

ISSN 0976-8165

*The Criterion*



# The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Quarterly Refereed & Indexed Open Access Journal

April 2013 Vol. 4 Issue- II

**Editor-in-Chief**

**Dr. Vishwanath Bite**

**Managing Editor**

**Madhuri Bite**

[www.the-criterion.com](http://www.the-criterion.com)  
[criterionejournal@gmail.com](mailto:criterionejournal@gmail.com)

## Jayanta Mahapatra: An Innovative Approach to Poetic Idiom

**Mukul Kumar Sharma**

Research Scholar,  
University of Rajasthan,  
Jaipur, India.

&

**Sanjit Mishra**

Assistant Professor of English,  
Indian Institute of Technology,  
Roorkee, India

Jayanta Mahapatra seems to show a desire to acclimatize an indigenous tradition to English language, and create a new Indian English idiom; he shares some of the concerns of the well-known Indian English poets of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It, being a hard nut to crack to study Mahapatra in isolation, and especially when he has influenced a number of contemporary Indian English poets and brought recognition to this new poetry by winning the first ever award by the National Akademi of Letters for his book of verse, *Relationship*, in 1981, requires a historical study of Indian English poetry to find how Mahapatra has evolved the English he has used in his poetry.

R. Parthasarthy, as it were, gives a clarion call to Indian English poets to return to their respective linguistic tradition. He says:

“How long can foreign poets

Provide the staple of your lines?

Turn inward; scrape the bottom of your past.”

[*Rough Passage*]

Sometimes, a poet writing significantly in his own language uses his cultural past as roots whereas other poets with some other cultural background still find themselves able to create a suitable idiom for their proper communication to all the communities. Post-independence Indian English poetry is genuine because Indian cultural, religious, and communal situation forms a vital part of it and is deeply felt and addressed. Recently, existing superstitions and folks beliefs in Indian society turn out to be a favorite theme of recent poetry. Indians' attitude towards a girl child, their reaction to some natural sorrow, their paganism, their feudal mentality imprints on their minds. Now considering their subject matter, an evolving Indian English Idiom can be perceived in the Indian English poetry. Here, one should not insist upon the structure more but ideas that are conveyed by that language. The expression results in an ironic observation of reality. On studying the growth of American, African, Australian, and West Indian writers, it is evident that they have discovered successfully their own idioms in English. In this context, Mahapatra's poetry offers no fear of losing Indian Idiom in his language because he has mainly related himself to his province (Orissa), and country, its landscape, its history and

its milieu along with contemporary Indian situations, life and living, thus forming the bedrock of his poetry. This pre-occupation with present day life and society, together with his concern for history, myth, and tradition of his country has sufficiently evoked an English which thoroughly Indian.

His growth as a poet and his use of language is interwoven. He took poetry as a craft and since he is adopting it, he has been chiseling it. A noticeable change from the other parts is that,

“In his poetry, both theme and technique go together as he experiments with language poem after poem in trying to acquire inwardness with it. He is capable of using English language with passionate precision that helps him to establish his identity as India’s foremost poet in English.”<sup>1</sup>

Let us take Mahapatra’s own views to understand his concept of poetry:

“One does not know what poetry is, or what poetry does- but that, like metaphysics, poetry persists in trying to find something of permanence beyond changing appearances, some yet unknown form of a transcendent nature.”<sup>2</sup>

To give a distinct touch and an identity to his poetry a poet can acclimatize an indigenous tradition to a language other than one’s first language and by way of evocating the place to which he belongs because the place, no doubt, is always an important ingredient in making idiom of a poet. For example, Whitman’s nineteenth century New York, Robert Frost’s New England, Nissim Ezekiel’s Bombay, W B Yeats’s Sligo; in the similar vein, Mahapatra’s locale is the trio of Cuttack, Bhubneshwar and Puri which form the background of many of his poems. Mahapatra’s discusses his dilemma of choosing a language as the medium of his poetry and answers:

“I am in love with English. And then, my schooling was in English and I learnt my language from British English masters – mainly from English novels; so, blame H. Rider Haggard and Edgar Rice Burroughs and Ballantyne from whom I caught the first delight of words gravid with meaning. Further, I feel I can express myself better in English than in Oriya. And, I have done a lot of translations in verse from the Oriya.”<sup>3</sup>

Indian experience of Mahapatra molded in English language creates a typical bilingualism and allows him to gain access to the regional reader – audience through Oriya and to the global audience through English.

“Mahapatra has said of himself that he is ‘an Oriya poet who incidentally writes in English’”, points out Vilas Sarang and adds, “Indeed, Mahapatra effortlessly ‘translates’ a profoundly Indian spirit into English”<sup>4</sup>

Mahapatra chooses the metaphysical tone to express his sentiments with regard to the physical and psychological features of his country. His poetry is a metaphysical rendering of a smoldering vision and highly representational in regional adherence. This he accomplishes by weaving some arresting imagery in his poetry.

Imagery, derived from the Latin *imago* – “a likeness”, is a deliberate use of words in a work to evoke distinct mental pictures. Idiom is generated from the imagery and both give a special tone. Eliot in his “The Music of Poetry” elucidates-

“A poem or a passage of a poem may tend to realize itself first as a particular rhythm before it reaches expression in words and this rhythm may bring to birth the idea and image.”<sup>5</sup>

Elaborating the function of imagery, Gurrey states in his ‘Appreciation of Poetry’-

“We can experience imaginatively that which has come to us through the senses. And, every impression we are conscious of, however ethereal it may be, can be expressed if only the mind can find imagery to represent it. Imagery – this is definite enough to work on another mind without nebulousness. So, we find sense impressions of all sorts are suggested in poetry – cold, heat, dryness, moistness, tension, pressure and movement, weights and sounds – they are suggested by the sound and rhythm of words, but chiefly by imagery.”<sup>6</sup>

Imagery creates idiom and the ambiguity, tension, and irony of situations make Mahapatra’s idiom purely Indian. Ambiguity, not merely a formal matter in his poetry, cuts to his poetry’s very bone. Since Mahapatra creates his world out of ordinary words and things, such as - stone, ash, wood, dust and bone, he cannot make them take a burden of meaning without pushing them beyond their linguistic borders. The stressing makes the cultural coding of these words, their significations, explicit in order for us to die for or vie against them. To give an example, the Oriya deity, Lord Jagannath, who is a pervasive presence in his poetry, is carved of wood and, hence, the troubled reflection on the ‘haunted wood and hunted myth’ and the ‘swaddled sod’ [*The Lost Children of America*]. In invoking these words and their sub-conscious meanings and associations, Mahapatra’s poetry operates simultaneously on the sacred and secular planes. We see the mythic invocation at the start of his Sahitya Akademi award winning iconic poem *Relationship* which is an extended meditation on the sense of place, identity and belonging these lines, reminiscent of Eliot’s gesture of expiation, show why-

Those who’ve been my friends... have known only how to keep walking toward themselves along the upraised road, unsullied by guilt and belief: the rapture of ownership on their valuable faces.

As the long poem unfolds, myths of his homeland are seen in close interplay with what Mahapatra calls ‘this earth - sense’. “We are delivered by the myth”, says the poet. The fact of the self being trapped within a ‘social order’ produces the angst of Mahapatra’s poetry which they have for its goal – the self’s authentication.

Mahapatra’s unique way with words helps, making them come together in surprising new combinations and juxtapositions, thus offering a hope of redemption of the world through language. Coinages, such as- “language of clogs over cobbles” [*Sanskrit*], “seasons reasons through their branches” [*Possession*] and “my blood drowsy in the mosquito-hum of chanting” [*Faith*], to nameonly a few, come to mind instantly.

Mahapatra’s records of his observation about the whore house that appears in the poem “*Mourning Signs*” are clear where he comments on the beast-like male sensuality there in

it. How such images impart to his idiom is a matter which needs a close examination of his selection of words. This poem records signs of morning which aim at defining the disordered, disjoined social atmosphere. The morning signs are not pleasant ones; they are painful, nasty, disgusting. The poem “*In the Fields of Desolate Rice*” depicts ruinous aspect of social lifedescribing the ‘desolate rice field’ as well as ‘desolate social field’. It is a comment on the sad plight of the people and the country groping in unabated darkness of uncertainty. When Mahapatra talks about Cuttack, contaminated by twentieth century diseases like corruption, dishonesty and disintegration, his tone is bitter and painful focusing on the social dilemma of the land and the place of common man in it. Such concepts and contemporariness have shaped Indian sensibility eventually leading to his conscious and unconscious contribution to his language.

Like Kamla Das’s grandfather, Jayanta Mahapatra’s grandfather, Chintamani Mahapatra, who driven by hunger, embraced Christianity during the devastating famine that struck Orissa in 1866, is a dominant figure in his family poems and clearly depicts Indian sensibility and idiom. With sense of agony and disgust, the poet rightly directs his volley of questions to his grandfather-

What did faith matter?

What Hindu world so ancient and true

for you to hold?

[Grandfather]

Through natural objects, he traces the voices of his dead grandfather. The past memories present the conflict between the two life forces, one of the grandfather and other the young grandson.

The weary thump

Of my dead grandfather’s heart

Following me

Where the wind breaks water. [28]

In the *Indian Book Chronical* (October 1, 1981, pp. 326-327), Prof. M. L. Raina’s review noted the intensities of poetry which rather than arresting a ‘sense of belonging’ communicates a perception of the fragility, the instability of that sense. In spite of the poet’s cultural and psychological inheritance, integrated by location, recurring themes and images, and offering an impression of logical sequence, *Relationship* (1980), a twelve part ‘dream’ of Orissa, its myths, symbols, history, and Mahapatra’s private emotions, especially of sex, family history and his relationship to the past, traditions and the land, is still an ‘open’ work in which the fusion into a single experience will be the reader’s rather than that of the text. As no contemporary poet should be innocent and uninfluenced by Walt Whitman, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Williams, Borges, or the critical theorists who have displaced the primacy of the text by the poet’s and reader’s imagination, *Relationship* is also influenced by the epics in Oriya, especially in the chant – like lines and long periodic sentences of the verse paragraphs.

Mahapatra's imagination has always been concerned with such relationships as the difficulties of bringing into harmony such opposites as Christian guilt and Hindu myth, destiny and will, his environment and the western social order his grandfather chose, his sexual desires and his conscience. It is poetry of this world, although haunted by a longing for a paradisiacal pre-dissociated past of tradition and an organic view of the world. While his images, symbols, scenes are Indian and the style probably influenced by the literature of Oriya, the fragmented dualistic world view and the longing for an organic past are typical of the West and those who have been westernized. Mahapatra's poetry is an expression of this fragmentation. Expressiveness tends more to be brooding over contraries than specific emotions. While Mahapatra has sought unity through repetition (lexis, images, motifs etc.) by thematic clusters, and by local and personal subject matter, the result has remained uneven with most poems lyric fragments or formal exercises. *Relationship* offers a solution to fragmentation structurally, thematically and modally – there is a progression, the themes evolve from section to section conceiving the entire book as a single work. Curiously, the result is New Worldish and vaguely reminiscent of the long poems of such writers as Whitman, Williams, Neruda, St. John Perse, and Césaire, where the isolated-self expands to create wholeness from an otherwise open and fragmented world.

The fragmentation and break mentioned above is not complete; it is intellectual and not emotional, a “quality” remains, and this unclear line of continuation signifies an area of problematic in which poetry is fractionated into life. Confronted by the direct question of this problematic and its ritual “poetization” of response, he has answered in these words-

“You say that my poems are a sort of private ritual of discovery, relationship and reaching out to others; if there is a catharsis in my writing, it comes about involuntarily; if there is a spiraling, so I try to get into the center of myself, I feel I am somehow afraid of this closeness too, and I try to move out from the center of my life. Yes, my poetry might be a ritual of finding myself first, feeling the beat of the blood in my hand which feeds only myself.”

Mahapatra judges political issues from humanistic point of view in *Dispossessed Nests* consisting two long poems in this volume – “Bewildered Wheat-fields” (23 Sections) and “A Dance of Bejeweled Snakes” (12 Sections) which try to convey the ultimate destiny of a common human being in today's India. No doubt, like other poems of Mahapatra, irony is the key note of contemporary situation along with a sense of grief and uncertainty in which the poet watches senseless deaths and violence on TV and shudders-

Another death?

Little pile of ash

uncurls

like a woken beast.

[*Dispossessed Nests*, pp. 17]

---

Here

I do not know  
 What I am looking for.  
 Rain falls heavy, hard as stone.  
 I am so far away from these falls.  
 I chance pain and prayer,  
 the simple pendulum,  
 trying my utmost to replace  
 the senseless refrain of hate  
 by the amazement to be alive. [*Dispossessed Nests*, pp. 20]

The poet views politics just as a symbolic thing for life, the poet reflects on the contemporary situation giving it as it were, 'a local habitation and a name'. In a typical Indian way, the poet records his disappointment in the following lines-

When we learn to let our minds leave us, we don't care where  
 true feelings lie, or for a country's  
 national anthem floating around in counterfeit freedom  
 its time moves to echo the rain-voice  
 lying too deep for our nerves' reach, besieging  
 in vain the poet's lonely walls. [*Dispossessed Nests*, pp. 45]

Only an Indian English poet could express his feelings in such a situation in this typical coinage like "Counter Freedom", "Rain Voice" and "Nervous Reach". Typical imagery, simile and collocation of words in Mahapatra's poetry create a distinct kind of Indian sense in his use of English. For example, the poet laments the decline in Indian life, as he puts it-

The leaves of the dark tree of India are gasping for breath across the green air.  
 Awe circles and chases a tale through the leaves. A star looks fixed in space's old embrace. And  
 I have a dream. It is like a school boy in a class room who has not understood what teacher is  
 saying but puts on a knowing smile for all to believe.  
[*Dispossessed Nests*, pp. 48]

Now the collocations such as "green air", an owl 'chases a tale', and comparison such as 'a dream' like the pretentious smile of a school boy who has not understood his teacher in the classroom are typical of Indian English poet.

India is a country which cannot see scarcity of leaders and gods. This inspires Mahapatra to ridicule a typical habit of Indian people to turn to government and pray to God for anything and everything they hope to acquire or desire to get. Now Indo-Anglican poets put this aspect of Indian people in a subtle artistic manner with an implicit irony. Here, one can remind oneself of Raja Rao and Kamla Markandeya's fiction where such irony is very implicit in the face of the full devotion of the characters in their fiction, towards their deities. Mahapatra writes-

For if anything happens, their dreams of belief tell them that their gods and their government shall take care of them. [*Dispossessed Nests*, pp. 54]

Mahapatra's poetry may appear to be difficult because of its difficult vocabulary, far-fetched images and contrived style. For instance, he likens the 'feel' of a 'heart' to 'a hot ball of lead'. Expressions like 'brimful of light', 'heart's sack', 'battered body', 'charred skulls', 'unattainable smiles', 'bewildered wheat fields', 'impatient darkness', 'shaking skies', 'indulgent lie', 'tumors of noiseless tears', 'the incinerated sun', 'knowledge', 'labyrinth', 'an evening of cloistral shadows', 'wanton nightmare', 'bastard past', 'golden smoke', 'ambiguous abandon', 'frantic waters', 'the blood-oracle's fatality', 'un-milked cows', 'wispy nets', 'untroubled distance', 'bejeweled snakes', 'endless wound', 'music of blood', 'hypnotized feelings' which are found in *Dispossessed Nests* are new to Indian English poetic diction. These expressions may sound un-English because only the words are English, their occurrence or collocation is totally un-English but they indicate that the Indian English Idiom is in the making.

In question for interview by Bijay Kumar Das, about Mahapatra's use of language, Mahapatra answered-

"I had been writing poetry for about twenty five years or more in English before I thought of starting out in my mother tongue, Oriya. Frankly, my experience with English poems had revealed that local colours hadn't got into the poems. I felt I could speak in a more colloquial manner if I wrote poetry in Oriya. And then, I thought the common man would read my work; the fast-food vendor for instance, or the boiled-egg seller. It was a sort of challenge, and I am happy I took it up. I discovered too that the English and Oriya poems complemented each other; there were certain poems I could have written in Oriya alone. The fact remains; I am an Oriya poet, whichever language I might use."

The above frank acceptance of Mahapatra reveals that his use of English has an undercurrent of the sensibility and flow of being an Indian. The feeling is making an Indian writer sometimes uncommunicative to the outer world but no one can deny the fact that on the contrary it is the same language which makes such a writer approach the outer world with his human sensibilities.

Mahapatra's other important volumes *Relationship*, *Life Signs*, *Burden of Waves and Fruit* and *Temple* contain numerous expressions which are un-English in feature but new to Indian English vocabulary. The greatness of Mahapatra's poetry lies in the power it imparts to us to see man and women, our own contemporaries in their true colors. He has an eye for the right word in the right place. The style may appear to be laborious but the choice of words heightens the meaning of his poem. Let us take a few examples-



In a corner of her mind  
 a living green mango  
 drops softly to earth.            ['Summer', *A Rain of Rites*, pp. 14]

All day and all night I am moved by myself,  
 only the tree that is there,  
 the axes of seasons in a derelict eye.            ['A Tree', *A Rain of Rites*]

His mind, like the sun,  
 gently climbs the godly hill of day,  
 will not touch or reveal,  
 the many levels  
 of himself.            [*Somewhere, My Man*]

The lines quoted above show an unusual collocation of words, such as, 'godly hill of day', 'precarious sun set' and typical Indian expression like 'living green mango' dropping on the earth from the corner of one's mind. His vocabulary is both scientific and labored.

The shadow of T S Eliot looms large in the use of Mahapatra's language in poetry. However, he gives an Indian twist to it, such as-

And a man begins again  
 in the centre of this past,  
 and sees no end of it.  
 [*Samsara*]

Somewhere  
 a door opens and shuts,  
 years elapse quietly behind,  
 like things

people have known all along.                    [Somewhere, My Man]

Where you sit, in snide dreaming,

you have your own death.

What is this thing which won't let you

sit back

which you cannot share?                    [The Landscape of Return]

### Works Cited:

Das, Bijay K. *The Poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra*. New Delhi : Atlantic Publishers and Distributions, 2009 pp. 44

Mahapatra, Jayanta. "The Voice in the Ink". *The Illustrated Weekly of India*. April 1990. pp. 21

Mahapatra, Jayanta. "Inner View". *Tenor*. Hyderabad, June 1978. pp 59

Vilas Sarang. ed. *Indian English Poetry from 1950: Anthology*. Hyderabad. Orient Longman, 1990. pp. 15

Hayword, John. ed. "The Music of Poetry". T.S. Eliot: *Selected Prose*. Harmondsworth : Penguin Books Limited 1959. pp. 66-67

Ibid