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## Jayanta Mahapatra: A Thematic Glimpse

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Amid the galaxy of new burgeoning poetasters in India-English writing, Jayanta Mahapatra is certainly a redeeming feature. His scintillating poetic *oeuvre* places him with Ezekiel, Kamla Das, Partha Sarthy, Pritish Nandy, K.N. Daruwalla. His poetry like a prism has many facets and nuances. He illustrates India's hoary wisdom, glorious past, her spiritual and cultural heritage, her variegated traditions and customs, her religions and rituals, sociology, folklore, myths and mysticism etc. vehemently and vigorously. His native land becomes the centre of his literary activities, he weaves his experiences and observations around the warp and woof of Indian consciousness. His poetry unravels his fathomless love and concern for the people of his state but he also shows similar concern for the plight of the people – be it the victims of Bhopal gas tragedy or the terrorism unleashed in Punjab or any injustice meted out to the denizens of the country. He himself writes about his poetry:

My poems deal with the life without myself where the mind tries to find a sort of coherence from the mass of things in the world outside it (Jayanta Mahapatra Daily Star News, 2004).

Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry is the matrix of the exotic culture and pathetic depiction of socio-cultural deterioration and sterilization of modern people. His poems address the subjective feelings as the poet enquires of the existence of the self; the other seldom focusses on local society and particularly Hindu culture, rituals, spirituality, symbols and the glorious past from which he feels cut off and secluded by his grandfather's embracing Christianity and his upbringing and nurturing in English medium school. His poetry irrevocably springs forth the various facets of the isolation, loveliness, solitude and seclusion of the self from the real world. This is the existential dilemma of post-colonial literature. His universe is inundated with hunger, pain, scars, communalism, terrorism, dirty politics, the wretchedness of woman; his province is replete with symbols of belief and conviction in the mundane life of the inhabitants of Cuttack; the temples, the Hindu festivals, the ancient monuments, poverty, exploitation and segregation, prostitution occur in his poems. He puts his heart out in the following lines:

When I started writing poetry I thought it would be a safe and private business..... Now everything seems charged.... the years have only instilled in a different sense of the requirements of poetry..... I am fully aware that my poems deal with the life within myself, where the mind tries to find a sort of coherence from the man of things in the world outside it (Sunday Observer Interview, May 27, 1984).

Mahapatra was a professor of physics who forayed into the realm of English literature, for a great poet was in the offing. Mahapatra uses landscapes as his mouthpiece to vent his

subjective feelings. The Romantics always took nature as stimuli to evoke emotions, his poems surreptitiously exude some shades of Romanticism. He fits in the shoes of Romantic poets to project external objects to draw attention in the in new world. Mark the following lines of the famous poem “hunger”:

It was hard to believe the flesh way heavy on my back.  
 The fisherman said: Will you have her, carelessly,  
 trailing his nets and his nerves, as though his wards  
 sanctified the purpose with which he faced himself.  
 I saw his white bone thrash his eyes.  
 I followed him across the sprawling sands.  
 my mind thumping in the flesh's sling.  
 Hope lay perhaps in burning the house I lived in  
 Silence gripped my sleeves; his body clawed at the forth.  
 (*Lie of daws*, 46).

Apparently, the poet who hails from different cultural background and selects English as the vehicle of expression, their work invariably bear the stamp of regional textures and scent of local cultures and its ethics. Indian poetry shows a remarkable fusion of the future and past and exhibits its proclivity towards novelty and simultaneously it exudespenchant for indigenous culture, customs, and communities. He is a true poet of the soil, his native state Orissa but also have similar concern for theother parts of the country. Mark the following lines from his poems "Some Where My Man":

A man doesn't mean anything  
 But the place  
 sifting on the river bank throwing pebbles  
 into the muddy current  
 a man becomes the place. (*A Rain of Rites*, Selected Poems, p. 10).

JayantaMahapatra seems quite abreast to modern and new poetry that got mention in the works of A.K. Ramanujan, NissimEzekeil, KamlaDas, R. Parthasarthy, K.N. Daruwalla etc. He has immaculate inkling of the literary movements like expressionism, impressionism, symbolism, imagism, surrealism and his growth as a modern poet. Modernism or Globalilzationhas left an indelible mark on him. Mahapatra seems influenced with surrealism, and his mindscapes vindicate this point. He wrote long poems reflecting his inner world and his alignment between his dream and reality.He discusses the contemporary concern of the predicament of modern man. He uprightly upholds that India usher in new era. Mark the following lines from his poem "The Independence Day”:

Perhaps this was the song of the earth  
 Going to ruin our children are getting into,  
 to amuse themselves and arrive.

But with the child's pulse of our past,  
 how could we be strong and aggressive and free?  
 The thought of buried treasure  
 still seemed like a confirmation  
 of a form, a voice to us-  
 but where was it that one could hide?  
 It's only the children perhaps  
 Who can find a place  
 Outside of both good and evil.  
 Like Roshanara, eyes hidden behind dark glasses,  
 bearing down with the sun's arrogance  
 Or because India always wanders. (*Lie of Dawns*, 127)

One of the most remarkable feature of his poetry is Indian isIndianness. His poems are mostly spun around the myths, traditions, landscape and mindscape. As his poem "Grandfather" revealsMahapatra's grandfather embracing Christianity, and was subsequently renounced by his orthodox Hindu family, during the outbreak of famine in Orissa in 1866, the poorest state of India. Educated in colonial school, Mahapatra's father became a subinspector of primary schools for the British and then for the State of Orissa. He inherits glorious past traditions but be also crafts present to shape his own psyche and mindset to tread on the future path. Mark the following lines from his the poem "Grandfather":

Did you hear the young tamarind leaves rustle  
 in the cold mean nights of your belly? Did you see  
 yourown death?watch it tear at your cries,  
 break them cute fits of unnatural laughter? (*The Lie of Dawns*,23)

JayantaMahapatra's poetry stems from his root, from his soil. Some people finds his poetry obscure while they analyze it in isolation. He vehemently opined that his poems can't be alienated from the social texture and language. He retrieves imagination emerging out of logical and historical relationship. Indian poetry after 1950 began renovating and shaping itself apropos to liberalization and globalization. He becomes in reflecting the themes and techniques. He openly clamored that he liked to write poetry that would come out of ashes of our culture. He writes:

My own stirrings like the wind's  
 keep hoping for the solace that would be me  
 in my father's eye

to pour the good year back on my;  
 the dead man who likes my palm,  
 is more likely to encourage my dark intolerance  
 rather than there turn me  
 toward some strangely solemn charade (*False Start*, Selected Poems, 41).

Orissan ethos spins the warps and woofs of his poetry. Legends, history, myths, folklore and landscape of the states is the focal point of his poetic endeavor. We can't separate him from his soil, he is true poet of the soil; and his poetry embodies the very spirit of his state, its temples, rituals, festivals and its landscape. He himself pronounced after getting SahityaAcademi Award: "To Orissa, to this land in which my roots lie and lies my past and in which lies my beginning and my end" (Mahapatra's speech at SahityaAkademi). His poems preponderously exude the liveliness of Indian culture and its pluristic fabric. He is of firm conviction that Indian has many facets and Orissa is definitely one of them. M. K. Nike succinctly observes:

Mahapatra's poetry is redolent of the Orissa scene and the Jagannatha temple at Puri figures often in it. His most characteristic note is one of quite but often ironic reflection mostly concerning love, sex and sensuality in the earlier poetry and the social and political scene in some of the later poems. (M. K. Naik, 1982)

Verily, His poetry reeks of Orissan spirit. Some poems highlight his unabated love for his land. The poems like "Dawn at Puri", "Main temple street", "Taste for Tomorrow", "Dhauri", "Ash" etc. are real testimony of his orissan origin. He applies humanistic approach to his work, and his poems realistically deal with the problems like love, sex, hunger, religion, bigotry, social aberrations, women's plight, the temples which unify all people hailing from diverse cultures. We witness an incredible transition from oriyannessto Indianness. His kaleidoscopic vision also shows his concern for coming generations, he is pained at the pathetic condition of the victims of Bhopal Tragedy, and outcries against the exacerbated situation in Punjab because of Terrorism or even the brutal killings of innocent people in Kashmir. He also feels pain at the unfortunate division of India, spread of epidemics and prevalent poverty in Orissa. He also doesn't close eye at the injustice meted out to women and their marginalization in the society. Mark the following lines from the poem 'Dawn at Puri':

White clad widowed Women  
 past the centers of their lives  
 and 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.  
 (*Lie of Dawns*, 21)

JayantaMahapatra finds himself at the door of love twice admirably. While studying at the school called Stewart European run by British Missionary Organization in Cuttack, he gets

infatuated towards the beautiful girl named Irene. She was tall, slender and demure, she was his first love and felt first time irresistible tilt towards the loveliness of life. But his fantastic faith in love mired into chaos when he found Irene with another boy Adrian in objectionable state. He became immensely dejected, and recollects that incident in the words:

I realize painfully how silly I was, moping over something which did not concern me. Perhaps this insignificant event was like a tiny chink in the fence round my life; it gave me a glimpse of what was there on the other side; a garbage bin, an inbuilt house, a half dead butterfly surrounded by ants (Jayanta Mahapatra, Contemporary writers, 1989).

For Mahapatra, Love was an emotive force which he couldn't resist, consequently fell in love again with a beautiful woman, Runu, who was the scholar of English literature in the college where he began his first inning as a faculty in the department of physics. He was swept off his feet by her ravishingly fabulous personality. He proposed to her blushing and afterwards married her, not wary of the much opposition from his parents and other kin around. Love is a dominant theme he adds different hues into it in his poetry. He chisels it with new tone and texture and unravels his dissatisfaction in it. That is why he presents love and sex in his poetry spectacularly together. His poetry has love and sex mingling together. Eroticism also runs abruptly along the cross section of his love poems. Bruce King says about his love poetry. "Poems about love and sexuality treat desire and relation obscurely as if they were metaphysical abstractions. Sexual attention for some woman or women is often the disguised subject" (Bruce King, 2008). Most of his love poems like "Another Evening", "Women in love", "The Whorehouse in Calcutta Street", "Morning", "An Ordinary Day", "The Farewell", "Sometimes" "Armour", "Love Fragment", "Of that Love", "Lost", "Svayamvara and other poems" show inner space, depression, desire, lust and attention. In the poem "The Whorehouse in Calcutta Street" the speaker is in love with the woman, has a purpose in fondling her:

I've wanted to know what lulling silence  
can bloom in my hands,  
what pain and pleasure your mind can wear  
through the intrigues at my fingertips.  
I watch your body ease off the seasons  
stretched out on the stone of my breath  
going now where. (*An Anthology of India English poetry*, Orient Longman, 2001).

Mahapatra traces the incongruities of human relationship, especially belonging to lovers with sheer tenderness. R. Parthasarthy comments: "Love offers a sort of relief from uncertainties one has come to expect life, probed rigorously for instance, in 'Lost' and 'The logic'. There is an intense dramatic quality about "A Missing Person" (Satish Kumar, 2008). Mahapatra's poetry enthusiastically illustrates human relationship and these relationship hover around sexual love. Thus he finds a vent to recover from the clutches of disappointment and dissatisfaction in love life. Chirantan Kulshrestha writes about his love poems: "Mahapatra often excels in love poems especially those expressing through the accoutrements of rhetorical irony, the fragility as well as

the stasis of interpersonal relationship. The stasis is never accounted for in terms tangible common places such as infidelity or in compatibility; more often it results from a statement enters life through the systematic certainties of familiarity and routine". "The Logic" is a charming piece of verse on this theme and describes consummation of love. The beloved with her lover stretches out and not to think about the pleasure of love. She is lost in love so much that she looks oblivious of pain, ignominy and anguish:

Make me the small and edible, love.  
This scalp hurts not from the sleep drag  
of your hands but from my own practiced drivel. (An Anthology of English Poetry, 38)

However, His love poems unravels his desire, passion and ecstasy. Love is the supreme good of human good. It entwines inextricably the strings of emotion into one. It is a natural phenomenon but a conscious one too. In his famous poem "Love", he selects graphic and chiseled words to describe everything in detail. The title itself is the part of the poem. Mahapatra's artistic zeal is discern in the following lines of another famous love verse "Of that Love":

And no one is back here, no one  
I can recognize, and from my side  
I see nothing. Years have passed  
since I last sat with you, watching  
the sky grow lonelier with cloudlessness,  
waiting your body to make it lived in. (*Lie of Dawns*, 90)

Mahapatra possesses an extraordinary vision love themes. His love poems illustrates immutably a blend of hope and chaos, dream and reality, closeness and distance, anxiety and fulfillment, and imaginative thoughts fluorescing into the fervor of mankind. "Lost" is the casket of his poetic beauty. It searches concreteness out of physical unions of lovers. The love seems immersed in a whirlpool of remorse. See the lines:

My hands move on.  
Inside the lines on my moving palms,  
Is it time being sent back to somewhere far behind  
On the edge of dream  
Is it that  
Which quickly shuts my eyes?  
And outside my hands, where

Your body keeps shrinking in space,  
 The first faith of some child goes wrong  
 Like some defect in a mechanical toy;  
 Yet what does it lead to?  
 To what fateful encounter?  
 Like a misplaced watch, this half-light.

Where was I when I lost it? (*An Anthology of Indian English poetry*, 40)

“A Missing Person” is a very memorable lyric hovering around the theme of love. It brings out the somber vision of the poet. The protagonist of poem is a rural hapless, helpless, hopeless woman drawn with sympathy and precision. The missing person is her innerself which is not reflected in the mirror she looks exhausted, bored, somnambulistic, and contemplating her figure in the mirror in a dark room and looks much dejected. Mahapatra is a great love poet and has observed sexual love between man and women in all colors and variety with deftness.

In the darkened room  
 a woman  
 Can't find her reflection in the mirror  
 waiting as usual  
 at the edge of sleep (*The Lie of Dawns*, 89).

Jayanta began writing poetry at the age of forty after undergoing rapturous relationship with his wife, marriage and the arrival of his only son. The image of his unattainable beloved haunts him again and again and finds mention off and on in his poetry. The title *Svayamvara* (1971) of his second volume which has some love poems dedicated to his wife, Runu. Mahapatra alludes to the rare form of Hindu marriage in which the woman has a choice. He opined that love doesn't have any existence in modern days.

Love and passion in Mahapatra's poetry are chiefly opposite to that of Nissim Ezekiel, Kamla Das and Shive K. Kumar. There is spectacle of feeling in Ezekiel's skeptical style; we see serenity and sickness in the poetry of Kamla and insipidness of soul in Shiv K. Kumar's poetry. The protagonist who goes into a brothel to seek sensuous pleasure in the poem "The whore House in a Calcutta Street" suddenly transforms into an image. The poem is an important social account laying emphasis on the hunger and misery of the poor. The man who wanted to know more about the woman, turns into a statue and the body disobeys and he doesn't indulge in sexual act. The poem radiates moral anguish that was missing in the poetry for a long time. Mahapatra's depiction of love as a moral presence in a sex-starved world keeps the sentimental outburst at bay. The poem illustrates generous humanism and stoic social consciousness:

While she does what she thinks proper to please you,  
 The sweet, the little things, the imagined;

Until the statue of the man within  
 you've believed in throughout the years  
 comes back to you, a disobeying toy-  
 and the walls you wanted to pull down,  
 mirror only of things mental, and passing by:  
 like a girl holding on to your wide wilderness,  
 as though it were real, as though the renewing voice  
 tore the membrane of your half-woken mind  
 when, like a door, her words close behind (An anthology of English Poetry, p. 38)

Jayanta Mahapatra is highly philosophical and exceedingly reflective poet. “Total Solar Eclipse”, “The Moon Moments”, “Logic”, “Grass”, “The Exile”, “The Abandoned British Cemetery at Balasore” are rich in philosophical contents. The poem “The Abandoned British Cemetery at Balasore” refers to a historical event, and reflects author’s concern for the English people buried in the cemetery which is bearing a deserted look. Many Britons died on account of the outbreak of fatal diseases like cholera at Balasore about a hundred and fifty years earlier. The cemetery looks in dilapidated state; but the remnants will keep memories alight:

out there on the earth’s unwavering gravity  
 where it awaits like a deity perhaps  
 for the elaborate ceremonial of a coming generation  
 to keep history awake, stifle the survivor’s issuing cry. (*Lie of Pawns*, 27)

“Exile” is also a philosophical poem. The poem is assorted in four stanzas and shows protagonist in melancholy mood. He begins to think himself an Exile – no better than a person who is banished from his country. He seems crestfallen, hopeless and hapless. The ideas and thoughts look intangible but soaked in realistic and vivid imagery. “The Moon Moments” is another luminous philosophical poem by Mahapatra. The Moon Moments means that those precious moments which let a man to think his ideals and to weigh his success with respect to them. The message of the poem is that ideals can never be achieved. He is of the view that humanity, brotherhood, harmony, altruism can’t be sacrificed on the altar of ideals. The poem ends on hope:

the socialism and the love,  
 How can I stop the life I lead within myself-  
 the startled, pleading question in my hands lying in my lap  
 while the gods go by, triumphant, in the sacked city at  
 midnight? (*Lie of Pawns*, 95)

Jayanta Mahapatra tries to find life out of dry bones. He enlivens past into his poetry considerably. The local history of the state, Orissa, is reflected literally in some of his poems. Orissa has earlier known as Udradesh, Utkal and Kalinga thereafter. It finds mention in Mahabharat's Sabhaparav, Bhsimaparva and in Banaparva. Mahapatra's unflinching and never diminishing love takes him down the memory lane in the time of Ashoka when during a war between Kalinga and Magadha wherein many people laid their lives for the noble cause, though Ashoka renounced the violence and embraced Buddhism but it didn't diminish the pain and anguish of the people. Mark the following lines from the Poem "Dhauri":

Afterwards when the wars of Kalinga were over,  
the fallow fields of Dhauri  
hid the blood spilt butchered bodies

At the earth  
burrowed into their dead hunger  
with its merciless worms,  
guided the foxes to their limp genitals. (An Anthology of Indian Poetry, 22)

Verily, Jayanta doesn't turn blind towards the political reality of the time. He ambitiously attempts to depict contemporary reality which is discern in his two longer poems: "The Tattooed Taste" and "The Twenty fifth Anniversary of a Republic". Indian English poet generally condone this aspect, but it is Jayanta who triumphantly deals with it in his poetry. When he is released from the etherealism or ghost of colonialism, he becomes more expressive and articulate. Mark the following lines from the poem "The Twenty fifth Anniversary of a Republic":

The new passage stamp gleams in silver and grey  
it's such a thing that brings a faint flush as our weeks,  
like a sudden wind that ships under the door and stirs  
the silent papers on the desk and other objects  
that have learnt to live without their knowing  
Do we want to feel the ground give may beneath us?  
this is a barren world that has been  
prowling round my room epidemics in the poisoned air,  
dusty streets stretching away like disgruntled socialists.  
(The Twenty Fifth Anniversary Republic)

Like R.K. Narayan, Mulkraj Anand, Raja Rao, Nissim Ezekiel. Mahapatra endeavors to ensconce myth out of Mahatma Gandhi and transform Gandhi into a living myth. Gandhi is the epitome of peace, truth, non-violence and formidable spirit. He glorifies Gandhiji as a contemporary legend, for he wants rationalize Indian mindset. In the poem 'Excerpts for Requiem', he defines Gandhi's persona remarkably well. Mark the opening lines of the poem "from A Requiem":

Your eyes blossom.

These flowers realize.

Safety is not a word for you.

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. (*Lie of Dawns*, 168)

Mahapatra contrives to mythicize Gandhiji in his poems. He wants to turn him into a living legend. Indian people are so much enamored of Gandhiji's thoughts that even if they are angry with him, they feel his indomitable presence. Mahapatra by lauding and eulogizing Gandhi explores his roots and belongingness. He peeps into past, brings Gandhi out and mythicize him in his poetry. Thus doing so, he decolonizes his mind. Gandhi still lives in our heart of heart and his presence can be seen among the psychological levels of Indian people. In the poem "from Requiem", he exhibits this spirit flawlessly:

The noose in the hand of the freedom you earned,

that is mere precious illusion,

oblivious to India's face the colour of shadow

Just the crows' clamour along the overhead wires,

the carcass disappearing into its own shadow,

the hollow chest of the sun floating in the Ganga. (*Lie of Pawns*, 168)

He is indefatigable patriot and shows concern for immensely in his poems. He is shocked to hear the pain of unnatural deaths due to cyclone in Orissa, thousands of casualties in Bhopal Union Carbide gas tragedy, brutal assassination of Gandhiji and terrorism in Punjab and Kashmir. In the past, he witnessed the oppressive British Rule and heard the echoes of world war in India when Japanese troops were heading headstrong to wards India. He also lamented at his uncle's sudden death at Burma Border. He has also seen the pre and post- independence sectarian and ethnic violence and the widening gulf between Hindus and Muslims. He was also pained at the partition of the country and the outbreak of epidemics, famine and prevailing poverty in the country. He also observed the wheat fields in Punjab destroying in fire. All these things find finest expression in his poetry.

In conclusion, we may say that JayantaMahapatra, by the dint of sound application of various themes invariably spawns luminous and florid pieces of verse. Though he forayed into the realm of poetry quite late in life at forty, notwithstanding he is sitting at the Parnassus of Indian English poetry with Ezekiel, Ramanujan and Kamla Das. The richness and sophistication of language, the gush and delicacy of the words, arguable imagery and variegated landscapes, sets him apart from other contemporary poets. He adopts an indigenous tradition of English language,

however he creates a new Indian English idiom too. His Indian sensibility, his flawless command over English, his mythopoeic vision, his brevity and felicity in expression, astonishing imagery, are all indications of a great poet that'll eventually take him on greater height.

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