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MYTHS AND RITES OF ODISHA IN THE SELECTED POEMS OF JAYANTA MAHAPATRA

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ABSTRACT

What does the use of myth and rituals in the poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra entail? Does it revive the glory of the past? Does it critique the contemporary scenario? Does it bring to light the poet's deep-rootedness and intimacy with his native land? The present article attempts to address these questions and explore the use of myth and rituals in the poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra. His poetic imagination is shaped by the pantheon of gods and goddesses and also by the rocks and stones of Odisha. His poetic self constantly interacts with legends and myths of Odisha, and this mythopoeia explains his roots, belongingness, and true identity. The past looms large on the present. His is a search for the mysterious and the infinite. And it has made up his poetic destiny.

Keywords: myth, Odisha, rites, self

Introduction

Myths and rites are syntagmatic of the poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra in that they are the main constituent of his poetic cosmos. His poetry is basically "rains of rites". The shaping spirit of Mahapatra's Imagination draws heavily on myths and rites of his familiar locale. Just as clouds concentrate into rain, myth and rites come crowing upon him, get concentrated into poetry, and make the body and soul of his poems vibrant, fertile, and rainbow-flavoured.

Mahapatra is an eminent Indian poet in English of the present time. Available literature suggests that poetry to Jayanta Mahapatra has been not only a powerful personal experience of self-realization but also a redemptive act of self-revelation. In favour of this, we see his career graph as a poet of standing repute that holds considerable space in raising his early memories of love and of love's selfishness to complete absorption in identifying himself with the culture and tradition of his homeland Odisha – if "taken away"; he'd be "lost" somewhere. Furthermore, a close study of his poems reveals that his poetic canvas off and on bumps into Indian myths and rites which resulted in putting, to quote Jayanta Mahapatra, "a door in the heart of a man which never opens" ("Freedom as Poetry: The Door" 1).

Discussion

Like many other poets writing in English, Jayanta Mahapatra treats myth in variety—both ancient and modern myth in his poetry. "Myth is the very hub of Mahapatra's poetry" (Mishra 21); parallelly runs the process of Mahapatra's quest for identity and self-questioning. The poem "Myth" from *Rain of Rites* delves deep into the mystic, foggy temple of his consciousness forged by Indian myth and rituals where over "long years"

recurrently ring the mysterious, old “brassy bells” of memory and “sluggishly drift” a prayer, “a chanting”, and “an incense”. He is hypnotised by the dark, deep “stairs”, the dark, “dank sanctum” and irresistibly drawn to the peaks of “Annapurna” and “Dhaulagiri”. And as soon as he pulls himself up, he is faced with the overwhelming who-am-I question: “Are you a Hindoo?” (15). “Mahapatra thus invokes the sacrificial rituals of the Hindu temple...his mythic consciousness of the Indian heritage which is central to his poetry ...and unfolds his response to the tantric design” (Shahane 172).

A seminal poem that digs into the poet’s relation to the mythos and the established practice of India in general and Odisha in particular is *Relationship* (1980). In this respect, Critic Vasant Shahane finds similarity between William Wordsworth, William Blake and Jayanta Mahapatra. In the vein of Wordsworth, Mahapatra’s poetic inspiration comes both from the very being of nature— its aura, sights and sounds, flora and fauna, and from the very earth of his intimate haunt i.e. Odisha. Again, in the vein of Blake, in much of his works Mahapatra’s intuitive imagination is also stimulated by a mystic quest. *Relationship* opens with the poet’s preoccupation with the fabled lore of the “phallus” of the “enormous stone”. This is perhaps an implied reference to the Shiva lingam of the Lingaraj Temple at Bhubaneswar. Mahapatra also resuscitates in his mindscape the architectural wonder of the ancient Konark Sun Temple – one of the torch-bearers of the quintessence of Indian tradition. Critic Vasant Shahane makes an apt observation:

Mahapatra’s imagination is almost continually evoked by his sense of the earth, the “earth” of Orissa, the rocks, the stones and the alluvial soil of the fertile land which encompasses within it the racial and cultural consciousness of its people and their gods and goddesses, and the history of a civilization which has risen and fallen like a stupa, a pillar of past glory, and of present decay (174).

Mahapatra owes his success to his birthplace Odisha—the land of nature, myth, and temples. His poetic self constantly interacts with the legends and myths of Odisha in his poems. His mythopoeic self explains his roots, belongingness, and his true identity. But the primacy of rites and rituals over myth does not superimpose the poetic fabric of Mahapatra. For example, “The temple points to the unending rhythm.” (“Main temple street, Puri” 12) This is an inextricable link between rites and the unfathomable beliefs of people. No doubt, his affinity is with Indian myths and rites. The same is revealed in the *Selected Poems* (1987) and confirmed by the fact that he seeks all happiness and solace in looking at the temples and the sacraments performed by widows. He writes: “White-clad widowed Women/past the centers of their lives/are waiting to enter the Great Temple” (“Dawn at Puri” 14). “White-clad” and “past the centers of their lives” metaphorically refer to the social ostracism faced by middle-aged widowed Indian women. It also refers that temples are of tremendous spiritual significance besides their pristine participation in the predominant and pre-existing temple rites. “The dreamy quality and the visionary aspect are so strong in Jayanta Mahapatra that these keep giving a slip to anyone whosoever seeks to explain, annotate and analyze him for meaning sake.” (Dubey. n.p.)

That the veritable presence of Hindu myth & the parallel existence of man and nature, the simultaneity of past and present shape his poetic oeuvre is well acknowledged by him in an interview with scholar and poet Rabindra Kumar Swain in the following gestures:

I suppose past and present, man and nature, contribute to the myth which is necessary for survival. Temple, on the surface, may point to the life and times of a woman in Indian society, but it may also go on to suggest the spiritual nature of life’s journey, poetic or actual. And yes, I did use the Hindu myths of the destructive image of the ogress, Putana, to drive in the point that life has to be lived amidst all deceits, cruelties, disguises, and contradictions, and that illusion, whether mystical or earthy, might help to save man from ultimate despair. (S. Rabindra & Merchant P. n.p.)

Further, Mahapatra asserts the vital and immutable attachment between man and place. This self-reflection is also but the lost valour of his ancestors on the historical riverbank of “Daya”: “But the place/Sitting on the riverbank throwing pebbles/Into the muddy current,/A man becomes the place” (*A Rain of Rites* 42). “Sitting on the riverbank throwing pebbles” has acquired a mythic dimension to his interconnected thoughts and “A man becomes the place” brings to light the poet’s deep-rootedness and intimacy with his native land,

Odisha. Mahapatra has a reverent appeal: "Once again one must sit back and bury the face / in this earth of the forbidden myth," (Relationship 59). "Once again one must sit back and bury the face" and "the forbidden myth" explore and elaborate on the relationship between the glory of the past and the myth of the land – he builds a new pattern of poetry.

Observing the thematic pattern of Mahapatra's poetry, Mishra comments, "the poet wishes to rebuild India by following the ideals that were there in ancient India. (Dispossessed Nests, 146). Even while enjoying the natural beauty of rain, as a conscious lover of history, the poet asks: How I have waited, shaped by memory,/ these many years without knowing exactly why./Does childhood spread out all the way/from the hills of innocence to the horizon of the sea? ("Bare Face"18). Here, utterances, such as "shaped by memory", "childhood spread out all the way", and "from the hills of innocence to the horizon of the sea" speak about the heroic past of his native land that slots into the present.

Mahapatra's mythopoeic imagination is shaped even by the smallest of the flora (grass). It is when the mind resides in sombreness and an uninterrupted bargain intervenes to accept grief as destiny, his imagination gets stuck on the reverberating hymnal sound of the "Grass" chanting the glory of God. Consequently, his numbness dislocates to redemption—the revival of faith and existence in life. He recollects the purifying effects of "Grass"—one of his short poems consisting of six stanzas of three lines each: "I watch a little hymn /turning the ground beneath my feet, / a tolerant soil making its own way in the light of the sun." (1-3).

The sacredness of Grass in the Indian context is attributed to rebirth, fertility, and prosperity. To be precise, the act of wearing a ring made up of certain species of grass during rituals or during an oblation to a fire god is truly Indian. This childhood reminiscence of the poet typically absorbs the Indian myths and rites into the very texture of his poems. Moreover, his search for the mysterious, the infinite, through a blade of grass is justified. "Jayanta Mahapatra skilfully makes use of myths to give a wider appeal and a cosmic touch to the eternal problems of mankind, by moulding the mythological symbols into new forms and placing them in the contemporary context. Myths operate at two levels – social and cultural – in Mahapatra's poetry" (Mene 10).

Conclusion

Mahapatra's poetry horizon is very vast. His journey as a poet and man is consequent upon his single-minded trailing with tools of the English language and his native land Odisha. Mahapatra confesses, "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 keens over the great grief of the River Daya..." (*Door of Paper* 81) Regarding trailing with English writing, Mahapatra answers in an interview, "Here I was a Physics man, and then I lived in a remote place in India, away from the standard centres of English poetry. The publications brought me a sense of confidence I had sorely missed in life. I knew I could write poetry" (Das 125). As a careful thinker, he does proper weighing and balance of words to incorporate them into his poems. Mahapatra in one of his articles titled – "Containing the World that contains us: Myth/Symbol as Metaphor in Poetry" states clearly:

Probably my reaction, my conviction to the poem's sincerity would build from the thought or the ideas of the poem, which the poet finds out not through spontaneity or what we might call inspiration (a terrible enough word)-but through a process of careful thinking... (*Door of Paper* 183-84)

The myth and rituals of Odisha are thus the microcosms through which Mahapatra presents India and has carved a niche in Indian English poetry. Despite being from a Christian background, Mahapatra's mythical bent and his profound understanding of the Hindu myths and rituals are unparalleled. He has watched everything with a hawk's eye, and yet, like an owl, he dug into the subterranean mythic world, stayed there for a while, and like the artisans of the Sun Temple makes them bloom through his poetry. Poetry in his hand thus becomes a confluence, a meeting point of self, society, art, culture, myth, and ritual.

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