination and vitality and moments of poetic creation from its own inner realities (2001, 203).

Relationship (1980) is remarkably different from all the volumes that preceded it. 'Relationship' is the first long poem of 'six hundred-plus lines' in 12 sections which is profoundly philosophical and highly contemplative in nature.

Relationship is representative of the essence of Mahapatra's probing into the eternal questions men have tried to answer generation after generation, i.e. myth of origin, man's place in the Universe, man's role in society and above all, the significance and meaning of existence, man's relationship with himself and the worlds at large (Bhat 49-50).

In *Life Signs* (1983), Mahapatra tries to answer some very valid and pertinent questions regarding the driving force behind his poetry. In the poem entitled 'Life Signs', the speaker captures the central preoccupation of all his poetry:

What's in my father's house
is not mine. In his eyes,
dirty, and heavy as rainwater flowing into earth, is the ridicule
my indifference quietly left behind : (12)

Thematically *Life Signs* comes closer to *A Rain of Rites*. The poem meditates on the ruins of ideological, sociological and cultural rites. The titles such as 'Dead River', 'The Wound', 'In a Night of Rain', 'The Morning of the Dead Fish', 'Man of his Night', 'Last Night the Poem', 'The Lost Children of America', seem like darkening like signs.

Mahapatra attempts at definition of his poetry in order to understand the meaning, significance of the very purpose of writing poetry. 'When all else has failed / the poem's words are perhaps justified.' (34)

Will a poem of mine be the only answer ?

Will its words make me feel something

I do not want to forget? (45)

Commenting on *Life Signs* Devinder Mohan acknowledges the maturation of Mahapatra's poetic sensibility and his craft:

In this volume, the poet and his medium succeed in sustaining the stubborn stability of being grown up twins. There is a marked growth in their mutual affinity in the common segment of experience, whether it is the area of darkness or the area of dream (76).

Dispossessed Nests: The 1984 Poems is a slender volume published in 1986 differs from rest of the Mahapatra's poetry volumes. It marked the shift in location from Orissa to the Punjab and Bhopal. Mahapatra tried to capture the pulse of the two major disturbing, traumatic and devastating national incidents - the terrorism and devastating which he calls 'an enormous pathological / dream of Dharma' and The Bhopal Gas Tragedy - 'A Dance of Bejewelled Snakes' — which claimed a heavy death toll of innocent men, women and children by the sheer carelessness of a giant multinational company. With the publication of this book dealing with the senseless bloodshed in the Punjab and disaster of gas-leak in Bhopal, Mahapatra becomes trans-provincial.

The volume *Burden of Waves and Fruit* is a continuation of the motifs of *Life Signs*. The volume, *Mahapatra* treats again the familiar ground of his passionate obsession — Orissa, the land of Lord Jagannatha of Puri, the ruins of Konarka and bloody Kalinga War. Most of the poems here deal with the theme of death.

Temple published in 1989 is thematically a continuation of the theme of *A Rain of Rites* published more than a decade ago, in making woman the central character. *Mahapatra* takes women as the medium of endless sufferings and possible redemption. The volume opens with the news flash from *The Times of India* dated March 24, 1980, on the death of an octogenarian couple Ramanujan (85) and Chelammal (80) who were believed to have committed suicide because of poverty and loneliness. This leads the poet to ponder over the plight of Indian women in general.

The poem is divided into four sections: 'Prologue', 'The Hall of Dancing', 'The Hall of Offering', and 'Sanctum Sanctorum: The Shrine'. The myths of Sita, Draupadi, and Putana are recreated to reveal the divine force of woman. *Mahapatra* uses the concept of the female principle, the source of all energy, the Shakti in terms of Putana, a mythical demonic woman, as the central metaphor. The volume ends with another news flash from *The Telegraph* dated January 5, 1986 - 'A 12-years old girl was allegedly gang raped-and murdered No one has been arrested so far'.

A Whiteness of Bones was published in 1992; and it may be called the compendium of *Mahapatra's* poetic world. Pain has been one of his favourite and recurrent themes. Rabindra K. Swain in his review article, *Bone Call* in *Times of India* dated 13th September, 1992, sums up :

The misery of the world added to poetry is failure to change it makes him immensely sad. The pain the poet feels within himself 'my pain comes from rain / river from the clouds of my own realization' ('The Fifteenth of August'), with the 'ripe fruit', in Bhopal ('this pain was new') and in the earth ('pain is the scent of earth'). There is, in fact, a great space in the book as well as in the heart of the

poet. Sometimes he is cynical about the use of feeling pain at all because it cannot 'clear up' 'the eternal debris' in the heart ('Afternoon Ceremonies'), at other times he forces himself to believe 'Whatever pain does / we hope it will change the mind' ('Consolation') (P. 07).

Mahapatra's the entire major thematic preoccupations find place in this volume.

Shadow Space (1997) strives to express and catch the anguish, the pity and the horror of events that shaken the country in the last two decades of this century: the Bhopal gas tragedy, the Gulf War, the Bombay riots of 1994, the Kalhindi starvation death, technology creating its own share of injustice, over and above the traditional injustices of ancient India that still live on.

Mahapatra's collection, *Random Descent* (2005), contains his deeper meditations about things, places, persons and myths. The poems are highly symbolic and reveal Mahapatra's essential humanity and his empathy with the objects of his meditations.

Mahapatra's response to the landscape, his sense of myth, tradition and culture gives his distinct identification. His use of Indian imagery and symbols in English language in his own way has contributed to the growth of Indian English idiom. Mahapatra continues to be read and discussed widely both in India and abroad and his influence on the younger generation is distinctly perceptible.

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