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The Portrayal of Odisha: Historical Realism in Selected Poems of Jayant Mahapatra

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Abstract:

Jayant Mahapatra is a renowned literary figure from Odisha, not only nationally but also on the world map. The first poet to receive the Central Sahitya Akademi award was not a poet like Wordsworth, who only immersed himself in nature; instead, his poetry is quite often an outburst of agony that is caused by the problems in society. Mahapatra sets some of his poems in the natural setting of Odisha, like Puri, Dhauli, and Chandipur, to name a few, and portrays realities of society and societal problems with great enthusiasm and vigor. In this paper I would like to bring out historical realism in the poems of Jayant Mahapatra by doing a close reading of his poems and drawing from the theories and concepts on social and historical realism.

Keywords: Social Realism, Odisha, poems, historical realism.

Introduction

Jayant Mahapatra was born on 22 October 1928 in Cuttack. He started writing at a much later stage of life. He started writing poetry in his early 40s. He started publishing in 1971. The name of his first collection of poems is *Svayamvara and Other Poems (1971)*, followed by other

collections like *Close the Sky Ten by Ten* (1971), *A Father's Hours* (1976), *A Rain of Rites* (1976), *Waiting* (1979), *Life Signs* (1983), *A Whiteness of Bone* (1992), *Shadow Space* (1997), *Bare Face* (2000), and *Random Descent*, among others. The lengthy poem "Relationship," for which Mahapatra received the Sahitya Akademi prize in 1981, is among his best-known compositions. He is the first poet of Indian and English descent to be honoured. Mahapatra was one of the three poets who established the groundwork for contemporary Indian English poetry in addition to being one of the most well-known Indian poets of his generation.

His love and dedication for Odisha is obvious from his speech at his Award-receiving speech at the Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi:

“To Orissa, to this land in which my roots lie and lies my past and in which lies my beginning and my end where the wind knees over the grief of the River Daya and the waves of the Bay of Bengal fail to reach out to day to the firelight soul of Konark, I acknowledge my debt and my relationship”

His poems are often in the form of social protest against the evils present and happening in society. Most of his poems are set in Odishan context but talk of universal themes. His poems often highlight the pessimistic portrayal of harsh realities. In his poem “Grandfather,” which is highly personal, he gives allusion to one of the darkest chapters of Odishan history, the Great Odisha Famine of 1866. In which he gives the account of his grandfather’s conversion to Christianity from Hinduism out of starvation during the famine. Similarly, in “Dhauri,” he gives an insinuation of another historical event of the Bloody Kalinga War of 261 B.C., the event marked by blood and destruction. A critic remarks, “Orissa is the pivot around which the poetry of Mahapatra revolves” (Tiwari 119). Mahapatra does not only dwell in the past but also pens down the social realities of his times. In the poem “Hunger,” the maestro highlights how poverty and hunger compel a father to offer his daughter to the narrator to satisfy his hunger of

lust so that they can satisfy their real hunger of food and survive by earning some money. In Mahapatra's poetry, Puri, the centre of Odishan religious faith, resides very often. The picture is not always a beautiful depiction of the seashore or the temple, rather a somber presentation of death and poverty. In "Dawn at Puri," Mahapatra opens the poem with:

Endless crow noises

A skull in the holy sands

tilts its empty country towards hunger. (Mahapatra, lines 1-3)

The renowned poet portrays the harsh truths of life, particularly regarding social injustices, economic struggles, and class disparities. Although Jayant Mahapatra is most recognized for his investigations into the intimate and the metaphysical, he also explores historical contexts, rural life, and social realism. This paper seeks to examine these topics, especially historical realism in his poems.

Social Realism in the Poetry of Mahapatra

Social realism is a movement in art that seeks to highlight the actual socio-political circumstances of the working class and to critique the power dynamics that underpin these realities. It frequently employs a style of realism that is both descriptive and critical. One academic who has analyzed social realism is David Forrest in his work *Social Realism: Art, Nationhood, and Politics*. Forrest suggests that social realism is defined by its emphasis on the daily challenges faced by everyday individuals and its goal of motivating social change by showcasing social injustices.

Jayant Mahapatra is a poem of social rebellion. His Poetry is neither a description nor a beautified imitation of reality, rather it presents a portrayal of social problems especially the

problems of the oppressed and marginalised including women. In his very famous poem “Hunger,” he writes:

I heard him say: My daughter, she's just turned fifteen...

Feel her. I'll be back soon, your bus leaves at nine.

The sky fell on me, and a father's exhausted wile.

Long and lean, her years were cold as rubber.

She opened her wormy legs wide. I felt the hunger there, (Mahapatra, lines 16-20)

Which shows the poverty and dehumanising effects on women by patriarchal society.

Other poems of Mahapatra which are set in Puri and depict the poverty of Odisha, the poet in a way never talks of the bright side in his poems about Puri, the religious epicenter of Odisha and Hindus. Social realism is prevalent in his poem “Deaths in Orissa,” which depicts the death of a man in a rural agrarian family. Many may not mark this as a poem that talks of farmer suicide. The following lines may be textual or referential evidence to my claim:

Nothing but the paddy's twisted throat

exposed on the crippled bleak earth,

nothing but impotence in lowered eyes, (Mahapatra, lines 6-8)

Not only Odisha but also India faces the problem of farmers’ suicide; it might have been the case that Bhagybati’s husband or father has committed suicide; that is why “cries of shriveled women” are heard near the “altar of a man.”

Historical Realism in Mahapatra's Poetry

The literary and creative approach known as historical realism seeks to portray historical events, social situations, and personalities in a way that is truthful, realistic, and representative of the period being portrayed. It highlights how crucial it is to accurately depict the historical social, cultural, and political situations rather than romanticizing or idealizing them. In Mahapatra's poetry we do not only find historical realism, but we find it from different timelines. One notable scholar who has written extensively about historical realism is Michael C. Williams. According to his work in *The Oxford Handbook of History and International Relations*, historical realism is often seen as a form of historical fatalism, but it is much richer and more diverse. Williams argues that realism takes history as a resource for understanding the complex historical trajectories that shape contemporary politics. The poems under discussion in this section are "Dhauri," "Grandfather," and "The Abandoned British Cemetery at Balasore.". These three poems depict three different temporal settings and are in chronological order, respectively.

"Dhauri" or the hill Dhaurigiri is a place on the bank of the River Daya near Bhubaneswar. It is the place where the bloody Kalinga War happened in 261 BCE, claiming the lives of lakhs of people. Historical narrative suggests that the entire river turned red due to the bloody war. K. C. Panigrahi in his book *History of Orissa* mentions:

The details of the Kalinga War are not known to us. Asoka has made in his Rock Edicts a brief reference to its results from which the details of the operations cannot be gleaned. He states that the Kalinga War resulted in one hundred thousand people killed, one hundred and fifty thousand carried away as captives, and many more died of starvation and disease that followed in the wake of the terrible war. This account presents an overall picture of the great devastations caused by the Kalinga War. The figures given by Asoka about the number of the slain and the

captives indicate that the Kalingan army was a vast one and that the country had a large population. (11-12)

Mahapatra in his poem “Dhauli” is nostalgic about the event, and he mentions:

Afterwards when the wars of Kalinga were over,

the fallow fields of Dhauli

hid the blood-spilt butchered bodies. [originally 'red-smeared voiceless bodies']

(Mahapatra, lines 1-3)

He also mentions the River Daya and the rock edicts of Ashoka, which stand as testimony to the historical event, and highlights the suffering of both the victor and the defeated in his concluding lines:

The measure of Ashoka's suffering

does not appear enough.

The place of his pain appears lamentably

from among the pains of the dead. (Mahapatra, lines 12-15)

It is believed that witnessing the sorrowful death and devastation of the war, Ashoka changes: “Chandashoka became Dharmashoka” (Panigrahi 13). This poem, by giving allusion to the Daya River, rock edicts, and Ashoka, does not only talk of the historical event but also highlights the devastating effect of the war.

“Grandfather” is a lyric and can be categorized into autobiographical poems. The poem is set against the backdrop of the Great Odisha Famine of 1866, or the Na’ Anka Durvikhya. The poet narrates Mahapatra’s grandfather Chintamani Mahapatra’s plight during the famine and his conversion to Christianity just to survive and get some food. The Great Odisha Famine is the most cataclysmic famine that has ever hit Odisha. The horrible picture of this famine has been described by the historian, Pyarimohan Acharya, who was an eyewitness to its havoc, in the following words:

One feels stunned when he remembers the shocking events that took place at that time. It is quite impossible to give a faithful picture of the horrors of the famine that came accompanied by death itself. The towns were filled with the sorrowful shrieks of thousands of men, women and children who had been reduced to mere skeletons. The crematory grounds near the towns and villages were full of innumerable dead bodies and upon them the vultures and jackals feasted to their hearts' content. Men and women forsook their natural instincts owing to the unbearable pangs of hunger. Parents cast away their starving children before wild animals to be devoured by them. Some even ate the dead bodies of their own children like demons. Social evils such as murder, suicide, etc., became a very common thing at the time. Some people tried to live upon wild and inedible materials. (155)

This event in the history of Odisha changed its course of development. Due to the failure of the colonial government’s policy, the natural calamity and crop failure turned into famine; this event added a derogatory word in the Odia dictionary called Chhatarkhias. Whose literal meaning is people who ate from shelter, it was used for people who ate in relief shelters; they were disregarded by the society and became outcasts.

The poem is autobiographical because the poet finds the inspiration to write this poem from “yellowed diary's notes” of his grandfather as mentioned in the opening lines of the poem. The poem highlights the theme of starvation and death:

Did you hear the young tamarind leaves rustle

in the cold mean nights of your belly? Did you see

your own death? Watch it tear at your cries,

break them into fits of unnatural laughter? (Mahapatra, lines 13-16)

It also questions religion and faith. Mahapatra questions the essence like religion during adversities which questions existence. During the famine, people were dying like insects out of hunger and diseases. So questioning faith and belief, Mahapatra writes:

The imperishable that swung your broken body,

turned it inside out? What did faith matter?

What Hindu world so ancient and true for you to hold?

Uneasily, you dreamed toward the center of your web. (Mahapatra, lines 21-24)

The poem highlights the devastating famine and quest for existence, the dilemma between to hold your faith and die or accept a new one and live. “We wish we knew what it was to be against dying, to know dignity.” In this poem, Mahapatra ends with a couplet, “We wish we had not to wake up with our smiles, in the middle of some social order,” which is indicative of the dual identity of a convert. Residing in Odisha, a predominantly Hindu culture, and being a convert, he dwells between two identities of a Hindu and Christian and a complex identity of an Odia Christian. As rightly Dr. Jaydeep Sarangi writes:

Jayanta Mahapatra is a Christian, living in a Hindu society—a society that pays maximum homage to Lord Jagannatha, the presiding deity of Orissa. Jayanta Mahapatra's grandfather accepted Christianity out of the compelling forces of famine and poverty. There is always a sense of insecurity and alienation in his poetry. He perpetuates his quest for identity, and he is keen on the assertion of his self-emanating from a veritable part of his holy land and its rich socio-religious traditions. (qtd. in Dhara 91-92)

“The Abandoned British Cemetery at Balasore” In this poem, through the perspective of an abandoned graveyard in Balasore, the poem examines the lingering effects of British colonization in India. Mahapatra depicts the dilapidated tombstones and abandoned graves in striking detail, signifying the waning influence of the British Empire. The poem explores history, memory, and time passing, emphasizing the sharp contrast between the opulence of the past and the inattention of the present. The poem opens with, “This is history.” So the poet makes clear that the poem is historical in nature. In the cemetery, the narrator comes across many tombs that are of the colonial era and carry the colonizer’s British name. The stanza that highlights above reads:

In the circle the epitaphs run: Florence R--, darling wife

of Captain R-- R--, aged nineteen, of cholera

Helen, beloved daughter of Mr and Mrs J. S. White, of cholera,

aged seventeen, in the year of our Lord, eighteen hundred (Mahapatra, lines 16-20)

The poem also highlights the impermanence of power; the empire that once ruled is now in ruins, there is no one to take care of the cemetery, and like the title goes, it is “abandoned.”

The narrator asks in this regard:

Of what concern to me is some vanished Empire?

Or the conquest of my ancestors' timeless ennui?

It is the dying young who have the power to show

what the heart will hide, the grass shows no more. (Mahapatra, lines 21-24)

This poem gives allusions not only to British colonialism but also to the then-societal conditions; most of the epitaphs read "cholera," which means this was the disease prevalent in colonial India, and the health/medical sector was not so developed hence people died out of diseases that are not that dangerous in the 21st century.

In two of the above-mentioned poems, one thing is common: the importance of place. Dhauli near Bhubaneswar and Balasore are real places in Odisha's geography. But when one meditates in those places, they themselves tell their story, their history, which has rich cultural and historical significance. While the cemetery is a place where the poet is mourning the dead Britishers, it also highlights the colonial past of Odisha; Dhauli, a beautiful, exquisite spot, reminds of a bloody war and a conquest that is written in the history forever due to both violence and the turnover to peace from violence after the war, which is substantiated by the rock edicts present there and at some other places.

Conclusion

Mahapatra is a poet of Odisha. He uses the English language to express his Odia identity. The concerns of Mahapatra are not the bright colours of the society; rather, he paints the harsh realities of society in the canvas of a poem. He can be compared to William Blake of England, who, through his poetry, highlighted the corruption and social evils of his time. Mahapatra's poetry is primarily set in Odisha and tells tales from and about Odisha. In the above-mentioned

poems, one finds how subtly Mahapatra presents historical events in his poems by presenting them with the help of allusions. These poems portray the Odishan landscape of different times and help us in understanding how places are not just simply places; they are repositories of historical and cultural tradition. The poetry of Mahapatra is set in Odisha but is a mouthpiece of universal themes that can be expressed as shared experiences of humankind across time and place.

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