

## DEPICTION OF INDIA IN JAYANTA MAHAPATRA'S POETRY

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### Abstract

*Jayanta Mahapatra, a contemporary of A.K. Ramanujam, Nizzim Ezekeil and R. Parthasarathy stands out distinctly as a great Indian poet, in the domain of contemporary Indo-Anglican poetry. The poetry of Mahapatra describes what he sees around him. His creative mind changes the incidents into poetry. He comments on the social behaviour of people and the issues which affect them. While dealing with socio-cultural and political issues, he does not sacrifice the artistic quality. Yet, he is more concerned with the survival of man rather than creating a utopian world for the people. His characters are cobbler, hungry street children, slum dwellers, prostitutes and a woman in pain. Like the English Romantics, Mahapatra anchors his poetry in the sights sounds, and experiences of ordinary life and ordinary man. He portrays the people of Orissa and their Hindu religion with all its rituals and beliefs of the ancestors at the same time. Similarly, he embraces the genre of poetry because of its exploratory nature and beautiful rhyme structure.*

**Keywords:** Mahapatra, Indian Poet, Indianness, Contemporary reality, Indian Milieu

"Literature has been the means of giving form and utterance to the hopes and despairs, the enthusiasm and apathy, the thrill of joy and the stab of pain, in a nation's history as it moves from freedom to Slavery, from slavery to revolution, from revolution to independence and again from independence to the tasks of reconstruction involving further experiences of success and elation or futility and failure." (Indian Writing in English 694)

Jayanta Mahapatra, a contemporary of A.K. Ramanujam, Nizzim Ezekeil and R. Parthasarathy stands out distinctly as a great Indian poet, in the domain of contemporary Indo-Anglican poetry. He was born on 22nd October 1923 in Cuttack, Orissa. He was born in a lower middle-class family. He had his early education in English medium at Stewart school, Cuttack. His post graduation was in Physics and he joined as a teacher in 1949 and worked in different Government colleges of Orissa. Though Mahapatra was born in a Christian family; he was surrounded by Hindu neighbours. He began writing poems rather late in his life. The publication of his first book of poems, *Svayamvara and Other Poems*, in 1971

was followed by the publication of *Close the Sky Ten* by Ten. He has written seventeen volumes of poetry that include, *A Father's Hours* (1976), *A Rain of Rites* (1976), *Waiting*, *Dispossessed Nests* (1986), *Selected Poems* (1987), *Burden of Waves and Fruit* (1988), *Temple* (1989), *A Whiteness of Bone* (1992), *Shadow Space* (1997), *Bare Face* (2000) and *Random Descent* (2005). He received the prestigious Jacob Latstein Memorial Award in 1975. He has the great honour of being the first Indian English poet to receive Sahitya Akademi Award in the year 1981 for his long poem *Relationship*. The most coveted and prestigious "Padmashree Award" for civilian citizen was also awarded to him for his outstanding contribution in the field of literature.

The poetry of Mahapatra describes what he sees around him. They are temples, beaches and the crowded streets of Orissa. His poetic world does not reproduce the incidents that influenced him. His creative mind changes the incidents into poetry. He supplies the aesthetic pleasure as well as the social behaviour of people and the issues which affect them. While dealing with socio-cultural and political issues, he does not sacrifice the artistic quality. Yet, he is more concerned with the survival of man rather than creating a utopian world for the people. His characters are cobbler, hungry street children, slum dwellers, prostitutes and a woman in pain. Like the English Romantics, Mahapatra anchors his poetry in the sights sounds, and experiences of ordinary life and ordinary man. He portrays the people of Orissa and their Hindu religion with all its rituals and beliefs of the ancestors at the same time. Similarly, he embraced genre of poetry because of his exploratory nature and beautiful rhyme structure. His own notion of poetry is thus:

Mahapatra deals with variety of themes ranging from nature to death. His early poems deal with the themes like the nature of his childhood, his relationship with his father, his aloofness from the Hindu tradition, personal longings, infatuation, love towards women. His poetry is deeply rooted in Indian heritage. In the next phase, he is more concerned with the problems of the people and the contemporary reality, myth, ritual and cultural background. Whatever may be the theme, his sensibility

is absolutely Indian. He captures the scenes around him and pens in his poems.

The poet expresses his intimacy with his hometown and its landscape. Though Orissa is endowed with rich natural resources, it becomes necessary for him to examine the poverty scenario and living condition of the people of Orissa. The poet can see the poor families going from door to door, begging for food. Orissa seems to have a large number of destitute who lack either money or material to survive. The poet feels sorry for the sad state of affairs in his state and he indirectly indicts the government's negligent attitude in resuming the good standards of living condition of the people.

In another Poem "Dawn at Puri", he writes about Puri, the holy town of Orissa situated on the coastal area. The town is throbbing with religious fervour. It is not a holy place but it is the centre of Oriyan culture with the temple of Jagannath. It is well known for its religious features, particularly the annual festival held to honour the deity, Jagannath. The poet ruminates on the beach premises at Puri. The endless cawing of crows catches the poet's attention at the outset. He then notices a skull on the beach where bodies are normally cremated. Puri here, functions as a miniature representation of India. The term 'empty country' emphasises the rejection of established social conventions. The hollow skull points to the irrational superstitions which would probably take man to cave age.

At the break of dawn, when the poet looks at the single funeral pyre burning, he is suddenly reminded of his mother's last wish. The phrase, "And suddenly breaks out from my hide" echoes the thought springing out; just as the poet sprung out from his mother's womb. His aged mother expressed her wish that she should be cremated at this particular place. Rites and rituals are necessary for a man belonging to a society. However, performing one's mother's last wish is far more important than these obligatory rites of religion and doctrines of custom. The realisation occurs to him on all of a sudden. The symbol of Dawn is thus also the realisation of the poet.

The poem "Summer" illustrates Mahapatra's authentic Indian sensibility. Mahapatra sees the world with detachment, comprehends the reality that he encounters in the world, and portrays it objectively. The poet beautifully brings an order in his experience through peculiar evocation of images. This poem offers a few pictures which are by no means interconnected, and it reads like a riddle. But the pictures are vivid and realistic.

The words 'Not yet' focus on an event that will come after

the current time. One needs to understand the poem to find out what is not yet to take place, or to happen, or to be done. The poem expresses the poet's inability to find the mystery of life.

As for his themes, Mahapatra seems to be obsessed with hunger, poverty, loneliness and a search for his identity and for roots. His attitude to Orissa, the place to which he belongs, is however, a matter of deep concern. Mahapatra's poems deal with intricacies of human relationships, social problems of Post-Independence phase, personal themes of love, sex, sensuality, marriage and philosophical or cultural issues as well. Even, he is concerned with the hunger of the people. 'Hunger', according to Jayanta Mahapatra is an expression of his solitude. The poet understood the real meaning of the word 'hunger', not owing to sexual displeasure but that driven by dismal poverty. The poet could feel the empty stomach as though the fish turns inside. The stanza explicitly reveals the loss of moral and social values of Orissa as well as of India. It provides a contrasting image of traditional Orissa - that is highly spiritual, ethical, and rich in cultural heritage.

In the poem "Slum" also, the poet articulates his empathy with the slum dwellers. In the last stanza, he says that he turned around to avoid his burning eyes. He sees him as a lonely girl who is beaten in a battle. The girl feels limp, bruised, tired and crushed. Her sensibility is shaped by the Indian environment and climate. The poet could not digest the poor living condition of slum dwellers of Oriya.

His poem "The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street" seemed to deal with the pains and agonies that these prostitutes suffer in their everyday life while confronting the cultural society. Mahapatra has a great reverence and veneration for women who are primitive symbol of suffering and sacrifice. Mahapatra does not only write about these neglected women, but in general, he describes the condition of women who do not have a place to go. He uses a melancholic tone to give their thought a narration. Whether a wife, daughter, or a mother, the male dominated world has drawn the limits of existence for the women. The role of wife is enunciated with speculative irony. A woman can think of freedom only before marriage. The wife is alienated from the freedom that she enjoyed before marriage. The plight of ordinary women in their conventional and customary lives is pathetic. Mahapatra describes position of Indian women with minute details.

Mahapatra has developed a genuine voice which is of great interest to diverse Indian and foreign audiences. He identifies himself with his roots and realises the meaninglessness in the life of the modern man. He

exorbitantly describes his alienation, suffering, his frustration due to his old age and the unavoidable triumph of time over him. He convincing and honest voices forth the social, religious and political issues in Mahapatra's India in the fine form of poetry. Indian people and the recurring problems of existence in the Indian space becomes the dominant theme of his poetry. He gives his voice for the deprived, and he is undoubtedly the poet for the people.

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