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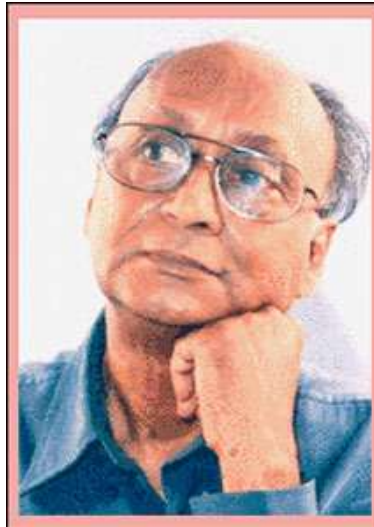
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Jayanta Mahapatra: A Poet of Social-Cultural Concerns

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com

13 : 2 February 2013

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Abstract

Jayanta Mahapatra has made a significant contribution in enriching the Indian Poetry in English with an innovative use of Indian themes and contemporary idiom in his poetry. Originally hailing from Orissa and spending his whole life in and around a typically rich mythological background of Cuttack, he steps beyond the physical confines of regions in his treatment of people's pleasure and pain in his poetry which is deeply tinged with an unusual awareness of the surrounding social and cultural realities. This portrayal of human situation forms an integral part of his poetry thus taking into account almost all the prevailing grievances of humans in general- and of Indians in particular- such as poverty, corruption, crime, lack of communal harmony, social unrest, grass-roots level realities of common man along with his symbolic competence. The present paper attempts to throw light on Mahapatra as a poet of universal socio-cultural concerns.

Jayanta Mahapatra's Works

Jayanta Mahapatra took up writing poetry in 1971 when the publication of his first book of verse, *Close the Sky, Ten by Ten* followed by other volumes in quick succession. His poetic oeuvre includes *Swayamvara and Other Poems* (1971), *A Father's Hours* (1976), *A Rain of Rites* (1976), *Waiting* (1976), *The False Start* (1980), *Relationship* (1980), *Life Signs* (1983), *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), *Random Descent* (2005) and the more recent one *The Lie of Dawns* (2009). This enumeration and nomenclature suggests a development of his sensibility as well as his thematic concerns along with indicating a major shift in his poetry.

Odisha Relationship

Jayant Mahapatra matures himself by strengthening his understanding of lived reality as well as a felt historical and mythical past reverberating to one what Mahapatra said while receiving the Sahitya Akademi Award in the year 1981:

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

13 : 2 February 2013

Mukul Kumar Sharma, M.A. (English), M.Phil., Ph.D. Candidate and Sanjit Mishra, Ph.D.

Jayanta Mahapatra: A Poet of Social-Cultural Concerns

“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 and where the waves of the Bay of Bangal fail to reach out today to the twilight soul of Konarka, I acknowledge my relationship.”¹

Sense of Rootedness

Mahapatra’s awareness of his sense of rootedness is visible in the poem “Living in Orissa” (the poem with which his *Shadow Space* begins):

Something here, perhaps fatal spirit.
Something that recalls the centuries of defeat.
To live here.
Antlered in sickness and disease.
In the past of uncomprehended totems.
And the spirit blood of ancestors
one would wear like an amulet.

Today, the darkness of our own shadows slips over the uncared for cemeteries by the river.

Someone keeps walking down still
across the ravenous dust
between the graves.
Waiting like an ancient debt.
Someone goes on dancing
at the door of indifferent temples.
Carrying pain in an eyeless face.
Only shadows shift now.
They have the eyes of defeated spirits.
The old old eyes.

[*Shadow Space*. pp. 11]

In the above extract, such phrases as “uncomprehended totems”, “uncared-for cemeteries”, “indifferent temples” show Mahapatra’s spirit becoming damp along with showing a supreme expression of dejection.

Individual Self and History

In the poem “1992”, Mahapatra concerns to relate the individual self to its history, to the burden of history and to the fleeting nature of time. The poet is never open up to his relationship with the world; it seems that the poet himself, who has to negotiate that, has to show interest in the world.

The poet has to generate interest in knowing the dead and the living, the past and the present of the world:

Hear the rain tapping against the door

So persistently and you think

The dead themselves are trying to come in.

[pp. 14]

Pain of Bearing Witness

The depravity of our country and countrymen, the tales of failures, defeat, poverty etc. have their piquant references in the poems like “Trying to Keep Still”, “The Shadow of Day”, “Saving Ourselves” and “Bazar Scene”. He painfully writes: “It is painful still to bear witness to what we are.”² “Possessions” is a yet another poem in which one easily discerns a self-reflexivity that assumes a sharpness to unleash the poet’s bitterness about the world he lives in and about himself, about the meaningless of poetry in “a land of fluctuating shadow and sunlight”. (pp. 23)

A Bleak Present and a Bleaker Future

Throughout his poetry Mahapatra shows a bleak present and a bleaker future. And, on moving from *Shadow Space* to *Bare Face*, one discovers the reiteration of the scenes and cries of grief, misery and pain, with a tone of voice that has acquired only irritating salt of bitterness of

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

13 : 2 February 2013

Mukul Kumar Sharma, M.A. (English), M.Phil., Ph.D. Candidate and Sanjit Mishra, Ph.D.

Jayanta Mahapatra: A Poet of Social-Cultural Concerns

270

the world outside and the bitterness of the world within propelled by the increasing awareness of futility of writing poetry. Here, it is noticed that the images in the poem do not show any ray of hope, for instance, the poem “Watching Tribal Dances in an Orissa Village” and “Requiem” in the volume *Bare Face*, intensify and multiply the grief.

In “The Lines of My Poem”, Mahapatra shows how poetry has become a faint shadow of its former self. He has succeeded in trying to critique what the contemporary poetry has rendered for he feels that it has lost its touch with the quality of universality and how it has become devoid of any sublimity of raising human questions. His poems have been stumbling over, again and again, the human misery and poverty as the depressingly sad lines of Mahapatra lose no chance of showing the poverty and hunger of people around:

Perhaps the lines of my poems will be lane for a long time losing their fight go against the pain of the screaming, frightened girl; In Kosovo, or Kicking vainly at the anger of a boy on the West Bank.
(pp. 43)

Women in Different Characters

Women come as different figures like wife, whore, daughter, beloved and keep coming through suggestive forms in Mahapatra’s poetry. John Oliver Perry traces the transformations she undergoes in the early volumes:

“The image of his unobtainable beloved in time took its place in a series of females who figures more or less frequently in his poetry, still with some feeling of guilt and ultimate frustration. The title *Swayamvara* (1971) of his second volume – again with many love poems “for R.M.” (his wife RunuMahapatra) – refers to the rare form of Hindu marriage in which woman has a choice. Throughout his mature 1980 volume, *The False Start*, she appears deeply transformed as a “You” who is neither self nor other, neither actual nor merely imaginary – a darkly disappearing, persistently female phantasm who takes symbolic and suggestive forms from passing prostitutes or absent and silent divinities.”³

Woman is rather mythicized as abstraction in Mahapatra’s poems as she is more spoken to than she speaks, more questioned by the poet/narrator than she answers. She is often silent, distant, tortured, enigmatic and deceptive and is approached in the traditional Indian way unlike many of Mahapatra’s contemporary English poets of India do.

The poet asks in “Woman in Love” in the context of pain, separation and silence:

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

13 : 2 February 2013

Mukul Kumar Sharma, M.A. (English), M.Phil., Ph.D. Candidate and Sanjit Mishra, Ph.D.

Jayanta Mahapatra: A Poet of Social-Cultural Concerns

Woman, what things
you would make me remember,
what would you make me do?

And, the poet declares conclusively in the same poem:

“And if on the endless blue waves of your
someone leaves a boat, a touch
In the darkened room
a woman
cannot find her reflection in the mirror
waiting as usual
at the edge of sleep
in her hands she holds
the oil lamp
whose drunken yellow flames
know where her lovely body hides.”

Her body is drunk with the flames of desires and she waits. The oil lamp aflame is the mirror image of her inner passion that consumes herself in the absence of any sharing. She emerges in the darkened room as a ghostly figure, a guilty thing.

Focus on Socio-Cultural Deterioration

The socio-cultural deterioration of the present generation has been a constant theme in many of Mahapatra's poems. He is in a state of fix and dives deep into the problem along with being concerned about the present state of India:

“What is wrong with my country?
The jungles have become gentle,

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

13 : 2 February 2013

Mukul Kumar Sharma, M.A. (English), M.Phil., Ph.D. Candidate and Sanjit Mishra, Ph.D.

Jayanta Mahapatra: A Poet of Social-Cultural Concerns

The women restless.

And history reposes between the college

girl's breasts...

... there stands

only a lonely girl, beaten in battle, all mine,

sadly licking the blood from my crazed smile"

[From *Slum*]

Jr. Martin C. Carroll has claimed that the chief function of any genre of literature is "to reflect with meaning the totality of contemporary human condition".⁴

Contemporary Social and Political Process

Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry is reflection of social process, for example, Naxalism, which is an Indian socio-political issue during 1970s. Let us examine Asif Currimbhoy's words on the socio-political conditions of Calcutta during the Naxal Period:

"The proximity of blood-thirsty violence rent the air, and before you knew it, it had pervaded the countryside, the classroom, the revolutionary, the intellectual, and the deprived... the fear crept over the entire city... Indiscriminate killing followed, terrorist appeared under the guise of Maoist reform, and law and learning lay shattered..."⁵

The violent young generation opts for the nefarious path of Naxalite violence. They feel that "the established order becomes obstruct to progress."⁶

In *India* (1979), Jayanta Mahapatra gives a vivid account of the Naxal Movement:

Why am I hurt still by the look in the hand of the

Graceful Naxal girl who appeared out of nowhere

that winter holding a knife as old as history.

In a mono-logical voice, the poet compares his 'reason' with "a prejudiced sorrow like Naxalism". Along with taking a straightforward stand, he considers Naxalism as a mass hysteria.

In *Judgement*, a vital social aspect gets reflected and that is within the scope of nature, "mountains burning with sky".

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

13 : 2 February 2013

Mukul Kumar Sharma, M.A. (English), M.Phil., Ph.D. Candidate and Sanjit Mishra, Ph.D.

Jayanta Mahapatra: A Poet of Social-Cultural Concerns

... too timid

to embrace the woman of his choice.

No One Can Choose the Manner of His or Her Living – Fatalism?

“Sleep comes and goes” but “no one can choose himself/ the manner of his living”. Possibly, Jayanta Mahapatra wants to highlight the basic pattern of life in Orissa where one has very little freedom “to embrace the woman of his choice” and asks for judgment to play a great role. “Time whispers like an old man” but nothing changes the old system/ value continues.

In *The Abandoned British Cemetery at Balasore, India*, Jayanta Mahapatra is concerned about the “vanished empire”:

This is history

I would not disturb it.

The ruins of stone and marble,

The crumbling wall of brick,

The coma of alienated decay.

How exactly should the archaic dead

Made me behave?

He remembers the ‘forgotten dead’ and he goes back to ‘a hundred and fifty years ago’:

I walked around them; thirty nine graves, their legends floating in twilight of baleful littoral the flaking history my intrusion does not animate.

But, Jayanta Mahapatra’s love and care for India does not stop here, it goes deeper and deeper showing a sense of being an Indian is an internal and abstract value:

“It is that mental unity where

differences melt.

It is in the author’s blood and

Mind.”⁷

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

13 : 2 February 2013

Mukul Kumar Sharma, M.A. (English), M.Phil., Ph.D. Candidate and Sanjit Mishra, Ph.D.

Jayanta Mahapatra: A Poet of Social-Cultural Concerns

Starvation and Hunger – Result of Social Discrimination

Mahapatra believes that starvation and hunger are the issues of social discrimination and inequality by which the Asian countries are haunted most and the human suffering is at its apex. The country and its politicians respond to this grave situation in a stronger like way and hence, deaths and diseases are in full progress on the earth and in the country like India. They are the all-time evils of the universe and hence, ‘hyenas are aware of the dying countryside around them.’ Mahapatra is conscious of the diseased and disfigured world around him. He has much to say about the world of lepers. They are generally seen squatting on stone steps of *ghats* and the temples. They are social outcasts, hence the sad plight. And, this is the world, a part of the social world which Mahapatra fails to know even in the bright sun:

“the mangled lepers will shuffle along
going home
their helpless looks.” [pp. 39]

The politics of the country is responsible for the tragic realities that encircle the common man. Mahapatra finds that we are living in highly politicized era today. He records the political treat in-

“The day stands like a mature Prime Minister.” [pp. 41]

High Sounding Speeches of Nehtas

Mahapatra thinks that the country insults itself through the high sounding speeches of its representatives. Corruption, pretense, deception, infidelity, lawlessness, superstitions all means a share in which a country is mercilessly drawn. This awareness ingenerates silence in the poet:

“I pick up the morning newspaper and see
how a nation goes on Insulting itself
with its own web of rhetoric.” [pp. 42]

Symbolism of Whore House

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

13 : 2 February 2013

Mukul Kumar Sharma, M.A. (English), M.Phil., Ph.D. Candidate and Sanjit Mishra, Ph.D.

Jayanta Mahapatra: A Poet of Social-Cultural Concerns

When he records his observation about a whore house that unmistakably appears in the poem “Morning Signs”, he comments on the beast-like male sensuality there in it. The poem also records other signs of the morning which aim at defining the disordered, disjoined social atmosphere. The morning signs are not pleasant ones; they are painful, nasty, disgusting. The poem “In the Fields of Desolate Rice” depicts ruinous aspects of social life. It describes the ‘desolate rice field’ as well as ‘desolate social field’. It is a comment on the sad plight of the people and the country groping in unabated darkness of uncertainty. When Mahapatra talks about Cuttack, his tone is bitter and painful. This is an attempt to understand social dilemma of the land and the place of common man in it. This land of Cuttack is contaminated by twentieth (20th) century diseases like corruption, dishonesty and disintegration.

Prophetic and Visionary

Bijay Kumar Das’s question to Mahapatra that his poetry seems to be prophetic at times, in an interview suggests that Mahapatra’s poetry has a touch of life with a visionary angle. Mahapatra’s answer to that question is worth quoting here. He says:

“Take the human mind, for example, it is packed with feelings we know nothing about, besides other unknowns: like images of people we have never seen, sounds of voices we have never heard, and places we have never ever visited. So, it is extremely difficult to give a precise or absolute meaning to many of our thoughts or actions. Can I say that poetry is the end all in my life? It is not in mathematics that I would insist: This only is what matters to me in life. I would like to believe life is something else besides the statements I make at times in my poems. And this is true. The workings of the brain are so complex that it is hard to make generations and order is not easy to achieve.”⁸

Mahapatra is right in his assertion for what he writes here or there in different poems is all what a common man and his poetry filled with. But, still after having a deeper glance over his major works it is seen that speculation is his most ambitious production and the poem “Relationship” is an extreme case in this category. It is not free of narrative element. It does reveal some autobiographical details but it is completely dominated by the philosophic, somber voice of the poet.

“The style of Mahapatra belongs to the Indian tradition of speculative poetry which silences the reader more than it excites him. A style of this kind easily admits abstractions, almost as if they were a matter of concrete experience. It ignores the time space specifics of the subject, the logic and progression

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

13 : 2 February 2013

Mukul Kumar Sharma, M.A. (English), M.Phil., Ph.D. Candidate and Sanjit Mishra, Ph.D.

Jayanta Mahapatra: A Poet of Social-Cultural Concerns

of perceptions and works through evocative sound patterns. Besides, it moves away from the life and language of everyday experiences. It has a generality about it, though not necessarily any universality; and yet it hints at a knowledge which has emerged from deep thinking and profound suffering. It is, in the complimentary sense of the term, a romantic style. It shows the poet's constant and serious engagement with the mystery of existence, with his Oriyan landscape and the mythology surrounds it."⁹

It is precisely this painful transformation, a withdrawal of the will, the power of visionary consciousness filling up the place the will had bent to its own purposes that we see in Mahapatra's poetry. Even the human body vanishes, giving up the centrality of location it had maintained. But, what happens next? The mind is gently consumed, from the edges, inwards:

“With his body, he loses body
pales into a place.
Nothing matters,
the river grows,
the hill takes a high face.”

“Mahapatra confronts the issue of identity that arises for each and every writer in India, the anguished need to define a self, out of the bottomless flow of time; to cut identity out of the sky's eternal vault.”¹⁰

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com

13 : 2 February 2013

Mukul Kumar Sharma, M.A. (English), M.Phil., Ph.D. Candidate and Sanjit Mishra, Ph.D.

Jayanta Mahapatra: A Poet of Social-Cultural Concerns

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com

13 : 2 February 2013

Mukul Kumar Sharma, M.A. (English), M.Phil., Ph.D. Candidate and Sanjit Mishra, Ph.D.
Jayanta Mahapatra: A Poet of Social-Cultural Concerns