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Relationship: A Theme Song of Jayanta Mahapatra's Life

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Abstract:

Jayanta Mahapatra's *Relationship* presents the varied facets of human life in poetic manner. The poem is set in Orissa - a land of 'forbidden myth'. The Mahanadi, the prime river of the state, the temple of Konarka, the ancient harbours, the heroic past of the land has been recalled with regret. The glory and pride of ancestors shown in the Kalinga war turned Ashoka the Great into a deeply religious man. Once the heroic and militant race of poet's ancestors is drifted away from their ideals. Mahapatra speaks of the burden of the last generation, the responsibility of the present generation and the concern for the future generation in the poem. The landscape of the Orissa thrills the poet and he becomes an integral part of it. His symbols and images are evocative, and suggestive, they reflect his love for the Orissa landscape with all the myths and rituals associated with it. History, myths, legends, folklore all go together to establish a distinct idiom and identity in Mahapatra's *Relationship*.

Keywords: Relationship, King Ashoka, Kalinga war, Sun Temple.

Jayanta Mahapatra *Relationship* is a single poem running in twelve sections and six hundred and seventy two lines. *Relationship* evokes the landscape, history, tradition and culture of our country in English Language.

Relationship is not a poem about relationship of man to man in friendship, love, family or community. It is about a relationship of man to time, man to land and man to generations of men who have passed before him and who will come after him (Jayaprada 89).

Rooted firmly in the Orissan soil, the strength of Mahapatra's poetry comes from his living intimately with his place. Legends, history and myths associated with these places become the nerve centre of his poetry. The poem opens with an invocation to Muse.

Once again one must sit back and bury the face
in this earth of the forbidding myth
the phallus of the enormous stone (*Relationship* 9)

Mahapatra recreates the scene of the building of the Sun Temple in the eleventh century A. D. The twelve hundred 'artisans of stone', who built the temple in long twelve years. They are like 'brown flowers in passion' and the aerial roots of centuries - old banyan tree'. Their shadowy appearance at present confirms man's futile existence in the passage of time. The Konark Temple stands on its ancient ground as a "messenger" of their death. They are involved with the history of the "cruelties / of the ruthless emperors" "groans and cries", "smells of gunsmoke and smoldering flesh", and of "tactics and strategy".

Saroj Kumar Padhi observes-

The present generation's alienation from the archeological, artistic and aesthetic past has distanced them (the artisans) too far beyond recognition. The war of Kalinga in 261 B.C., the inhuman atrocities of Ashok and the unaccountable suffering of the ancestors are peacefully forgotten in the passage of time. Today people visit Dhaulgiri, on the dead river Daya to see the rock-edicts that bear testimony to Ashok's change of heart. The poet thinks it is the cruelty of time to have rendered people callous to ancestors' glory as well as suffering. The names of the kings resound in our ears. We have forgotten names of the artisans, the names of the Oriya fighters in Kalinga war but remembered Narasingh Dev and Ashok (32).

Thus, the history of legends and traditions of Orissa make him aware of his "maritime ancestors" and their prosperity of the past. "This is the story of both time and eternity, of history and truth" (Shahane 172), but time cannot speak for it "has no mouth". The poet like a solitary traveler "can sense the brilliant, colours of the past / in the ocean's strange and bitter deeps".

Mahapatra's identification results in his awareness-
and yet my existence lies in the stones
which carry my footsteps from one day into another,
down to the infinite distances, (11)

It is the stones again that relate him to the Sun Temple, now in a state of ruin. The ravages of time have caused a slow process of decay and death. The poet thus arrives at the realisation of his physical existence.

only that the stones were my very own,
waiting as mother or goddess or witch,
as my birth feeds on them. (11)

Krishna Rayan makes a pertinent remark, "the journey from feeling of dispossession to feeling of rootedness, which is the "plot" of the poem" (215).

In section Two, the speaker's meditation continues and now the public past is substituted by a personal one. The self would uncovering the relationship with family members, friends and people at large. The speaker states-

Today I watch through the window
the grave that is my mother's
watch the old impulse in red and yellow
chalked across the white terraces of childhood,
in the shores of distant refrains, (12)

The poem becomes a part of a kind of magicians audience watching the tricks of magic on the stage. Memories dominate this section and the poet describes himself as a "memories are just voices of another world". These personal reminiscences are also mixed with the memories of history, of war, and peace.

The swords of forgotten kings
rust slowly in the museums of our guilt
while the carved rock loses its light, (13)

The emotional state evoked in this section. The poet recollects the memories of his 'quickly – aging father', his 'old village' and 'gentle daughter's skin'.

Section Three of *Relationship* begins significantly with the ‘tapestry of the year’s first rain. The rain drops are “like an army, uninformed in gray / but penitents, down on their knees”. The poet recollects the bloody battle Emperor Ashoka fought on the banks of the river Daya in which thousands of human lives were lost. As emperor Ashoka vanquished the Kalinga kingdom in the battle, the river Daya turned red with the blood of those who were killed in the war, and when he saw this scene his heart was filled with remorse. He then renounced war and violence. The past is bloody and brutal and the poet shuts his eyes in a fear that history may repeat itself, since “the invaders walk along the only road they know/that leads to their bloody victories”.

and how the waters of the Daya
stank with the bodies of my ancestors;
my eyes close now
because of the fear..... (14)

The poet remembers his relationship with his friends “friendship is like a pool of water/ where shadows move about and dance” - how his friends have turned into mere shadows that is affected by doubt and envy.

The speaker thinks that there is no warmth in human voice. It is choked with fear of violence. Violence may erupt again in the world. When the speaker looks “into the eyes of hunter”; who can be identified as one of the ancient invaders of the land of Orissa. He admits that his “hands are weak for the violent life”. The only thought that saves the poet is the thought of his dream that can transcend the ugly realities of life “a sky full of fallen birds”. The speaker expresses his desire

Now you don’t even want me to write my poems,
of those words which spit blood and vomit
and speak of malice, (16)

He thinks that the words of the poem that would speak love rather than spit blood. He wants to preserve them in “The dark crevices of stone” so that they cannot be affected by the wounding wind.

The poems in the section Four, Five and Six are devoted to an exploration of speaker’s dream, its meaning and significance, in terms of the image of ‘sleep’. In Section Four, the speaker describes sleep of the father paradoxically suggests the life of action in time:

So the sleep you wear yourself to
through the smouldering burning - ground
of your granite eyes (17)

It becomes difficult to know the mystery of death that cause our suffering and unfulfillment in life. The poet comes to realize that he has to conquer time and death in order to achieve the cherished dream. The speaker establishes his father as a major force.

Burden of your peace, Father
Theme – song of my life that burns my tongue
Voices of children always wronged (18)

Rabindra K. Swain states–

He (Mahapatra) is a child of the earth and the sea, sun and wind, of tradition in which he is brought up. All of those taken together have richly shaped his Oriyasensibility. The various aspects of Orissa, its flora and fauna, its

enchancing landscape vividly summed up in the image of “the indigo waters of the tropics” and “the eternal half light of rain” which exist amid the squalor, poverty and the drudgeries of daily life, its customs and festivals Which have enriched his sensibility, find sensuous and detailed expression in an apostrophe, sweetly addressed as “my ancient – love of a “hundred names” (95).

The exterior world and the interior world dissolve into one. The poet obliges to go back to his origin. The poet declares:

I know I can never come alive
if I refuse to consecrate at the altar of my origins(18)

The speaker is in a mood of prayer - a prayer to draw his body out and to reflect on the ‘earth’s lost amplitudes’. The poet also recalls the scene of the rain and the sunshine which is the source of pure joy.

The kind of sleep described in section Five is “the miracle of living”. The Poetries to master “the sleep habit / of the golden deer, tempter of the taste “. This sleep habit would perpetuate his dream of involvement with life rather than escaping from it. The poet tries to define this sleep as a song.

This sleep is a song
that is heard from all sides continually,
a course cage that can hold a larger life ,
a time that stretches the scarlet in the mind ,
and grace the heart’s skies with clear wind ,
the hiding-place without beginning or end ,(21)

The speaker acknowledges the driving force of his creative urge gives him insight into the significance of his land and life. The speaker undergoes transformation and his sleep “creates the special vision” and “poignant significance”.

Section Six continues the poet’s preoccupation with sleep and walking in his continuing quest for vision. The speaker interrogates – “how shall room be made for sleep?” The next stanza of the poem opens up with the fear of death. Therefore, the poet asks “what can save us now/ but the miracle we have been waiting for?”

At this time of doubt, fear and distress, the speaker finds hope and he asserts “no, there is a room enough for cries and whispers / for a nameless sigh, for the sharp blade of love / for another kindredship of spirit”.

In Section Seven the perspective changes from sleep and dream to the speaker’s loneliness and fear of death. The poet realizes that the body is only a witness- box and asks:

How long does it take one to know
that it is he who is standing there,
alone by himself in the witness - box
of shackled pink muscle ? (24)

The speaker is critical about his own predicament. “The heavy round night” he rolls on his pillow, and “the weight of shadows of sick relics lies upon the bed”. He realizes that he would not be blessed with martyrdom living in “no man’s land”. He, therefore, makes

an attempt to come in grips with “the five shadows” which are five physical senses. In the folk tales of “the elephant of six blind men” each of them touching different limbs of the elephant gives their own perceptions of the animal from their limited vision. The poet says one has to overcome this limited vision “only by conquering them / can one conquer the rest of the road”.

The section appropriately ends with the reenactment of the horrors of war - “beat of drum” and “wooden soldiers marching” to the “periodic invasions of the enemy”. In the midst of this action, movement, and the noise, the speaker remembers love’s “trembling / through the deserted ashes of my heart”.

In section Eight, the poet at once establishes a relationship between his own life and “this temple in rains, in a blaze of sun”. The poet interrogates to the “Sun-lions” standing near the door and asks - “Whose return of life are you waiting for?” The reference obviously is to the Sun Temple of Konarka, magnificent pieces of sculpture and architectural world. The poet looks through and beyond “these granite peaks of dream”. One can only understand the essence of this great monument:

So through this door, through
the gleaming skin of the three kingdoms
the mineral, vegetable and animal ,(26)

Rabindra Swain comments-

In order to be able to comprehend life in its fullness, one has to go through the varied experiences, though the three kingdoms of “the mineral, the vegetable and animal that roughly correspond to three worlds of the Sattva, the Rajas and the Tamas. Going through these three dimensions of life one will ‘experience the fever of love / and deeper undulation of the earth’ (101).

The speaker is convinced now that despite his willingness to escape the gloom, decay and death cannot take away man’s dream of living and experiencing the reality. The carved figures of “the elephants”, “gazes of mermaids” and “the gandharvas and the demons” on the body of the temple have been cornered by silence to loneliness. The sculpture of the body on the temple stone are imitations. The poet thinks what matter is the body itself:

This is the real body: raging pachyderm
with the crazy testicles, red and wild,
the lusting god of the blackest Siva night:(27)

He can thus experience love only in a sensual aspect. So when he touches the “embarrassed yoni” of his “ancient love”, “the sulking years of dreams / the stricken purposes of muscles” still lie before him unrealized. The poet says:

How would I pull you out
of the centuries of fallen stone ?
How would I hold the linga the eye
until the world is made all over again ? (28)

In section Nine, the speaker is still in the midst of time looking for happiness. He speaks the myths of happiness, action and sleep. Action can also lead to happiness. But it can only take place in time, in the process that ends in the physical decay and death.

The poet captures the mood of the present embodied in the nature and behavior of his contemporaries and friends. Friends grow selfish and “keep walking themselves / along the upraised road, unsullied by guilt and belief”.

The poet is confronted with “the myth of sleep and action”, he argues that his meditation on sleep and action is not in the escapist's mode, it is “soothing himself”, and reaching to certain perfection for himself. He would prove that the honesty “holds the throat of man” and common fate “can make one love a neighbour” binds community together. Vasant Shahane observes “the world of myth is peopled by all kinds of being and things - friends, relations, prostitutes, newspapers, which leave rather strange and sad impression on the poet's sensibility”(176).

In the beginning of Section Ten, the poet expresses that he is proud of that rich past. He stumbles out of his door to see “the sage of troubled mien – sitting under the peepul tree, all alone”. The poet here incorporates the metaphor of the sage who remains unperturbed by the flow of time. The poet is confronted with an atmosphere of meaninglessness where “waters flow past without their purposes” and instead of grand monumental architectures, only “replicas of temples lie scattered everywhere”.

The poet recalls the scene of Cuttack:

the town of Cuttack where I was born
its lanes scarred by ruts from whose clay
the goddesses take their sacred shapes
in autumn every year,(34)

The poet identifies with hordes of worshippers gathered around a giant tree or making clay images of Goddess Durga in the street of Cuttack during the Dussera festival. He becomes “mysterious inheritance” where his “roots stick out here and there of “broken empires”. “Vanquished dynasties” and of “ahimsa's whimpers”. “Ahimsa's whimpers are allusion to King Ashoka and the Kalinga war and the subsequent stupas stand for universal peace.

The poet, however, has been redeemed from his weariness of loneliness and ageing and fear of death.:

Now I stand among these ruins,
waiting for the cry of a night-bird
from the river's far side
to drift through my weariness ,
listening to the voices of my friends
who have become the friends of others,
writing poems , abject and anxious. (35)

Section Eleven begins with an image of mirror where reflections of the past connect him to the present.

The narrative posits within itself an amalgamation of history, myth and tradition and tries to uphold the narrator's conviction that present is to be understood and be made more meaningful not by disowning the past , but by accepting it (Mohanty53).

The Sun Temple stands on its twenty four stone wheels. These “twenty four blue spells” and the twenty four hours into which the stone wheels on the chariot of Konarka

temple are divided. Those wheels firmly stand out as a symbol of eternity, of the co-existence of the past and present.

For lofty as they are on their twenty four blue spells,
my walks along the trembling of the stone
seems loftier still ; to the flashing tendril
from the fugitive root, the throat of stone
choked with the many truth of eternal sleepers.(36)

“Thus, the poet continues his quest for ‘an essence divine’ and for ‘grace’ in relationship between man and man, man and god, man and sculptured art” (Shahane177). The poet sums up the end of this section with his vision of life and its continuity and its endurance.

In the concluding Section, the speaker bids farewell to his old fearful guilty feelings and asks-“Is anything beyond me that I cannot catch up?” He then salutes the “dark daughters” - the figure of beautiful women carved on the temple stone, and says “Tell me your names, dark daughters / Hold me to your spaces”.

This section “acclimatizes the persona’s dream of total merger with the Sun Temple. The self of the persona is seen to be shedding down all personal problems – sin, guilt, fear of death and ageing – with which he had been occupied and obsessed (Mohanty54). The poet is in eternal harmony with himself as well as others. He owes his new birth in the silence dance of these beautiful daughters.

Vasant Shahane observes “*Relationship* shows the poet’s endeavour to connect not merely the past with the present ,but also to explore the connecting links between one art and another, between sculpture and poetry between music and poetry and this is indeed fascinating”(179). Mahapatra’s response to the landscape, his sense of myth and history, tradition and culture of the land of his birth gives him distinct identification.

Mahapatra’s focuses in the poem on the history, the mythic origins of Orisa. But the thrust of the work is on “ the poet’s relation with his past, undertaken in the poem a kind of like journey, quest” (Mokashi-Punekar 53). Mahapatra’s *Relationship* gives a message of involvement and action and acceptance of life as it is with all its past, and present as well as the implications of the future.

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