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## The Real and the Ethereal in Jayanta Mahapatra's Poetry

**Chittaranjan Misra**

Former Associate Professor of English,  
B.J.B. Autonomous College,  
Bhubaneswar-14.

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### **Abstract:**

Jayanta Mahapatra's poems offer a web of metaphors transforming the real into the ethereal. But this changeover is more of a mode than philosophy. The process involves the poet's inner longings, intimate experiences and delicate handling of language. The real instances of suffering merge into an ethereal relationship of images of shadows and darkness. The ethereality in Mahapatra's poetry is not an escape or going beyond the gross world. Suffused with humanism, his poetry does not celebrate a transcendent silence but aspires to be an act of liberation from deep-seated ignorance.

**Keywords:** Jayanta Mahapatra, Real, Ethereal, Mystery, Surrealist, Poetry.

In Jayanta Mahapatra's poems events become metaphors transforming the real into the ethereal. But this changeover does not occur as a matter of word swapping or easy barter. The process involves the poet's inner longings, intimate experiences and delicate handling of language. The real instances of suffering merge into an ethereal relationship of images of shadows and darkness. The ethereality in Mahapatra's poetry is like 'crying the cry of the dropping leaf' and not going beyond the gross world. Suffused with humanism his poetry does not celebrate a transcendent silence but aspires to be a liberating act – both for the poet and the readers.

The themes he has written on over half a century cover a vast range of subjects - from local life styles to international politics. It is not possible to comment on his creative output and style of handling language in terms of a singular literary theory. His earlier poems are more abstract and obscure while the later poems seem to be less ambivalent. The uncertainties the readers face while making sense of his poetry are caused by incoherence and absence of logical

connections in the structuring of the sequence of images. The weaving of images evokes multiple reactions and the accruable responses lead to multiplicity of meanings. Yet the juxtaposition of the images has a pattern of placing the factual alongside the abstract and treating things as beings. As a result, the boundaries blur and the commonplace images become potent as signifiers of the uncommon and the unearthly.

In February 1991 in a Sahitya Akademi seminar the poet said about his own work:

“What I was perhaps trying to do was to put together images and symbols so that the reader would draw the implicit connections for himself. Maybe in such poetry, context is all important. For here only certain meanings of parts of the poem emerge to the exclusion of others. It could be that this approach to the writing of poetry goes to make the poem mysterious, even obscure—and I must admit here that obscurity has been a label applied to much of my work.” (2018:109)

The context of the poems to a great extent throws light on the meaning of the poems of Jayanta Mahapatra but the context does not surface in clear terms or through flat statements. The lack of explicit and over simplified content sets the ethereality as the secret of appeal of his poems. The real and the empirical are represented and described through a texturing of suggestions that are airy and exquisite.

An example can be cited from his poem “The Day”:

At times a day of my past

Stands in front of me ethereal as a ghost.

And my body wanders to the dark ends of my story. (2018:121)

The present-ness of past is like an exploration of the subconscious. The light of the day is defined through the dark wanderings of memory and urgency of recovering lost stories. These three lines can be a template to understand the process of self-searching. The narrator becomes universal and ‘my’ story can be anybody’s story. These kind of autographic musings in first person become impersonal poetic expressions of self-exploration. An aura of mystery pervades around his depiction of self. Whatever may be the context, social, factual or personal he tenses his words and bends his diction in effecting a vagueness. In “Shadow” he writes:

Maybe this shadow of mine

Was born before I was.

Now I am never alone

Because it's always there.

People come often, stopping by

For my shadow.

It's not me that draws them here. (Random Descent.28)

This shadow the narrator says "is a keeper of terrible mysteries." This shadow is like "the spectre in its dark cloak".

A stanza from "It is Night When" speaks how the poet meditates on darkness:

Night and I stand searching for light,

For movement. Something is there in darkness,

Shifting on its old hinges. If these

Were my hands, they'd loosen and fall

To the floor, like dust of a fallen façade. (2018:202)

That 'something' in the dark is a vague presence but there is no attempt at defining it in clear terms. The specific reference to 'Birla Academy' in the poem comes at the end in the light of which the meaning of the whole poem creates certain impressions that are more surrealistic than realistic.

Not only in the poems where a meditative mood is in focus but in the poems that emphasize the socio-political issues having particular reference to real events and dates the poet does not desist from his employment of suggestive symbolic mode. The book length poem "Temple", "set in South India" with two newspaper reports (one about the suicide of a weaver woman and the other about rape and murder of a girl) published at the beginning and the end claims to be a "dream narrative". The poet states in his note: "Perhaps Chelamal is a character in someone else's dream – unaware herself that she is a main figure in this dream, unaware too that

this dream might restore her to the world of reality.” Chelamal too in her self-conscious moment is aware of her shadow:

As I walked on

I saw my shadow walk beside,

Watching it play its tricks on me. (2018:123)

The real and the fictitious, the contemporary and myths are interspersed in the poem. The myths of Kali, Sita, Putana, Savitri or Draupadi are of no help:

Probably the tale of the woman

Who could not be disrobed

Was a myth. (Temple.48)

Myths in this poem are reinterpreted from the victim's point of view as past falsehood but at the same time they make the poem rooted in India's cultural resources. The meditative suggestive mode in Mahapatra does not underscore any religious dogma but adopted as a strategy to probe intensely and that probing becomes a rewarding experience.

From the early phase of his writing Mahapatra has been questioning the contemporary state of culture and ideologies by exploring their roots. He travels back in time through history and myths. His “Relationship” speaks of Odisha's maritime ancestors, the architectural marvel of the Sun temple of Konark, the Kalinga War and the ancient tradition. But his poetry is not engaged in deification or glorification. He is able to imagine the horrors of history associated with it:

Would meaning remain

in merely that a thing exists, on a single plain,

in the helpless sips of loneliness, we have made,

marooned on stone, on the dark chariot of the sun

whose fevered granite wheels claw desperately

at the strangled earth in our lives? (Relationship.27)

The kind of medium as used in this stanza and the rest of the book is abstract, a probing of reality through an ethereal and subtle way. This makes the appeal of the poem intense but the meanings wait for multiple readings. History of the “strangled earth” like its meaning seems to be marooned on stone. There is always another plain where another meaning hides. Through indeterminacy the poet superimposes antithesis of what a first reading offers the readers. The tone of indignation evokes a need of looking at the world in ways different from the usual ones.

The meditative, metaphysical approach in building images and connecting them is not limited to the poems he has written on love, death, nature, silence and death. The same attitude renders the objects and events of the banal world as components of a world impalpable and tenuous. In other words, the poet makes the matters of the matter of world reappear and happen on another plain, another location drawing attention of the readers. In “Life Signs” he speaks about the rape and murder of a girl by the son of the priest of a temple:

Her father found her at the police station

Assaulted over again by four policemen

Dripping of darkness and of scarlet earth. (Life Signs.26)

The line ‘Dripping of darkness and of scarlet earth’ transforms the significance of the event through evocation of colours pervading everywhere. The violence wounds the earth. The visual image attains enormous proportion. Similarly, in “Burden of Waves and Fruits” a line like “A rape penetrates the periphery of the jungle” (1998:9) evokes a feeling of how ecology is affected by individual acts. References to political killings, religious hostilities abound in his poetry but these mundane deeds of malevolence too become malleable to be shaped in the aesthetic mould for cathartic effect. He refers to the ghastly killings of the Australian Christian missionary Graham Staines and his sons in 1999 in Odisha in “Happening” and 9/11 in “Ten Years, Past 9/11” but pretends in the poems to be focusing on something else that grieves him.

The major themes of Mahapatra’s early poetry are mainly loneliness and human suffering. His later collections emphasize more on cultural practices and social tradition. In “A Rain of Rites”, he has related seasonal cycle with the festivals, time with tradition and poverty

with compassion. "Relationship" has explored the lost glory of past in consonance with the dreams of a nation. His "Dispossessed Nest" speaks about the violence in the Punjab and the tragedy of Bhopal. His long poem "Temple" constructs the miseries of Indian woman in relation to myths of Indian woman. "Shadow Space" is a collection marked by a mature vision and grip over diction. He has searched for himself and others the path to freedom from suffering and destruction through innumerable poems written in English and Odia. But liberation according to him is uncertain like the secret flow of the river hidden under the earth. Maybe all the edifices built by words regarding life are utterances full of lies. In "The Sounds of Freedom" the poet keeps awaiting as a shadow without body at the threshold of freedom:

Only my sanity sits at the doorway

Like a blind man watching the world go by. (Random Descent.52)

His voice for the common good of humanity and freedom emanates from a helpless struggle and grieved depth. His creativity is steeped in humanism while he sounds "sad and secular" to quote Philip Salom's phrase. (2018:74) On the modulation of Mahapatra's intensely personal meditative tone John Oliver Perry observes a "non-traditional mode of secularized consciousness". Perry feels the echoes of Bhakti poetry and Hindu sensibility forged differently by Mahapatra. "The tentativeness", he says "is perhaps more crucially necessitated by the irreconcilable contradictions in his cultural situation as a particularly inward-turning, outward-reaching poet choosing the curious and self-isolating work of writing in Indo-English in India today." (1986:65)

Jayanta Mahapatra's medium evolved through half a century of writing is different from the major English language Indian poets like Nissim Ezekiel, R. Parthasarathy, A.K. Ramanujan or Keki Daruwalla. He has adopted the romantic strain for non-romantic purpose and themes. His purpose is to awaken the readers with a wider vision in the direction of freedom. In an essay 'Freedom as Poetry: The Door' he says:

"For true poetry does have the ability to 'liberate' both poet and the reader from their necessities and produce in their minds an effect beyond the ordinary." (2006:2)

He does not preach any precept but celebrates the magic of poetry in his struggle to come to terms with the world as it is. The mystery of creativity is endless. Experiencing that mystery is to find the ethereal in the real.

Though the reader confronts the ethereal in his poetry he does not find any religious or mythic affiliation to lean on for meaning. Myths are rather treated by the poet as cages that bind humans in ignorance and falsehood. His struggle at resolving the contraries ensuing from two poles like reason and religion leads to a different domain of mystery. This is more of a poetic excavation and exploration intended to arrive at revealing but unbiased meanings of life. The appeal of Mahapatra's poetry does not emanate from his skill of ordering similes and metaphors but in a total effect of sequencing all the components that go with in the making of a poem. One may discover the aesthetics of the ethical modifying an emotion that kindles the urge to write. His poems are animated by a secular humanism that plead for freedom from prejudice and bigotry. But often his poems are interpreted as if he was espousing the urgency of myths and irrational beliefs. Mahapatra is a physicist and a poet at the same time. For him there is no essential difference in experiencing cosmic mysteries as regards their potential of igniting poetic imagination. The rational knowledge of the external world and the intuitive insight into the complexities of deeper human experiences blend in his writings as a celebration of the wonder of life without championing a religious view or cult. That is the reason why he does not abstain from taking up social issues despite his ontological musings. His view of history is too is peculiar. History is like philosophy, an all-inclusive hollow that swallows everything. History is like a burden and man needs to be liberated from that burden. Unable to propagate any particular ideology or religion he roams about past centuries and depicts human history as adream narrative in his poems. Love and compassion emerge as his secret to escape the monstrosity of history. For him the famous historical inscription at Dhauli on the banks of the river Daya is full of vain words. The massacre and bloodshed of the Kalinga war cannot be eclipsed by the glorification of an emperor like Ashoka. The unwritten history of the Kalinga warriors, the miseries of common people are swallowed into silence behind the inscription. His collection of poems "Waiting" reveals his attitude to history.

Though in later poems Mahapatra seems to have united the meditative with the descriptive and has started using statements in place of esoteric cryptic mode he will be identified with his signature incomprehensibility- appealing and evocative at the same time.

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