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Major Themes in the Poems of Jayanta Mahapathra

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Abstract:

Jayanta Mahapatra is a coveted Indo-Anglican writer who started writing poems in his early forty's and won the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award in 1981. He is a physicist and came later into poetry and published books in quick successions. He dealt with varied themes, images, symbols to highlight his native fragrance. He mostly chooses his own state, Orissa for his poems and brought the native culture and tradition in multitudes. His poems are rich in imageries and colors that make him aloof from the contemporaries. His language and style varies from his early stages and writing to his later stages. The first stage of his writing is colorful and in abundance of images. It is easy for a common reader to comprehend. The later stages of his poems showed social commitment and responsibilities, raised his voices to social vices, situations and urges to have a better living for the posterity upholding the traditions and culture of their ancestors.

Keywords: *Love, Suffering, Pain, Sex, Myth, Tradition, History, Culture, Nativity, Loss, Patriarchy, Sacrifice*

Jayanta Mahapathra is one of the most celebrated Indian-English authors who had published his books only after forty years of age. He is the most esteemed post-modern experimental poet and shares his uniqueness with A.K.Mehrotra and viewed poetry as a structure of images. He deals with memories, obsessions, doubts and other personal experiences as his themes. He was considered the most prolific writer with a science background. Mahapathra is the first poet to receive the Sahitya Akademi Award. His writings are with perspicacity of symbols and images. He broke the conservative thought of writing in Vernacular language. He always wanted to lament the stark reality of Orissa through English. The themes of hunger, myth, rites, rituals, sexuality, spirituality, self and eternity drew large applause from the international audiences and thereby highlighting him as prolific Indian English writer.

All his writings are the net result of his pain and sufferings of his childhood and adolescence. He had gone through harsh circumstances which made his childhood terrible. He was born as a Christian child and his neighbors were Hindus. Mahapatra's father got his admission in British Missionary School. There he was a timid child, mocked by everyone, thereby developing inferior in attitude and faced many such harassments. The sufferings started from his house and his surroundings. But he found a little solace in his school days while watching girls which he had openly admitted in his recent interviews. As Bruce King points out his nature of themes in his poem.

A skeptical rationalist troubled by the uncontrollable, particularly by his biculturalism and alienation as a Christian from Hindu tradition, Mahapatra used words to seek reconciliation. (Prasad 2)

He married Runu Mahapatra, who was a student of English Literature where he first joined as a Physics Professor. He was not friendly with his mother till her survival. The family posed very strict and stringent rules before them and many mental conflicts which led his wife suffering a miscarriage.

He became Christian because of his lineage. His grandfather was a Hindu. During the hunger and poverty struck in Orissa in 1886, he embraced Christianity. Before writing poetry, Mahapatra tied his hands in novels, short stories, and essays. At twenty two, he sent his short stories to *Illustrated Weekly of India*. It was rejected and sent back to him. Then he pursued his profession and photography. It was after seventeen years that he started writing poetry and was published in the highly reputed journals of the world which include *Chicago Review*, *New York Quarterly*, *Poetry*, *Sewanee Review*, *Critical quarterly*, *Times Library Supplement*, *Meanjin Quarterly*, and *Malahat Review*.

Mahapatra's maiden book of forty nine poems , *Close the sky, Ten by Ten* , was published by Dialogue Publication, Kolkata in 1971. This volume was dedicated to his father and bore two famous poetic quotations of Nissim Ezekiel and T.S.Eliot. This is his first phase of his poetic creation in which he deals with the language which is primarily experimented with the learning of English Literature. The title of this collection is taken from the opening stanza of the book's seventeenth poem *Sanctuary*.

He feels to have his own space where he can store his hidden poetic creation without any norms. He always has an affinity to curb his Oriyan culture and traditions. In his conscience, he has sympathy for the woman folk who are always under the cripples of the male dominated society. He draws allusion of the myth of *Ramayana* and says:

*Drawing a circle he places the woman inside.
The forest drags down the clamour of the birds
She looks down too, circumscribed by a pact,
Smelling of winds and root and forest heat. (Close the sky, Ten by Ten)*

He draws sensual themes in his art and consumed its unaffected taste of composure. In the book, he laments a young tired man, authoritative and symbolizes patriarchy, explores the whore; with her flesh, he overpowers her mild stature. The suffering and pain of the woman folks seemed to have gained immense attention in his creative artefacts. The use of paradoxes as images, nurtures his poetic creation that the birth of a child was dealt with the image of his own death.

*I realize how death
Was being slowly born on the bed. (ibid)*

Purely sensual pleasures are being satisfied as a result of the struggles in life. Mahapatra features a sense of compassion towards the poorer section of the society because of their social insecurity and human tragedies. This volume of poetry shows a sense of urgency in itself portraying various themes of love, suffering, pain, sexual pleasure, sympathy and search for identity. It has got the identity from an immature poet who has got no rules and regulations to follow.

Mahapatra has always been romantic in his heart and he never had any knowledge about the vast arena of poetry except for a few poems by William Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats. He has kept his self in writing his poems that it doesn't feel like that of Ezekiel's distanced self. Thus by keeping his subjectivity, he added romantic notion to the contemporary Indian English poetry. As R. K Swain says:

He has always remained close to the Romantic notion of poet's inescapable presence in the poem. (Swain 13)

In his *Sickles*, Mahapathra pictures a ten year old village girl with her home- bound cow and the image of twilight. Mahapathra points out the emptiness behind the intensity of love which is short lived. The days end always make the hands with the sickle, tired and succumb to love making which leads girls becoming mothers at their tender age; before they know about their womanhood, enjoy their childhood and the 'floods' of life.

*How little I understand myself,
among children who are mothers already
before the floods come, wetting the reeds on the shore .(Mahapatra 48)*

The Indian village life is so scary that child marriages and Child –mothers are most common. The children become more serious in their lives before they could enjoy their childhood. They are the victims of patriarchy and never complain about their sufferings.

The sickles themselves become the symbol of women who scintillate in the day and twilight then fades during the night. They are pictured as mere objects of sexual pleasure who are always satisfying their partners irrespective of their discomforts. The poet draws the image of

typical Indian scene in which nature is weighed as a woman whose responsibility has never been valued in a patriarchal society.

In his *The Deaths in Orissa*, the nature and the life of a woman is compared to impotency. Suffering earth had to have the same fate of Bhagyabati as Paddy's throats are being twisted and had deeply affected the earth after the harvest. Draught and famine are the common issues that Mahapatra highlights. He shows a sense of responsibility towards the social evils and sufferings of his people in Orissa. The poet also warns that speaking and crying has nothing to do with it but actions are to be strictly taken against a meagre folk who remains still dangerous due to the present pathetic condition.

*Oh I am a poet who barks like a dog.
Open the window, I say, so I can breathe.
Let not my memory be like a tiger in ambush.
But there is this dangerously alive body
and only a baton or knife can tear it apart.* (Poem Hunter)

Search for identity is another aspect that Mahapatra deals with. In his *A Missing Person*, a woman's life is searched in the darkness. The room is darkened that her image itself is invisible. She will not find her reflection until the lazy flames of the lamp shows it. She is alone and her life is made miserable even though she holds the light of the house.

*In her hands she holds
the oil lamp
whose drunken yellow flames
know where her lonely body hides* (Mahapatra 89)

Jayanta Mahapatra's well acknowledged masterpiece *Relationship* comes out of his dreams. It offers history and myth in which he draws the picture of his native land and its tradition. The poem is divided into twelve halves which invokes the idea of the relevance of past for the existence of the present. The poem invokes at the beginning:

*Once again one must sit back and bury the face
In this earth of the forbidding myth,
On the phallus of the enormous stone,
When the lengthened shadow of a restless vulture
caresses the strong and silent deodars on the valley.* (Mahapatra 59)

The poet here deals with the problems of the current generation who has lost their rich tradition and history which has been engraved on the stone for ages. Those engraved images are the valiant stories of the Oriyan people who had sacrificed their lives for their motherland fighting against emperor Ashoka. It is a sculptural glory of their ancestors and the present

generation needs to explore the forbidden past of their culture. He sees a ray of light for this generation to get motivated from these stories to bring peace and prosperity to them.

Mahapatra has a great affinity for the sun temple, Konarka, which is now in a ruined state. The temple is itself a giant chariot of the sun god with seven horses and twelve pairs of wheels. It also has two fighting lions at the entrance with the elephants which were laid on the human bodies. Mahapatra tries to enlighten the current generation to rise and sing the valor of their ancestors. He also tries to uphold his tradition and says:

*for our lives are only of the seeds of dreams,
forgetting the cruelties
of ruthless emperors who carved peaceful edicts
on blood-red rock,
forgetting our groans and cries, (Mahapatra 59)*

Jayanta Mahapatra has brilliantly portrayed sex and its related issues through his poems. He is very straight in portraying his ideas that even sex being a divine act, comes painful in reality in his expressions. He views sex as suffering of the poor folk which comes as a result of poverty and stagnation of their day to day life. For him, women are the victims of utter cruelty and humiliation. He lashes out the political exploitation and the social insecurity through his poem *The Lost Children of America*.

*In the Hanuman temple last night
the priest's pomaded jean-clad son
raped the squint-eyed fourteen-year fisher girl
on the cracked stone platform behind the shrine
and this morning
her father found her at the police station
assaulted over and over again by four policeman
dripping of darkness and of scarlet death. (Mahapatra 33)*

Here Mahapatra says about the insignificance of the idea of the divine nature of sex but it is being exploited very rudely. He brings the image of *Hanuman* shrine to intensify the situation that the priest's son himself is not having any kind of mercy to do such a heinous act right behind the shrine on a shattered image of trust. The stone image is pictured as cracked stone platform. The poet laments the way sex is being viewed and utilized as a means in the society. He is fed up with the unkind nature of people towards protecting its serenity and divinity.

*Today the land of shrines and temples
offers its troubled tombs of blood,
when I don't want to write my poem,
while a mob watches, cheering in delight*

*at the sight of Fara's rape
mutilation limb by limb.*

(Mahapatra 132)

Jayanta Mahapatra equally treats poverty with sex in his poem *Hunger* where a fisherman is motivated to offer her own daughter for the speaker. Here the poverty and sex is intertwined as a soothing experience for the speaker who is eagerly waiting for a sensual satisfaction. His portrayal of social disruption because of poverty is so stark that even the human instinct of having sexual pleasure overpowers the situation. Here the girl is just fifteen and her age never stops her to succumb but allows her to save her and family's meal.

*Long and lean, her years were so cold as rubber.
She opened her wormy legs wide. I felt the hunger there,
The other one, the fish slithering, turning inside.* (Mahapatra 46)

The most powerful and realistic image of a victimized woman to do prostitution shows the corrupt social set up and negligence towards the poorer sections of the society. *Hunger* is not only about sex, but also about the poverty struck consciousness of a helpless father who allows her own fifteen year old daughter to do prostitution.

His poems are the manifestation of humanistic, liberal, secular, social, cultural, historical, geographical and spiritual concerns of Orissa. He is the man of Orissa and all his love towards his native place has reflected in his early poems. They were considered as love poems where people had a mixed opinion after his first volume of poem was published. The abundant images and the treatment of vocabularies flourished with the humane themes are his trademarks. He is also a poet who wrote poetry in an acquired language, which seemed to have marginalized from the then contemporary scenario. As Subrat Kumar rightly observes;

His Choice for English as his creative medium, his highly un-orthodox views upon crucial social matters, and his thoughts estranged from the general public, tend him towards marginalization, like most of his co-poets. (Samal 184-185)

Mahapatra laments women in his poems as the victims of the patriarchal society in which even the death of the women is hegemony of the male dominant society. The poem *Dawn at Puri* is a typical example of forced suppression of the feelings and desires of the female folk. The poem pictures women as widowed and their life is just a means of other's wishes. It is a satirical drama of the life of women in the so called 'holy' land. Mahapatra is critical about the farce practices of the society and wishes to be liberal on these issues. He sounds mocking the people who claims himself as the torch bearer of holiness. The widowed women in their mid-ages has nothing but only got the offer of waiting for their death.

*White-clad widowed women
past the centres of their lives*

are waiting to enter the Great Temple. (Mahapatra 21)

Mahapatra allows the readers to kindle the thoughts even after the age-old tradition of *Sati* has been banished from India. The minds of the people in Orissa are still occupied in the atrocities of the past. The women are never allowed to dream even though their eyes still have the charm of the aspirations of youth. They are the marginalized folk in the area and are devoid of dreaming and satisfying their desires.

Their austere eyes

stare like those caught in a net,

hanging by the dawn's shining strands of faith. (Mahapatra 21)

The poet sounds so loud through his poems with various themes of social relevance and reference for the posterity. His visions and thoughts has native flavor where all his life and experiences are curbed and grown. He has a hopeful vision to annihilate the insignificance of the so called pseudo morality which up-brings even in the most fertile atmosphere of its nature.

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