



Jayanta Mahapatra: The mouth-piece of India

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Abstract

Mahapatra belongs to the group of modern experimentalists in Indian English poetry. His works seem to be attempts to link to the kinds of Indian reality. They also express conflicting concerns of modern life partially colouring them with his personal and immediate response to the world unfolding before him. They also seem to be introspections into the customary notion of reality. It appears he conceives a poem as an object having a structure of images and symbols. Images employed in his poems try to bring to the surface his obsessing memories, doubts and experiences which have been the source material of his imagination. He seems to be much intimate to the modernist movement of the first half of the century. Actually Jayanta Mahapatra's poetic art is not for the large masses, but it is meant for a small discriminating readership.

Keywords: experimentalists, images, symbols, modernist movement

Introduction

Mahapatra's poetry is the relationship of the self to the other, the distance felt by the consciousness between being aware and what one is aware of. As a matter of fact it is a central problem of modern poetry. In Mahapatra's poetry there feelings are intensified as he questions the existence of the self, the other often takes the form of local society, and especially Indian culture, ritual, spirituality, symbols and the part from which he has been alienated by his grandfather's conversion to Christianity, and his omen English education. In this poetry everything is problematic as Mahapatra observes his environment and listening quietly, sensitively to his inner feelings – the sources of his poetry bringing momentary perceptions of relationship and feeling images of contrite. It is a difficult, often obscure poetry of meditation recording reality as an unknowable flux.

This tone of quiet acceptance, with a latent awareness of centuries of suffering, perhaps indicates a very Indian sensibility. Some of the common themes in the world of Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry are: nature, seasons, women, temples, myths, history, time and sufferings. When we see the whole range of Mahapatra's poetry we notice a wider variety of themes covering a large number of subjects like love, death, tradition, ritual and contemporary reality all attract him. But what gives an identity to his poetry is the breadth of his understanding, the temper of his mind and the depth of his vision.

Jayanta Mahapatra was born on 22nd October 1928, in Cuttack, Orissa. We need to look into some details of Mahapatra's personal life as they have a direct bearing on his poetry. Besides serving as a window to the poet's soul, give a glimpse of Mahapatra's unique style.

Jayanta Mahapatra's father, Lemuel, was a sub-inspector of primary schools. Mahapatra was raised in a lower-middle class Christian family. During the devastating famine that rocked Orissa in 1866, his grandfather, Chintamani

Mahapatra,

Starving and in a state of collapse, staggered into a mercy camp run by white Christian missionaries in Cuttack, where he embraced a new religion urged by the Baptists ^[1].

His poem "Grandfather" focuses on this theme. There, Chintamani Mahapatra met Rupabati – a young girl from another village in Orissa who belonged to a different caste. Years later they married, and Jayanta's father Lemuel, was their youngest son. When young, Mahapatra experienced the pull of two religions. He says,

As children, we grew up between two worlds. The first was home where we were subjected to a rigid Christian upbringing, with rules my mother sternly imposed; the other was the vast and dominant Hindu amphitheatre outside, with the preponderance of rites and festivals which represented the way of life of our own people. Two worlds then; and I, thinking to communicate with both, and probably becoming myself incommunicable as a result through the years (142).

This, conflict was further felt by the young Jayanta while doing his M.Sc, at the Patna University, Bihar.

I was utterly lonely those first days at Patna. Besides the differences, I experienced a huge cultural gap, I also realised painfully that I would have been subjected to unnecessary ridicule from other students in those lodgings had they know I was Christian (142).

Perhaps this fear of rejection is the cause for the near-total absence of Christian themes even in his poetry; Puri, Jagannath and Konarka have a dominant presence instead!

Jayanta Mahapatra recalls his childhood, his house, and his mother, both of which instilled fear in him – This fear was further intensified by his uncomfortable relationship with his mother.

I have never been able to feel that affinity with Mother (Sudnasubala, by name) as I had with Father. She was erratic in her ways, and as I grew up, my conflicts with her increased... I was flushed with tension. I didn't know what was important to me anymore... I slipped into dream. I kept more and more to myself. Mother did not appear to have any trust in me. It was difficult to agree with her (139-140).

Although, he confesses “There are particular trait I didn't like about my mother, but I still looked after her till her death in 2003” [2]. After his M.Sc., Mahapatra joined Ravenshaw College, Cuttack, as Demonstrator in Physics where he fell in love with Runu who was doing a course in English literature. He declares, “Perhaps fate had decreed our relationship” (143).

Jayanta Mahapatra started writing poetry comparatively late in life, when he was in his early forties. His first two books of poems *Close the Sky, Ten by Ten* and *Svayamvara* and *Other Poems* appeared simultaneously in 1971, at the age of 43. So far, Mahapatra has published seventeen volumes of his own poems (to date, including his *Selected Poems*) five volumes of Oriya poetry, eight volumes of poetry translation from Oriya to English, two volumes of Stories, one book on Orissa and many articles in various journals, periodicals and newspapers. Some of his books are published abroad. For example, *A Rain of Rites* was published by the University of Georgia Press, USA, in 1976; *Relationship* by Greenfield Review Press, New York, in 1980; *Burden of Waves and Fruit* by Three Continent Press, Washington D.C., in 1988; *Temple* by Dangaroo Press, Sydney, in 1989.

Mahapatra was honoured with the coveted Central Sahitya Akademi Award in 1981 for his poetry-volume *Relationship* and he happens to be the first Indian poet in English to receive that Award. Also, Mahapatra is the first Indian poet to receive Jacob Glastein Memorial Prize instituted by Poetry (Chicago) earlier in 1975. Mahapatra has many distinction to his credit. Mahapatra was chosen for the University of Iowa's prestigious International Writing Program in 1976-77. He went to Australia and Japan as Cultural Award Visitor in 1978 and 1980, respectively. Again in 1984 he visited Japan as Visiting Writer and took part in the Asian Poets Conference. During 1985, he visited the erstwhile USSR as Indo-Soviet Cultural Exchange Writer. The Rockefeller Foundation Award enabled him to complete his long poem *Temple* as resident Writer, at Centro Culturale della Fondazione, Bellagio, Italy, in 1986. He was a Visiting Writer at Singapore Festival of Arts in 1988, and New Literatures in English Conference at West Germany, in 1989, and participated in the ACLALS Silver Jubilee Conference, University of Kent, Canterbury, England, in the same year. He has given a number of poetry-recitation programmes both at Indian and foreign University at their invitation. His poetry has been published abroad in prestigious literary journals like *The Malahat Review* (Victoria), *Critical Quarterly* (Manchester), *Poetry* (Chicago), *The Times Literary*

Supplement (London), *Meanjin Quarterly*, *The Sewanee Review*, *The Hudson Review* etc., and *Chandrabhaga: A Magazine of World Writing* from Cuttack.

We can recognise three distinct phases of growth in the poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra: the early period from *Close the Sky, Ten by Ten* (1971) to *A Father's Hour* (1976) a period of apprenticeship, largely derivative in nature; the middle period from *A Rain of Rites* (1976) to *The False Start* (1980), a period of inventiveness and; the recent period from *Relationship* (1980) to *Random Descent* (2005), a period of profound maturity in thought and expression, deepening vision, contemplative mood and brooding tone.

Mahapatra's first two volumes of poetry *Close the Sky, Ten by Ten* and *Svayamvara* and *Other Poems* were simultaneously published in 1971, when he was 43, though he had started writing much earlier-at the age of 38. In the first two volumes Mahapatra's poetry show his restless preoccupation with language and the tools of a new medium in the process of formation. Mahapatra has no formal training in literature or poetry. He studied and taught Physics. Mahapatra's poetry of this period reflects a lack of unified vision. Expressions tend to be heavy abstractions without any pointers to indicate either their source of origin or intention. What his early poetry communicates is a sense of inadequacy of his poetic equipment; i.e., language seems to be burdened with a logical abstractions, free associations of ideas, juxtaposition of contrasting images, etc. There is little use of myths and symbols. It often consists of a heap of images, which are self-contradictory in nature, and the reader confronts them without any help which might guide him on to decipher the coded private experience of the poet. This poses additional difficulty which puts off any casual reader. Unless one is prepared to take risks of being constantly repelled by the increasing obscurity of Mahapatra's poetic experience, the private symbolism and its significance may not be easily accessible to a reader. Alan Kennedy aptly observes that “Jayanta Mahapatra is hard to read [3],” and stresses the need to understand “Mahapatra's method”.

However, the diction used by the poet in his early poems is not so difficult as it appears to be because of the frequent use of images and symbols which are traditional as well as personal. The poet suffers from a very serious flaw, i.e., in order to be innovatory he seldom uses punctuation marks that render him ambiguous and incomprehensible. In his first volume very few poem deals with some concrete situation, most of them are merely Mahapatra's experimental poems amply tell how his poetic skills develops and operates. They suggest that he never toils in the area of normal logic, but always in that logic of imagination as Eliot calls it, that he revels in juxtaposing the abstract and the concrete, the idea and the emotion, the vague and the clear. The process of writing poetry, in his case, is a kind of adventure in the dark out of which he tries to explore something. Hence, Mahapatra's poetry is marked by originality mainly due to the reason that it has its own peculiar linguistic method. Very frequently we notice shifts in diction and syntax and recurrent use of favourite images is an integral part of his work in his writings. He has never been a poet of ideas though he does not rule out that the words should excite the imagination and bring some ideas to mind.

The poem titled “The Movement” deals exclusively with the creative process and has language as its main concern. The poet maintains a fine balance and control in the four well measured stanzas that show the process of poetic composition. It illustrates the slow and controlled rhythm that is one of the features of Mahapatra’s poetry:

As if to avoid a fall, leaning
A word first in one direction
And then the other, the white frame
Of thought proceeds with balanced skill ^[4] (p. 4)

The first line ‘as if to avoid a fall, leaning’ emphasises the tentative start that his poems have, then words like the legs of dancer first move in one direction, then in the other and then, by and by, the process of composition, like that of dancing becomes easy and balanced. Initially, Mahapatra used to start his poems with a small letter, but later on he gave up this practice. However, his fresh lines do not, as a rule, start with a capital letter except those following a full stop or a question. This pattern also corroborates his tendency of experimenting with the poetic form. This technique of using obsolete expressions in his poetry should not be taken to mean that he thrives on left overs, he rather uses them to give antique expression to his thought whenever and wherever necessary. Besides, it also suits his philosophical thought.

Whereas *Svayamvara* and *Other Poems*, Jayanta Mahapatra’s second volume, makes the beginnings of his search for a poetic language more pronounced. The definitive norms of his poetry are in the process of their slow but gradual evolution. From a state of arbitrariness and linguistic-obsession in the earlier volume, they move to more concrete images and symbols. S. K. Desai rightly observes that “In the second volume, *Svayamvara* and *Other Poems* (1971), which consists of thirty-three poems, Mahapatra appears to move towards precision, by relating his craft more to the concrete than to the abstract, both in terms of theme and expression” ^[5]. In this volume, we find Mahapatra’s attitudinal change from a highly self-oriented private symbolism towards more general and contemporaries social issues. Now the artistic mediation through language comes off more naturally than in the preceding volume. This is surely a sign of a growing awareness of Jayanta Mahapatra’s responsibility towards his craft.

In the next three volumes, *A Father’s Hours* (1976), *A Rain of Rites* (1976) and *Waiting* (1979), Jayanta Mahapatra grows to be a poet of substance. The syntax and lines becomes relaxed. There is now something natural about the form and structure. The concrete physical details are coupled with an inexplicable sense of wonder and mystery “against or within” which he almost works, as Dick Allen aptly observes (35). These books, especially *A Rain of Rites* received high acclaim in US periodicals. Vernon Young said: “The manner of apprehension in his wonderful, sensate poems inevitably brings to the tongue the word, ‘sophistication’. His psychology is at once more historical, more anxious, more involuted than that of any Chinese poet, old or modern known to me ^[6].” (627). Frank Allen praised Mahapatra for encapsulating “the paradox of India’s; both impeccable, both determined to dominate; the blank, shameless agrarian world

with its polytheistic fatalism” ^[7] (340). These two worlds of contrast between “asceticism and sensuality, control and release, human and mythical ways of looking at reality” are manifested in the image of “Two gods copulating on the warm tar” (“Sunburst”).

In contrast to the empty spaces in the heart of the early poetry volumes the poems of the late seventies are concrete with local details. The characters that crowd his poetry are typical of the Indian milieu. The poems in *Waiting* are more descriptive, more statement-like and clearer in terms of the emotional effect. The poem “Dhualagir” named after the place of the well known Kalinga war is neatly worked out to question the adequacy Asoka’s suffering is erasing the pain of war. Orissa is full of history – the temples, the sculpture, its rivers, every part is carelessly evocative of its past. Dhualagiri (just outside Puri) with its river Daya: so named because of Asoka’s remorse, is one of the most movingly historical spots in the world. However unlike other places in Orissa, there is nothing glorious here in terms of sculpture (beyond the rock edicts). Having long perceived Asoka’s suffering as the *raison d’etre* of the Kalinga war the poem quietly re-centralises the thousands of men killed and wounded at Kalinga. Hence, the language in this collection is much plainer, the syntax less ambiguous, there is more punctuation and less fragmentation. In *The False Start* (1980) the poems are longer and marked by a meditative mood; they address an unnamed ‘you’ and the poet achieves a unity of theme within each of the three sections into which the book has been divided. Vasant. A. Shahane writes:

Jayanta Mahapatra, in *The False Start*, attempts to relate his life to his friends, to his land of birth, and more importantly to himself. The title is rather misleading (since it is not a false start). Yet the irony is quiet explicit, since the theme is, in reality, an exploration of the self ^[8].

The volume has three section which deals with the linear biological growth of the life from childhood to old age. First section largely consists of poems dealing with love, friendship, unfulfilled desires, absences, memories and secrets. In the second section, the poet enquires the purpose of our lives and the inability of grim reality to yield any truth. In the final section, the poet is oppressed with the devotees and hippies, desolate ricefields, fireflies, ancestors and ruins. Most of the poems are longer, the syntax is grammatically perfect. Images are expressive of darkness, decay and death.

However, James Finn Cotter feels that with the poems in this book the reader is “mesmerized,” that the poems offer no “easy solution” and further that they move “from abstract to sensible imagery” ^[9]. The images like rain, cloud, moon, ash, voice and door are drawn from the very source of living in an intimate world and yet they are so smoothly internalized that the images transcend their physicality and point to spiritual and metaphysical perceptions. For instance, the door placed on the threshold of two eternally opposite worlds, gives an access to the poet to enter into either or both the worlds. In an essay entitled “The Door,” Mahapatra traced the origin of the image of “door” to his childhood days and associated it with an inner freedom. The door

Served both as a refuge from the terrors of the outside world which mutely went on to lock me in, offering me no escape. It became both a haven and a prison, and my mind positioned itself both inside and out.... There is always something very final, very secretive about doors (191).

Relationship first published by the Greenfield Review Press, New York in 1980 has undergone an Indian reprint in 1982 by Chandrabhaga Society, Cuttack following the Central Sahitya Akademi Award given to it for 1981. It is the first book of Indian English Poetry to have been chosen for this coveted Award. According to Professor K. R. S. Iyenger, "Relationship is real achievement, for here there is neither 'Waiting' nor 'false start' but triumphant arriving [10]." In *Relationship* Mahapatra attempts to build a fugue-like structure aimed at evoking the myths and traditions of Orissa, and at the same time articulating the sensitive responses of his self to his spiritual, aesthetic as well as physical heritage and environment. This environment includes his own self his family life, his aesthetic existence and his responses to the hoary traditions of Orissa myth, legends and its rich architectural and sculptural treasures. It may be recalled that this book has been chosen for the Sahitya Akademi Award for 1981 on the recommendation of a 'final panel of advisers' consisting of Nissim Ezekiel, M. K. Naik and Ramesh Mohan. The poet calls it 'the theme song of my life.' According to Jayanta Mahapatra, "Relationship is a product of dreams, has made me speak of the demands of a pilgrimage – a pilgrimage threatened by the living Oriya past, by nagging hunger and a persistent sexuality [11]."

Relationship is based on history and myth but it has a vision. It has an epitaph in Eliotesque manner and the five lines taken from Walt Whitman unambiguously set the tone of it, in making an effort to unfold the mysteries of life. The poem is set in Orissa – a land of 'forbidding myth.' It is no collection of mere observation: a place here, a character there, an but a determined, integrated set of sections built into the theme. Mahapatra insists on saying things and like any modern man who happens to live in an irreligious milieu, he is 'caught in the currents of time' and in his attempt to 'go into the unknown in me' tries 'to speak the myth of sleep and action' in order to soothe himself and others who suffer a similar fate. Hence, *Relationship* will be regarded as great poem on the basis of its meaning and the myth embodied in it.

If in *Relationship* Jayanta Mahapatra reaches the peak of his imaginative height, with *Life Signs* (1983) he comes down to the day-to-day physical world. The thematic concerns of *A Rain of Rites* is carried further in *Life Signs*. With *Life Signs* the poet becomes more simple and the poems becomes paraphrasable. The characters, events and objects that hold his attention are the contemporaneous ones, like the Western hippies wandering on "the dusty, malarial lanes of Cuttack" ("The Lost Children of America"), the women workers tarring the road in a hot summer afternoon ("Again, One Day, Walking by the River"), "Total Solar Eclipse," etc. In a lecture at Mysore, Mahapatra says:

Governed as one is, as I am, by the unconsciousness – which in more ways than one acts like a power-

generator, like a God – I would be satisfied if I can reveal a consciousness in my writing in agreement with today's realities [12].

Among the Indian English poets writing today, Jayanta Mahapatra is one of the few who speaks of Indian landscape with the assurance of an insider. There is spiritual and moral degeneration everywhere. The plight of the people deeply moved him. The poet is convinced that India is a land of hunger, poverty, disease, casteism, communalism and many other evils. The poet's heart moans on these problems:

My pain grows empty like the rainbow,
It dances in the skeleton of the rain Limp with light [13].

Mahapatra's poetry shows his concern for the society. That is why a rape here or a murder their upset him. He has devoted a full book, *Dispossessed Nests* (1986) to the hard realities that one encounters in our country in the present time. In an introduction to this book, the editors note:

In *Dispossessed Nests* one hears these wails of a world shattered within a human heart. Like burning rods of truth Mahapatra's poems branded the screens of our consciousness. In these poems we find deeply anguished outpours of an acutely sensitive man aspiring to capture a disintegrated world in the light of metaphors deriving their heat either from the torturous memory of the country's recent past or from a minute observations of the natural components.

Mahapatra is a keen observer of contemporary life and situation and does not mince words in describing scenes that diminishes humanity, in the country and the world around him in realistic terms. He 'sees life steadily and sees it whole.' Violence and lawlessness in contemporary society seem to disturb the poet. He says when the world around us seems to be out of tune, when good intentions fatally miscarry, can poetry save us? In a letter he writes:

I am uncertain as to what a poem would be, what it must contain, what it must say. But I have learnt to live with discontent because of the realisation that poetry has not helped the world to survive, poetry has not helped to ease man's suffering.

Mahapatra is basically concerned with what is enduring in the past and the relationship between past and present. How does man endure and continue to endure this unkind world? Will the world that absorbs love and goes beyond it, endure for all time? After relining the centrality of love in human life, he assents on his new identity of man's love in human life and he assent on his new identity of man, envision such a world where he can rise from the surrounding gloom and darkness and can identify the beauty and respond to voices of kindred souls.

In 1980s things have taken a turn for the worse so far as law and order is concerned. The anti-national activities in Punjab in the name of Khalistan and the Bhopal Gas tragedy have sent shock waves throughout the country. The blurb of the

book rightly makes a note of it in the following words:

Mahapatra unleashes the buried horror of long and supreme knives in Punjab and the barbarous dance of bejeweled snakes, of multinational companies in Bhopal. The poems are bitter experiences of the Indian masses betrayed by an inhuman set-up^[14].

Bloodshed, violence and destruction have become the hallmark of today's world. Death is the all pervasive force in *Dispossessed Nests*. Death is the only thing that lasts. Compared to the troubled State of Punjab all over states are by and large peaceful. The poet minutely observes it with a sense of fear and disappointment, indiscriminate killings have caused panic all over the country and humanity has lost its way into oblivion and hate reigns supreme. Man has degraded himself to the level of animals and 'jungle law' prevails. In these circumstances it is difficult to find a way out as things drift apart with the passing of each day. Thus, hoping against hope the poet wonders 'if this is the last explosion.' The senseless violence has robbed off man of his conscience and he depicts the horror of life due to violent Khalistan movement and Bhopal Gas Tragedy with a tone deeply imbued with pathos, the poet observes, 'the country we try to leave behind seems upset by its own silence' and people smell the danger that awaits them in future. Life has lost its charm as it is beset with danger and uncertainty.

If the happenings in Punjab and the Gas Tragedy in Bhopal make the poet sad, the brute massacre at Nellie in Assam breaks his heart. Violence occurred in any part of the country is reprehensible for the poet and he is responding to it through his poems like the Mouth-piece of India and when the world around us seems to be out of tune, when purblindmen enact hell, when good intentions fatally miscarry, can poetry save us? That's a million dollar question. Mahapatra tries to answer this question in his own way in "Last Night the Poem":

But what use is a poem, once the writing is done?
Words looking for what, in the dark of the soul?
like the sound of a match stick striking, then over;
I know that much. When all else has failed,
the poem's words are perhaps justified.

This takes us to another poem titled, 'Will a Poem of Mine Be the Only Answer?' in which the poet states that a special kind of feeling he gets from his poems though they do not solve all problems. The world would have been an illusion to him without his poems. With Mahapatra, earlier it used to be the pure, uncontaminated inner-world, the socio-cultural and mythic details of the past and the pastness of the present economic and political world. Now, he constructs his poetic world on the bad news of the present rather than on the golden past.

The process of ageing and the problem of coming to terms with it through poetry becomes his agonising ordeal in *Burden of Waves and Fruit* (1988). His poetry, as has been already observed, is marked by his shuttling constantly, phase by phase, from the inner world to outer world and vice versa. As a result, he takes up the images from both the worlds: in *Life Signs* speaking of the lives and conditions around him he had

made use of the signs of external world and now that he is back to his body in *Burden of Waves and Fruit* his attention is arrested primarily by the elements and working process of the body itself. It is distinct from his early works at least in one sense: most of the poems here deal with the theme of death. This volume is rather a creative attempt at relating physical decrepitude with moral disintegration and the breakdown of the spirit. However, conspicuous presence of death makes itself felt in the various manifestations of the poet's imagination. In this sense, this volume becomes a watershed in the career of Jayanta Mahapatra by distinctly marking a fundamental concern of an ageing poet, that is, the relationship of the self to the ageing, alienation, slowly turning decrepit body and the ultimate death awaiting it.

By the time this volume was prepared for publication the poet was around sixty. So it was natural that his poetry should have responded to the immediate and urgent demand of exploring the ageing body. In trying to meet this demand the poet turns the gaze of the "centre of your web" towards the inside of the body. Body, then, becomes the centre of attention as well as the centre of his poetic world and consciousness. The body now emerges triumphantly as an overpowering image:

I touch my shoulders; they are bare, contrite.
Like the shape of a deserted park bench in the rain. (52)

The shoulders of his ageing body are "contrite": they are "bare" "like a deserted park bench "in the rain." The signs of ageing on the poet's body are conspicuous, but "contrite." The body that has started holding his attention deceives his very self. Now that the body is slowly becoming a burden, intruding into the terrains of his consciousness, he is getting increasingly obsessed with it: "shoulders," which he might have considered obnoxious a decade ago, have replaced the heart. Of his heart he is growing diffident, sullen: "The heart has nothing to learn,"(39) whereas a decade earlier, he has said:

Where is that absence which pushed an icy rope
down my throat, so close my heart could have touched it?
(*A Rain of Rites* 24)

The preoccupation with "absence," with "waiting," with a haunting sense of unfulfilment continues through these years. What has intervened is the shadow of ageing demanding for itself an exclusive attention from the poet. Further, his mode of giving shape to the immaculate feeling, and dissolving the existing shape of things into a flux, continues. Old age has come to him like a "weary night bird," (51) like "a grey owl on a branch of (his) breath" (53). The presence of this bird is ominous. The soul is now about to depart like this bird and he is aware of its consequence: he will be left as "a soiled shirt as though it were empty of its body" (50). The indelible signs of old age make him feel that he is being reduced to a mere "symbol." His "poem taunts (him) like a discarded bone" (29). "The naked truth of ageing is that," as Kathleen Woodward says, "while we usually associate young age with arms and legs and reaching out into the world and old age with the interior organs, we think of the youth as the symbol of social interaction, while we think of the immobilized, infirm elderly

as turning inward, preoccupied with the invisible working of the body's internal mechanism." [15] (54) These reflections on old age, as against youth, are abundantly, noticed in the recent poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra:

Here I lie, watching
the summer of my body
trembling over the grass (12)

Here we find the poet watching "the summer of (his) body," instead of the exterior worlds of stars, sky and fullmoon night around him. He is preoccupied with the dark workings of the inside of his body. His gaze is inward, bodyward. "Grass," which is an image of youth and vitality, now seems to be merely a shred of memory, overlooked, existing on a different plain, a thing of the past. Where there was once suppleness and tone – "grass"- now there is dryness, "absence," loss of colour – "summer" (12).

In an interview with the Indian Express Jayanta Mahapatra says, "I have been working hard somehow feeling that I don't have much time left. The morbid streak you find in my poetry is also there within me. The idea of death has always been with me." (Sept. 5, 1987) Of course, elsewhere, he had already equated death with poetry: "it has sometimes been said there are two main things poets can write about: love and death. For in poets dwell Man, this biological being, easily hurt, easily destroyed. And if one thinks a little on this, one will come to the conclusion that in reality there is only one subject all poets talk about – and it is death." ("Poetry: Climate for Renewal" 7-16)

Thematically, *Temple* (1989) is a continuation of *A Rain of Rites* published more than a decade ago, in making *Woman* the central character and the focus of Mahapatra's probing spirit. The progression of the theme gains in intensity and depth of treatment. It starts with the news flash from *The Times of India* dated March 24, 1980, on the death of an Octogenarian couple Ramanujan (85) and Chelammal (80), who were believed to have committed suicide because of poverty and loneliness. This leads the poet to ponder over the plight of Indian women in general. Mahapatra captures, with rare insight, the burden of tradition on women at all stages of their lives. Their individuality seems crippled and is made subservient to the all-powerful and all-demanding, predominantly patriarchal system of our society. Chelammal becomes the guiding spirit in *Temple*, representing the collective consciousness and the collective psyche of women: she echoes the dreams, disappointments, ecstasies and sighs of every woman. Mahapatra ruminates over the permanence of the predicament of Indian Woman:

If *Temple's* theme is the plight of the Indian Woman, urged by the opening news item in the ms, then there is reason to suspect little change, despite the seemingly dramatic changes depicted by today's media (57).

The volume ends with another news flash from *The Telegraph* dated January 5, 1986, i.e., almost six years later from the one quoted at the beginning, which states "A 12-year- old girl was allegedly gang raped and murdered... No one has been arrested so far" (*Temple*, p. 56-57) – which only confirms

Mahapatra's apprehensions. Mahapatra eventually infuses into her spirit the strong Will of Putana who was prepared to die in the hands of Lord Krishna with the hope of deliverance from the cycle of birth and death.

A Whiteness of Bone (1992) contains fifty-nine poems dealing with a variety of themes ranging from landscape and time to the grim realities of the contemporary world. It encompasses topics like the Bhopal Gas Tragedy, Assassination of Mrs. Indira Gandhi and the consequent riot in Delhi and the self-immolation by fire of students protesting against the implementation of caste law by the Mondal Commission. Mahapatra's sense of patriotism and awareness of contemporary situations together give rise to his concern for the country. Time has brought a remarkable change in society. No longer the children are afraid of their parents. The generation gap has widened the credibility gap between parents and children. 'The wheel has turned a full circle,' and the parents are now very much conscious of their position.

Mahapatra creates poetry out of contemporary situation. He encounters everyday reality with the insight of a scientist and portrays it with objectivity of a true artist. In "Red Roses for Gandhi", Mahapatra tells us how we have forgotten Gandhi's ideals and relegated him to the background by observing his birthday to a mere ritual. The poem is occasioned by the immolation of eight students on October 2, 1990, the day of Gandhiji's birth Anniversary. Time has changed, we mechanically perform rituals on his birthday without practicing his ideals. Whereas, the poet comes down heavily on those who criticised Gandhi and pay only lip service to him and for these misguided people Gandhi has become a faded picture. So, in this volume he steps out on to the street and into the remote village, in order to express the poet's anguish about contemporary Indian society.

Shadow Space (1997) is Jayanta Mahapatra's fifteenth volume of poetry consists of fifty-four poems. It also illustrates the dark aspects of Orissa, and his disgust with himself for not being able to improve the situation through the medium of his poetry. He knows that 'I write my futile poems,' 'Poetry stumbles and falls' and that his poetry is as 'a river without water.'

Jayanta Mahapatra is touched by the sudden demise of A.K. Ramanujan in Chicago resulting in the birth of a poem, "A Day in Marburg on-the-Lahn." This elegiac piece will perhaps remain as a milestone in Indian English poetry. The poem is very much unlike Jayanta Mahapatra in the sense that it has no complex metaphors, no private symbols. Infact, like death baring life, any talk of death in poetry would strip its ornaments. The hearts of the two men as such, of two poets come to the open. Here is the portrait of two poets, the homage of one to the other, the scrutiny of one's self and on the whole, speculation on the ultimate silence. Here one is struck by the intimate sharing of each other's world:

Suddenly you said you had something to buy.
"Birkenstock sandals," you went on to say.
I had never heard of this brand before. "They are
the best, you know, Jayanta." I didn't.
A Bata was all I knew. You smiled, as you rose... (47)

The two poets were meeting for the first time after twenty

years since they knew each other. Even after that, they did not have any correspondence which speaks of the reticency and a lack of proficiency in pushing themselves forward. Says Mahapatra, he never wanted to ask Ramanujan “about poetry or peace or love.”

Bare Face (2000) is a collection of poems prefaced by Camilo Jose Cela’s words, “A beheaded puppet is a sadder sight than a dead human being.” The volume is divided into two parts and addressed to his grandchildren Ayesha and Nikhil. First part consists of twenty-six poems and the second part entitled “Requiem” having twenty sections. In this collection Mahapatra is painfully aware of his past; memories, personal or as a legacy of burden, a journey backward through time in a dream-like state and of late Mahapatra’s poetry has started assuming somewhat political overtones. In an article published in *The Hindu* Jayanta Mahapatra has ably dealt with the question. According to him, there cannot be any hard and fast rules, but poetry that ignore the historical relationship between the self and the society becomes lifeless. “The poet who does not see reality around himself is dead; so too the poet who ‘only’ sees reality around him.” That is how he deals with the grim realities that surround him and scream for attention. A distinct feature of the book is that it contains a long poem on Gandhi in its second part. The poem is highly evocative of Gandhiji’s life, times and philosophy which flows like a sentimental flashback. The poem bears all the marks of the typical Mahapatra’s style of metaphors, powerful images of decay, deep melancholic voice, ironic rumination proclaiming louder than ever, that the civilised world we profess to inhabit is a blatant refutation of all that Gandhi stood for.

Requiem is one of the epic poems by him. It contains twenty sections. It begins with a prologue where a girl child is playing in the sun and rain. Her face was clear as the sky after rain. She was without any concern and knowledge of this brutal world. May be this girl is our home land, our country. The rudrakshya in her hand stands for religion in our nation, sun and rain stands for miseries and prosperity, a destiny which cannot be escaped. In this poem persona talks about p[resent sate of life in the nation. He talks here about vedas and Christianity. Assassination of Gandhi and his image appears again and again in this epic poem. As title suggests this poem is requiem of lost heritage and glory. In section one persona portrays our artificiality and mechanical life when he writes,

Those were fixed smiles;
Like people who had been defeated
But who smile when a camera is trained on them.
 (“Requiem” Sec-I, BF)

He talks about our fading humanity and our indifference to our roots. He finds humanity flickering like a fire fly somewhere in night. In section thirteen he again symbolizes humanity,

The long evening of your life
Haunted by a mystery
You could never solve
Like the face of humanity

that had lost its future

(“Requiem” Sec-XIII, BF)

He talks about the forgotten hero, assassinated by one among us. Those Gandhian traditions and values are fading like his images hanging in some corners of office walls and may be at some cross roads where birds and crows respect it in their own ways. He lashes at our present pettiness in the following concluding lines,

What you have left behind are
Faded pictures on bare office walls. A day
Every year as national holiday.
Growing, seething leper colonies.
 (“Requiem” Sec-I, BF)

Random Descent is Mahapatra’s most recent collection of poetry published in the year 2005. In this volume his poetry of non-comment turns to be poetry of comment. It is the poetry voicing his protest and intolerance against the sufferings of the poor, weak and downtrodden of the land. He wants to safeguard the poor sufferer and the women class at large. Divided into three sections, this collection of poetry is a fresh recurrence of the old legends, the poet was elaborating throughout the past three decades. It consists of a total of forty-nine poems, which deal with the familiar characteristic like Orissa’s architectural cosmogony, social turmoils, widespread terrorism and Mahapatra’s favourite images of stone, darkness and light emerge with renewed possibilities.

Land is his recent work appeared in 2013, containing thirty one poems as the title suggests all these poems refers to one theme i.e. the land, the soil containing past and present of the poet. These poems walk with him silently on the blood-smearred soil of Dahuli where lies blood of his ancestors. He recalls Kalinga, Ashoka and recalls the famine which compelled his grandfather to change his religion. This volume also projects recurrent images like River, Stone, Door, Shadow, Hunger, Jasmine etc. He again takes dip in to the past where stands Asoka with his hand stained in blood. Asoka becomes a symbol of injustice an irony here;

Slashed with blood-red light, Ashoka
Turns away from himself, proclaiming
“All men are my children.”
 (“Ashoka”, LD)

His favourite images like Rain, women, village and darkness come together in his poem entitled Village Mythology where he portrays through these images life of a woman and her day routine in Indian villages.

Firewood on their heads, a file of women
Stagger along the last rain-wet road.
Suna, the faithful village wife, carwls through darkness
As she moves beyond birth and death
From one night of rape to another.
 (“Village Mythology”, LD)

Mahapatra was twice removed from his immediate surroundings – first, he was born into a Christian family in a

predominantly Hindu society and second, he wrote in an acquired medium, English, which was considered not adequate to encompass the cultural spirit of his native land. Yet the themes which dominate his poetry are related to such stark realities of India as hunger, myths, rituals, sexuality, spirituality, the self and eternity. His poetry, whether describing the locale, its environs and landscape or the relationship of his self to his land, attempts to reflect an awareness of this milieu. It aims at evaluating Mahapatra as the Mouth-Piece of India in the perspective of the locale, in terms of the images drawn from the geographical, social and cultural sources of his native land of Orissa. The place with all its ethos and myths, its lives and beliefs, superstitions and transitions has been the governing factor of his (poet) perceptions and vision but at the same time it's having a national appeal too.

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