

Jayanta Mahapatra's Poetic Skill: Symbols and Images

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to picturize the poetic skill of Jayanta Mahapatra reflected through symbols and images in his poetic world. Jayanta Mahapatra, who writes in free verse, irregular stanza pattern, uses the colloquial tone and he wants to explore the uncertainties and the intricacies of life. It also explains how he has adopted certain techniques to explore such themes as love, death, exploitation of women and projected the 'images of women in his poetry are unique as they exist without emotion and identity.

Keywords: Jayanta Mahapatra, Poetic Skill, Symbols, Images, Exploitation, Self-Identity, Emotional Sufferings, Man-Woman Relationship, Passionate.

Jayanta Mahapatra adopts certain techniques to explore the themes of love, death, exploitation of women. Like Eliot, measuring life with his coffee spoons, Mahapatra measures the silence in his poetry with symbols like rain, sleep and stone. Truly speaking, to establish the relationship between men and women, he brings in a number of images in his poetic world. The Images of women in Mahapatra's poetry are unique as they exist without any emotion. They exist without identity. They are not individuals.

Jayanta Mahapatra is said to have adopted the narrative technique to bring in the images of women. He generally narrates in the first person. The poet or the narrator will narrate everything. The women are known for their silence. Silence is the symbol of Mahapatra which he utilizes for portraying the images of women. He also makes use of the symbol of 'stone' to expose the passivity of women and also he makes use of typical Indian images like 'hives' and 'bees'. Mahapatra's poetry may not always be simple and sensuous but it is evocative. Contemporary situation forms the bedrock of his poetry. His preoccupation with the present-day life and society together with the past history and tradition has been expressed in two ways, by posing questions to himself and to the world. With the sole intention of exploring the relationship between man and woman which is wrought with the exploitation of woman in a male dominated society, he pictures the women as passionless tools who passively accept everything. They are victims and mere tools to satisfy the needs of the men. Women do whatever the world will let them do. Women are never referred to in the first person, but only in the impersonal third person. First person narration is vivid in most of his

poems. The narrative flows like a river carrying the odds and evens which echo the theme, song of life.

‘I’ plays a vital role in Mahapatra’s poems. This ‘I’ refers to the narrator who is a man. In his poems, it is the male personae that views women. Whenever the poems do not have first person narrators, the poet takes on the role of an observer of a commentator. In the poem entitled “Hunger”, the poet-protagonist speaks in the first person and is tortured by the desires of flesh. The fisher man – father speaks a few words, but the daughter is never allowed to speak. She is a passive, helpless tool and a victim of male lust. While presenting women as nameless creatures, he does project them as ‘silent creatures’ thereby achieving the eloquence through silence. They exist not only without names but also without voice. The very same image of another woman is well portrayed in the poem *The Whore House in a Calcutta Street*. Here also, the woman is passive and a mere money earning machine. The protagonist does not speak in the first person. But the experience is narrated by the poet. The whore, as a typical image of woman in Mahapatra’s poetry, is silent. She is passive and not an active sharer of the guilt. Hunger and male exploitation have driven her into the flesh trade. She too accepts it with stoic resignation.

Jayanta Mahapatra, like most of the Indian writers, writes in free verse. The stanza pattern is irregular, and the tone is colloquial. The poem *The Whore House in a Calcutta Street* is in a conversational tone and the poet invites a man to come to the whorehouse to realize his dreams and fantasies:

“The faces in the posters, the public
hoardings and who are there all together” (P.19)

He wants to identify himself and explore the uncertainties and the intricacies of life. To achieve his aims, he poses certain questions to himself and also to his characters. In a poem entitled “Women in Love” he asks certain questions to the women:

“Women, what things you would make
me remember.
What would you make me do” (P. 27).

Mahapatra explores the secret meaning and significance of love through innocent childlike questioning. By posing questions, like “can love grow old and tubercular with age?” he tries to solve the riddles and intricacies of love. As Mahapatra has put it, “Today’s poem utilizes a number of images and symbols to form a whole, leaving the reader to extricate himself with the valid meaning or argument from them” (42). He also believes that “a great poem let us embark on a sort of journey or voyage through symbols and attentions to encompass the human condition.

Jayanta Mahapatra writes:
“Perhaps I begin with an image or a

Cluster of images or as image leads to another, or perhaps the images belonging to a sort of group... The image starts the movement of the Poem” (Syal, P. 203).

His images are drawn “from two worlds – the exterior world of phenomenal reality and the surrealistic world. The way these two worlds are related is equally significant. The image for Mahapatra is not merely the primary pigment of poetry” (Lewis 62). It is almost his characteristic way of reacting to experience, ordering it and recording it. It becomes in his work ‘a single language, sometimes so hard for others to read or guess” (P.57). He is not interested in nature as Wordsworth and others do. But he is preoccupied with the human conditions. To expose the human condition, the forces of nature supply him apt metaphors. The poet describes nature in human terms as in the “Petals open like stiffened muscles / of your belief” (Peace, 1). Sometimes, the concrete is made abstract as in the poem, “The Night Fall”:

“Those giant trees that fought the wind
Like beliefs” (Waiting, P.3)

Also, the illumined hills are described as

“dazzling that carved that Sunset
in my pain” (Evening in a Rain of Rites, P.37).

He uses animal imagery to describe the nature of human terms. ‘Astral bodies are described in animal terms as in the moon running white among the cloud / like a jackal,

“Orion Crawls like a spider in the sky”
(Relationship, P.11).

Even the inanimate things take on an animal character: “The clock / stabling in a Cobra’s tongue across the air” (Relationship, P.19). Animal imagery is also useful in characterizing human responses:

“My memories are rats scampering in the
Dark” (Relationship, P.12)

and my longing sits.

“Silent like a grew owl” (Summer, P. 219)

A reverse strategy is to find “human virulent boils of pot on dead women and children” (Relationship. P.10) and crows “their uncommitted beaks” (Close the Sky, P.19). The poet handles the animal imagery to depict human responses and also to describe the astral bodies in human terms.

Inanimate things are portrayed as if they are having animal character. They are also endowed with attributes of living beings. Hence a rock has ‘tensed muscles’ (Relationship, P.9):

“Main street

Pounding hugely like to leaning art”

(The Blind Beggar, P.10)

The poet wants to establish the relationship between man and nature and likewise places have their sign in terms of human expression in phrases like “Konarka of the Soul” (Performance, P.13). Images of diseases are frequent in his poetry when he tries to express his anguish and takes the weapon of the imagery of diseases. In a story at the start of 1978 (Waiting, P.56) Rain is a regenerative symbol recurs frequently in a number of poems. Rain is a favourite metaphor for Mahapatra. His rain poems, “In a Night of Rain”, “A day of Rain “After the Rain” deal with the metaphor of rain more effectively. The rain accelerates desire in man and woman for physical union. If rain fuels the desire in man for sexual union, it also gives hope for a better tomorrow. Rain is not only a symbol but also a metaphor of life. He loves it as he loves his own life:

“In the end

I come back to the day and to the rain”

(In the fields of desolate Rise)

Mahapatra realizes himself as he brings in the imagery of rain. Not only questions but also silence is prevalent in Mahapatra’s poetry. Silence is an effective medium through which he can depict many things in life. As Ayyappa Paniker says on the use of silence in Mahapatra’s poetry in general and on the poem “Hunger” in particular:

“Silence, incidentally, is a word that gets endlessly repeated, one might say consecrated in Mahapatra’s poems. But nowhere has he made silence more eloquent than in this poem. The young man does not speak; even the fisherman speaks in a matter of fact line which has the ominousness of silence” (P.122).

Thus, Mahapatra’s images are suitable and controlled. They play a vital role in his poetry.

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