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BEING INDIAN PERSONA – A CRUCIAL TRAIT OF JAYANTA MAHAPATRA'S POETRY

Dr. MUKUL KUMAR SHARMA

Asst. Professor, Department of English and Humanities  
Jaipur Engineering College and Research Centre, Jaipur



ABSTRACT

Indian English poetry is, perhaps, incomplete without a sense of belongingness to India, in modern time. Earlier, in the colonial era, an affinity to the English themes, style, content, while composing Indian English poetry was considered a 'priority' to be in par with the Britishers' level. But, with the major post-colonial poets like, Arun Kolatkar, Nissim Ezekiel and Jayanta Mahapatra, this 'notion' seems to fade away, and a strong inclination towards the Indian background, culture, myths, images, themes etc. is witnessed at large, which is not only likely to pave way for the bright future of Indian English poetry, but sometimes to surpass the English subjugators. The present paper throws light on the poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra, who has enriched the Indian poetry in a different way by dealing sagaciously with the Indian culture in general, and the Oriyan culture in particular. His contribution to Indian English poetry is not confined to his treatment of Indian culture only, but the evolution of his unprecedented poetic idiom which an Indian reader feels proud of.

**Key Words** – Indian culture, spirit, culture, religion, tradition, Orissa, Puri etc.

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India, a country having a rich and profound faith in existing religious perspective, feels the divine presence of God in every living or even non-living entity. Various religious bodies in India exemplify the multiplicity of the forms of God, yet maintaining the 'essential' feature of His being 'one'. These multiple forms of God can further be witnessed in the whole country in the form of the worshipping of various gods, goddesses, planets, trees or even stones, symbolizing His own being in almost all the parts of India, which interestingly represents true *Indianness*. Almost every intellectual individual, including artists, poets, writers, musicians, sculptors, priests, have been inspired and influenced by this theory to such a level that all are 'taught' to inculcate and infuse this 'goodness' in their children, and to look for the positive and the divine in every living being. The soul in every individual living being is considered to be a representation of God Himself. This sense of belongingness to India has greatly influenced poets like Jayanta Mahapatra.

Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry revolves around India and its culture. The landscapes and myths of Orissa form a major part of his poetry as he is naturally affected by them due to his birth and childhood spent in Orissa. What is noteworthy in his poetry is that he doesn't try to create *Indianness* in the mention of traditional Indian images of tigers, snakes, snakes-charmers, jugglers, crocodiles etc., but he is sensibly Indian. This sensibility and maturity is best seen in his poems about Orissa, where he creates the level of universalism

by dealing extensively with the local and regional themes. Poems like '*Orissa Landscapes*', '*Evening in an Orissa village*', '*The Orissa Poems*', '*Dawn at Puri*' etc., are Oriyan first in treatment of the content and nature, and so they are Indian eventually. Hardly any other poet can form poetry with such an equal validity. In his poetry, the language is, of course, English, but not the sensibility. It is purely Indian. K.A. Panikar justifies, "An examination of the recurring images in his poems reveals that he is Oriya to the core. The sun of the eastern coast of India shines through his poems. The eastern sea sends its morning wind through them. He, as a child of the sun and the sea, finds delight in invoking the god of fire and the god of water in poems like '*Sunburst*', '*The Beggar Takes It as Solace*'. Puri is a living character in several of these poems. The temple, the priest, the beggar, the fisherman, the crow: these rise before us all their objective reality and concreteness and then slowly transform themselves, almost imperceptibly, into monument-like images and symbols." Let's look at '*Taste for Tomorrow*' to substantiate this statement:

At Puri, the crows The one  
wide street  
Lolls out like a giant tongue. Five faceless  
lepers move aside as a priest passes by  
And at the street's end  
The crowds thronging the temple door; A huge holy  
flower  
Swaying in the wind of greater reasons.

The incident of Puri in the lines symbolizes India as a whole. Similarly, other poems like '*Bazar 3 P.M., Orissa*', deal extensively with the state of Orissa, again representing India. The prostrating woman, the crawling people, the tired Rickshaw Puller, are not merely Oriyan, but Indian also. In the 'Indian way', the poet presents them in a typically idealized Indian manner. The lover buys a lotus for her and makes an 'oath' that he would not even touch her before marriage, though he would not hesitate to do the same to the 'other' one, the whore. The lotus romanticizes the beloved, and the hypocrite Indian male mentality, and his double standards stand exposed, revealed by his approach that he would not hesitate to touch the other woman, but he would not touch his lotus-woman before the wedding night.

The theme of poverty, hunger and starvation which characterize the lot of the Indian poor constitute a major part of Mahapatra's poetry. S. Viswanathan aptly mentions, "Mahapatra's sensibility is both Indian and modern and his response to the scene is authentic and credible. The rendering of Indian Vignettes, whether it is of a village landscape as in "village" or that of a city or town street scene as in "Main Temple street, Puri", "Dawn at Puri", or "Sunburst", is invariably an authentic."

Poverty, hunger and starvation, major chronic and ubiquitous facets of the life of the Indian masses, find a justified expression in the poetry of Mahapatra, representing his unquestioning love and 'anxiety'. On studying the theme from various angles, various heart rendering and poignant realities come to the fore with the high intensity and credibility, as in *Hunger*, *The Whorehouse in Calcutta Street*, and *Man of His Night*. These poems again serve purpose to study and expose the voluptuous tendency of the Indian men to seduce and exploit women, faced reality of the poverty and the suffering of the Indian masses. Also, women, the sufferers of male lust in a male chauvinist society, impart to his poetry a tragic-pessimistic tone. K.A. Panikar again points out, "The poet's dominant concern is the vision of grief, loss, dejection, rejection. The tragic consciousness does not seem to operate in the work of any other Indian poet in English as disturbingly as in that of Mahapatra. '*The somber wind*', '*The darkened room*', '*The intrigues at my finger tips*'—these objects and images put their unmistakable emphasis on the sombre vision."

The suffering and marginalized women in his poetry point specifically to this aspect-

The good wife Lies  
in my bed  
Through the long afternoon:  
Dreaming still, unexhausted

By the deep roar of funeral pyres In the  
darkened room

A woman cannot find her reflection in the mirror.

A woman becomes a mechanical, impassionate tool in her commercial exploitation, and in suffering from it, takes it all mechanically, in a tiring, boring and insensitive way. Her suffering is treated in both the ways, as a wife and a whore. According to S. Viswanathan, "When the poet deals with the themes of trade in flesh, poverty and destitution his finesse does not fail him. He avoids making a tickling poetic opportunity of such themes and scene which practically exploiting the experience of his response to such and handling them in his poems with a stern, unsentimental compassion. It is perhaps this quality of the true poet's social concern which matches Mahapatra's engagement with the cultural pressures of the Indian, especially those caused by the generational compulsions and constraints, that lends real substance to the body of his verse and elevates it to major status."

One can conveniently find a continual rehearsal of dramatizing a human yearning for the possibilities of the dying process of a famous Hindu myth, "The Dance of Shiva". The origin of this myth is directly proportional to the Indian Hindu way of living life, a basis on which temples are founded in India, and in Orissa in particular. The poet directly faces this whole procedure, confronts its dying process in the life of common men and women in Orissa. Considering the progressive intentionality of his poetic language; a marked, varied intensity and range of themes – temples, whorehouses, nature, and love, elements of the poet's consciousness to the dying process can be felt. Here, the Hindu myth is shattered, but it's not a symbol of continuity or a development of thought from his mind's hiding places to generative redemption; and, this is his dedication and devotion to the modern condition of human loss, not a flaw. So, this proves him to be the most intense of Indian poets writing in English and sometimes at par with the European poets, who are fanatical about modernistic instinct for man's limitations, his philosophy, economics and culture, myth, and thought, to a worldwide human dilemma.

Political issues have always been the most enticing themes for many Indian English poets, but they evade straightforwardness and honesty, only few have shown courage to touch them with a barge – pole. Indo- Anglian poetry is often criticised for this failure or lack of 'bravery', not for its out-dated diction or uncertain rhythms, as assumed by critics and readers. Jayanta Mahapatra, on the other hand, tries to remain truthful in facing and fighting this challenge in poems like "*The Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of a Republic.*" Though he may not have fully succeeded in his attempt, yet he contributes to improving the condition. Here, Mahapatra establishes the genuineness of statement without surrendering aesthetic goals—

The new postage stamp gleams in silver and grey It's such a  
thing that brings a faint flush on cheeks,  
Like a sudden wind that slips under the door and stir the Silent paper on  
the dust and other objects,  
That have learnt to live without their knowing,  
Do we want to feel the ground give way beneath us? This is a  
barren world that has been  
Prowling round my room, epidemics in the poisoned air , Dusty streets  
stretching away like disgruntled socialists.

Here the Indian English writer becomes pertinent, and this pertinence is witnessed here -

The plumes of rice have glassy, furious eyes That sway aggressively in the sleepless wind '  
Such are the eyes of youth whose fears lurch about the doorways of their homes.  
The prostitutes are younger this year;  
At the police station, they 're careless to give reasons For being  
what they are  
And the older women careful enough not to show their years.

Similarly, questions are again raised against the deploring conditions of the country in "*The Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of a Republic*"-

What is wrong with my country?

The jungles have become gentle, and women restless

And history reposes between the college girl's breasts  
The exploits of warrior-queens, the pride pieced together

From a God's tainted amours. Is this where the advantage lay? Meena, my pretty  
neighbour, flashes round and round

The gilded stage, hiding jungles in her purse, Holding on to  
her divorce, and a lonely Ph.D.

Stone in the poetry of Mahapatra is a symbol of the self and is very crucial. According to Meera Alexander, "Stone is crucial to his cosmogony. It was there at the beginning. It is the penetrable permanent. He inhabits an earth where monuments of stone crumble and crack, yet survive in the same realm as human beings, the glory of stone glimpsed momentarily by consciousness." Stone is a mute observer to the experience of the multitudes of generations and has a silent role in the both creative and destructive rounds of time.

I look through the swollen glass of noon and in the heart of  
great grey clouds and cutting rains

the autumns of a thousand years spread out like ;

what can save us now but the miracle we have been waiting for?

Mahapatra tries to associate himself with the stone, itself a symbol of constant continuity and the time ahead while presenting the images of sleep and waking, death and birth, etc. Thus, presenting the stone as a mute witness to mortal time, Mahapatra finds himself passive in the flow of time and the coming generations. The poet achieves fulfilment by losing his personal, egoistic identity, and placing himself in the racial consciousness. The nature, the historic past, and the inner world of consciousness are fused into an organic whole in Mahapatra's poetry which proves him to be genuinely Indian.

Finally, despite being a man of science and his global voyages and experiences gained there, Jayanta Mahapatra has a deeply felt love for his own motherland, which he has presented in the forms of unique Indian imagery, symbolism and diction, and has created a niche for himself in the whole English literature.

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