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The Poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra: A Post Colonial Proposition

Dr. Mirza Sibtain Beg

Assistant Professor,
Department of English,
Shia P.G. College,
Lucknow, U. P.

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Abstract:

Jayanta Mahapatra is indisputably the most innovative, progressive and Anglophile poets of modern India. He is intrinsically touched by the stark realities of our country, and writes instinctively about – hunger, myths, traditions, customs, rituals, love, passion, anger, frustration, sex, the self and the eternity, the socio-cultural diversity with adroitness. His extant work exudes post –colonial leanings and spirit invariably. Post- colonialism refers to those theories in texts, political aspirations and modes of activism that spur to challenge structural inequalities and to establish social justice. Mahapatra’s poetry unravels many facets of post- colonialism as haunting past, search for identity and roots. Mahapatra writes to enliven the native tradition protesting the former colonizers and establishing national identity and integrity. He evokes the sense of Indianness both in content and form through his poetry relentlessly. His symbols and images are, however, evocative, suggestive and pivotal for linguistic versatility. The present paper aims at probing various dimensions of modernity and post-colonial proclivity in his poetry.

Keywords: Colonialism, post colonialism, hunger, myth, socio-cultural diversity.

Jayanta Mahapatra is shining like a star in the firmament of Indian English poetry, and relentlessly radiating light on country's rich cultural heritage, beliefs, traditions, myths, rituals, folklores soaked in Indian ethos. He entwines inextricably past with present, evolves new style, rhythm and thought in his poetry. He tries hard to ensconce and establish his own identity and province. His poetic output exhibits post-colonial characteristics and spirit. Bruce King avers:

Jayanta Mahapatra seems closer to the modernist movement of the first half of this century with its open-ended literary forms and reliance on securing symbols to provide coherence to non-linear, fragmented structures. Mahapatra's persona is an estranged, distanced, sensitive artist rather than an invisible or playfully prominent post-modernist author. As in modernist writers there is less importance on the material world and more emphasis on subjective memory and the inner self. The psychological in contrast to the post-modernist's emphasis on almost totally self-enclosed forms. Mahapatra's is an elite art, aimed at a small, discriminating readership (195).

Post colonialism refers to those theories, texts, political leanings, and modes of activism that engage in such questioning, that aim to challenge structural inequalities and

bring about social justice. Colonialism means the marginalization or extinction of culture, and in the sojourn of post colonialism several culture are incompatible with new world culture, which is called hybridity. Post-modern hybridity lays focus on multiple and mobile positioning spawned by the pre formative transgression of national grand narratives- which Homi Bhabha refers to as the 'Shreds and Patches' of various and varied national voices. Post-modern hybridity is also produced in the expressions of difference characterized by nation, class, gender, manifestations, sexuality and language. Mahapatra's poetry unravels many traits of post colonialism as a haunting colonial past, search for roots and identity. Henry Louis Gates is quite relevant here to quote:

Ours is a late twentieth century world profoundly fissured by nationality, ethnicity, race, class, and gender. And the only way to transcend those divisions to forge, for once a civic culture that respects both differences and commodities – is through education that seeks to comprehend the diversity of culture (xv).

Mahapatra as a post colonial poet writes to enliven the native tradition protesting the former colonizers and establishing national identity. Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak and Homi K. Bhabha played a pivotal role in the expansion of post colonial theories. Postmodern Indian English poetry is genuine as it addresses the entire community. Modernity in new Indian English poetry envisages a break with the past, fusion of present with future, possesses manifold manifestations. Mahapatra evokes the sense of Indianness both in content and form, through his poetry. His symbols and images are evocative and suggestive and they are significant for linguistic versatility. The poem "Taste for Tomorrow" is a true reflection of it:

At Puri, the crows
the one wide street
lolls out like a giant tongue
Five faceless refers more aside
as a priest passes by
And at the streets and
the crowds imaging the temple door (*Selected Poems* 14).

Mahapatra's poetry is conspicuous for depth of feelings and true poetic imagination which has a gamut of variegated themes. Orissa landscape representing India's cultural and religious past glory bequeathing into present and hollowness in modern existence, love, sex and all feelings and relationships which make human life and superb poetic craftsmanship. His superb poetic craftsmanship, his command to use native language, his flawless description of nature landscaped attired in foreign language spurs him to decolonize his poetry. Like other post colonial poets of other countries like Australia, Africa, Caribbean, he successfully establishes his own identity, and nation's identity which was shattered due to colonization. Boehmer is right when he comments on his progressive link: "Indian, African and Caribbean nationalist writers focused on reconstructing from the position of their historical, social or metaphysical difference a cultural identity which has been damaged by the colonial experience. The need was for roots, origins, founding myths and ancestors, national for mothers and fathers in short, for restorative history" (Boehmer,1995). In his "A Rain of Rites", Mahapatra gets submerged in his native sensibility:

Who was the last man on earth.
to whom the cold cloud brought the blood to his face?
Numbly I climb to the mountain-tops of ours
where my own soul quivers on the edge of answers.
Which still, slate air sits on an angel's wings?
What hold my rain so it's hard to overcome (*Selected Poems 7*).

“Crows” in his poems are symbolic of evil, guilt and destruction; 'water' symbolizes 'clarity and wisdom' and 'rain' is a symbol of 'purification or salvation'. Like T.S. Eliot and W.B. Yeats, he uses an image from the world of Science which suggests some aspects of modern life. In the poem, the line “Mornings like pale- yellow hospital linen” symbolizes the poor health of the entire nation.

Amid the ambiance of globalization, Mahapatra invariably wants to establish his own identity, his native place's identity and nation's identity in his poetry. Like his other contemporary Ramanujan, he longs for his roots. Through the panoramic description of temples, landscapes and myth, he strives to search his roots and identity. They make the bedrock of his poetry. He loves the present and is equally enamored of the glorious past. He portrays his native rituals, customs, Konark and Jagannath Temple, Puri and Dhauli vividly and vehemently in his poems. Mark the following lines from his lovely verse piece “Dhauli”:

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

As the earth
burrowed into their dead hunger
with its merciless worms,
guided the foxes to their limp genitals.

Years later, the evening wind
trembling the glazed waters of the River Daya,
keens in the rock edicts the vain word,
like the voiceless cicadas of high (*Selected Poems 22*).

Verily, he is tormented by the ghost of colonial past but he also seeks solace, peace, joy, pride and pomp from it. Like a post modernist poet, he also deals with theme of transnationalism in his some poems. He shows the menace of cruelty and violence which has increasingly and irrevocably spread its tentacles everywhere. . He is miffed with not much expected development during post-colonial era and it proves the fact that post-colonialism is just the continuance and progression of colonialism. Past memories and his continual quest for identify always bear the stamps in his poetry. In many poems, he depicts the Orissa Landscapes, rituals and temples. Mark the following lines from the poem “Myth”:

The stairs seen endless, lifelong,
and those peaks too, Annapurna, Dhaulgiri;
Uncertain, impressive as gods.

I dare not go
into the dark, dark sanctum
where the myth shifts
Swiftly from hand to hand, eye to eye.
The dried, sacrificed flowers smile at me.

I have become;
a diamond in my eye. (*Selected Poems* 15).

Verily, Mahapatra is extensively conscious of the poverty, the plight of the masses and women as victim of male lust in our society, it gives his poetry a tragic disillusioned tone. In the poems “Hunger” and “Whorehouse in Calcutta Street”, and “Man of His Night”, he resorts on the theme of sex. The tragic consciousness does not appear figuring in the poetry of any other Indian poet in English as desperately as in that of Jayanta Mahapatra. Mahapatra is quite aware of the futility of sex in life – an expression of love and vehicle of procreation. But now it has been perverted from its proper function and is utilized for animal pleasure and monetary gains. It has turned invariably into a source of degeneration and disease. It corrodes the mortality and poses a hurdle in man's spiritual salvation. He is pained at the pathetic plight of poor women. His treatment of sexual love gives us echo of T.S. Eliot's outcry against sex perversion. The following lines through the words of St. Augustine in “Wasteland” are quite worth quoting:

To carthage then I came
Burning burning burning burning (186).

Jayanta Mahapatra is truly a post- colonial poet, for his poems are woven around myth and legend and he presents it in national spirit. He shows his keen interest in contemporary politics, his interest in politics is revealed in his poem when he uses Gandhiji as a myth. His depiction of contemporary reality is palpable in his poems. “The Tattooed Taste”, “The Twenty-fifth Anniversary of a Republic”, “ The Fifteenth of August” and “ Of Independence Day”. Mark the following lines from the poem “On Independence Day”:

We have lost those first days
that had crowned themselves with thorns,
the damp tender grass growing to sanctuary
on faiths we could not manage to understand,
we have lost all those stories
about the rustle of the blood
that caught its breath when the British
seized our laughter
tossing timelessly for ages

beneath the time of the suns (*The Lie of Dawns* 126).

As a post-colonial poet, Mahapatra painfully feels the modern man's degeneration, hollowness and sterilization. The growing horizon of industrialization and the dilemma of survival in a constrained world turns the poet sympathetic towards the suffering of the poor people. He exasperatedly finds his self in the turmoil of the present day scenario. He is at pained and crestfallen at seeing the plight of poor people everywhere in the world like Somalia and Kalahandi, cries out in agony for starving children who are malnourished. He unravels the chaos and gloom hovering around our society and apprises us that we are still in the colonial condition with. In the poem "Deaths in Orissa", he laments the pathetic plight of the people when natural calamity devastates their hope:

Nothing but the paddy's twisted throat
 exposed on the crippled bleak earth,
 nothing but impotence in lowered eyes,
 nothing but the tightening of the muscles
 in Bhagyabati's neck which her outcaste mother
 would herself have killed to throttle to death,
 nothing but the cries of shriveled women
 cracking against the bloodied altar of Man,
 nothing but the moment of fear

When they need a God who can do them some good (*The Lie of Dawns* 138).

Like post-modernist, especially the deconstructionists, Mahapatra believes that a text can be dismantled differently. He comes across the contemporary reality, analyses it scientifically and paints it with objectivity. He has successfully acclimatized English language to an indigenous tradition. His employment of Indian imagery and symbols in English language incredibly contributed to the growth of Indian English. A clinical eye for detail coupled with a chiseled and firm syntax enables him to create a novel image whose nuances invariably expand beyond description. Mark the following lines from his poem "A Missing Person":

In the darkened room
 A woman
 Cannot find her reflection in the mirror
 waiting as usual
 At the edge of sleep.
 In her hands she holds
 the oil lamp
 whose drunken yellow flames
 know where her lovely body hides (*An Anthology of Indian English Poetry* 37).

Jayanta Mahapatra is a consummate postcolonial poet with a global vision. He is averse to unjust and unequal forms of political and cultural hegemony. Spurred and stirred by the metaphysical passion and disinterested cannons of justice and truth, he denounces oppression of men by men, defends weak and the deprived. He is pained at the plight, poverty and predicament of the poor people in District Kalahandi in Orissa, Somalia, and other parts of the world. He presents in his poems the stark reality of the society and how it is still the facsimile of the colonial chaos. He is unable to reconcile in this age of globalization and post colonialism with the poverty and hunger of the poor people and the anguish, pain, humiliation, and discrimination they've to undergo. In the poem "The Stories in Poetry", his humanistic soul cries out at the pitiable condition of the starving people. Mark the following lines of this poem:

a world where hundreds die
of hunger in Somali and elsewhere-
where poetry is no mystery;
even the most tender embrace says
there is no heroism for us to live on.

For there must be;

a world where hundreds die
of hunger in Som some excuse I can make
to get out of my myself.

These words I comb out,
as If I were pulling the knife out of the wound,
unable to staunch the flow of blood,

Knowing I must stay in the wings with others (*The Lie of Dawns*147).

Most of his poems have closed form. The structure of the verse is uprightly constrained and proceeds forwardly with precision and logic. The following lines of the poem "Myth" is quite reflective of this point:

Years drift sluggishly through the air:
a chanting, the long years, an incense.
Face upon face return to the barbed horizons
of the foggy temple; here lies
a crumpled leaf, a filthy scarlet flower
out of placeless pasts, on the motionless stairs (*Selected Poems* 15).

Like a conscious craftsman, Mahapatra revises and re revises, polishes, re polishes his poems till he attains perfection. He uses the simplest possible words, tremendously focuses on the syllables which give his diction a matchless melody. His diction has an almost classical simplicity, austerity and completeness. Mahapatra positions his poetry at the interface of post colonialism while harping on the non-west or its cultural other, incorporating

the antagonistic theories of Darwin, Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud. He is a postcolonial poet whose sensibility harbors complexity, variety and disenchantment in a peculiar way. His poems sprouts spontaneously from the dry bones of the gory past, chaos, hunger, solitude, distortions, longing, frustration, desperation and alienation etc. He cries out dispiritedly in the poem “The Lost Children of America”:

So to find the time among us,
Here on earth
When history does not reverberate any more
with pulse of the drum
or with the chant of the tide on a sacred Puri shore-
but with the echoes of a bruised presence
lying like a stone
at the bottom of the soul’s clear pool,
feeling the virtue that is there
in the refracted light, the earth-sense
of what pleases us and of what is lost
forever beyond us,
as the burden of understood things billows upward
like smoke. (*The Lie of Dawns* 34)

Twentieth century poetry is characterized by gloom, ugly politics, hegemony and vying for revenge through violence all across the globe. Mahapatra unequivocally and comprehensively denounces violence, in its all form and shapes. He is staunch supporter of Gandhiji’s policies and philosophy. Gandhiji was a great Indian nationalist leader and harbinger of non-violent resistance to colonial oppression. Like his contemporary literary luminaries Nissim Ezekiel, A.K. Ramanujan, R. K. Narayan, Mulraj Anand, Raja Rao, he tries triumphantly to transform Gandhi into a living myth. He takes liberty to glorify the charisma of his personality. Mahapatra finds many strategies of Gandhiji to be associated with postcolonial activism. He is dejected at the disgrace and disregard shown to Gandhi. Mark the following lines of the poem “from A Requiem”:

Your eyes blossom
These flowers realize
safety is not a word for you.
Today is the voice that points
floats over the breath of discarded ideals,
the breath of dead flowers day after day Rajghat:

it becomes the breath
that the children of Kalahandi breath
in their dreams in their interminable starvation sleep,
it grows into the faceless mist of white shadows
that stand at the door
opening into Parliament House,
the breath of an untold future
wanting to wind around your favourite song
Raghupati Raghav Raja Ram...
Like this futile, spiritless poem of mine,
The breath of meadows where no grass grows,
The breath of lost women looking for tears,
The breath of the blind child singing who watches us
With his golden fingers.
The breath of shadow, almost. (*The Lie of Dawns* 168)

In conclusion, we may say that Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry is soaked in post-colonial ethos profusely. He painstakingly decolonizes his English poetry, raises voice against imperialism, and enthusiastically evolves indigenous culture and tradition. He uprightly upholds his native past and entwines inextricably the bygone culture with the present culture. His poetry shows the relationship of the self to the other, the chasm felt by the consciousness of awareness and what one is aware of. Bruce King says: "Mahapatra's vision and obsessive writing poetry as a hopeless search for meaning in the human condition is, however, a characteristic of post-modernism" (195). He conscientiously elucidates a new Indian English idiom, ensures a new identity independent of the colonizer and evolving a new paradigm to depict the contemporary society in his poetry. His essentially Indian sensibility, his flawless command on English language, his mythopoeic imaginative flight, his brevity and precision in expression, his employment of enthralling images and symbols places him at the Parnassus of Indian English poetry.

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