Reflection of Mystical Philosophy and Reflective Psychology in the Poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra

Dr. Suparna Ganguly
Assistant Professor in English
Kulti College
Kulti Burdwan.

Jayanta Mahapatra’s mature technique is evenly balanced by his personal vision. It is this vision that rouses the repressed promptings of the mind and the heart. The outcome is poetry that dwells on the value of mankind constantly explored in terms of philosophical concerns and psychological affinities. The void that exists between the poet and the reader, the disguised moments of feeling within is exploited thus:

I looked at the poem that said so much, and its words appeared to melt away into the whiteness of the page.

But what use is a poem, once the writing’s done?
Words looking for what, in the dark of the soul? (Life Signs 34)

This duplicity existing between a sense of familiarity and an indescribable strangeness has its answer remaining in the dark recesses of the psyche. Thus it is the poet’s deep-seated subjectivism which forms the touchstone of poetic diction. An excellent poet as Mahapatra is, his poetry is marked by a perceptive note of philosophy and psychology, the combination of which makes it come full circle. This is a difficult but satisfactory comprehension and critics like Bruce King share a similar opinion: It is a poetry of inner spaces, of psychology, of contradiction and renewed feelings of depression, guilt, desire, lust and attention (195).

A close look at the psyche of Mahapatra reveals that the wound of his Christian alienation and the resultant humiliation gave birth to a poet eager to establish his unity with the tradition and culture around him. Hence it is quite predictable that his mental and spiritual canvas would receive the rich tinge of Indian philosophy. The sharply reflective poet continues to wrestle with paradoxes—the written word and the unwritten sense of futility, the articulate and the inarticulate—to create an emotive cosmos out of the existential chaos.

A commendable combination of a realist and an imagist, Jayanta Mahapatra reflects on the exiled state of a man’s existence. Through an exploration of the visible world, the poet probes into the depths of the invisible psychology, the deeply personal thoughts which comprise his philosophy. Hence, quite obviously, Mahapatra’s psychological bias and philosophical outlook complement each other, making his poetry a complete whole. The miserable plight of modern man is described thus:

It is an exile.
Between good and evil
where I need the sting of death.
Where a country’s ghosts
pull my eyes toward birth. (A Rain of Rites 12)

The poet reflects his state of exile. ‘The mouldy village’, ‘the charred ruins’, ‘corpses’, ‘the ashes of the present’, the ‘squalid town’, his ‘drugged’ state imply his displaced condition. Fluctuating between good and evil, he seems to belong to none. He firmly believes that in this distressed situation, it is the all-pervasive death that would come to his rescue. His dreamy eyes continue to hope against hope of a phoenix-like revival of the country’s glorious past from the ashes of the present. In the poem The Abandoned British Cemetery at Balasore, India, the poet’s reflections upon entering a cemetery in which a number of young British lives lay buried, presents with a resigned, meditative poise, the bond between death and the self. Death has laid its ‘icy hands’ on the British conquerors and their tombs are only left...
behind frequented by lizards and scorpions. The terror of mutability is on the self and there is no escape:

through both past and present, the increasing young
into the final bone, wearying all truth with ruin.
This is the iron

rusting in the vanquished country, the blood’s unease
the useless rain upon my familiar window; (The False Start 71)

Amidst the silence of the thirty-nine graves, the poet’s reflections over the dead actually depict that eternal realization that it is death that gives meaning to life. It is such moments of heart rending silence which defines ‘the shapes of solitude’. Speaking of silence in Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets, Mahapatra himself says:

What appears to disturb me is the triumph of silence in the mind […] A poem makes me see out of it in all directions, like a sieve, and I am almost relieved at that all-important thought. (59)

The flux of life occupies an important place in Mahapatra’s domain of philosophy. He believes in life’s great paradox of stasis-in-movement and permanence in transience which is expressed thus:

Something has come into me without my knowing it.
Something (through the days) I’ve been powerless to stop.

All day and all night I am moved by myself;
only the tree that is there,
the axes of seasons in a derelict eye. (A Rain of Rites 34)

The inner-outer harmony is arrived at between the inner and outer landscape which makes the poet discover the perennial in the ephemeral. A poem of an enlightening philosophical depth—Lost—probes into the quest of the duality of the self, expressed through the bodily ‘you’ and the concealed ‘I’:

Here I have learnt to recognize you
at a distance, (Life Signs 35)

Lost in an experience of yogic rapture, the yogi-poet tries to arrive at a spiritual understanding by measuring out the ‘distance’ between the ‘you’ and the ‘I’, the external self subjected to pain and pleasure and the internal tranquillity. A ‘fateful encounter’ is accounted for by ‘some defect in a mechanical toy’—a blow to the innocent childhood faith in the process of growth, which is again restored. Thus, ‘like a misplaced watch’, the mystic identity of the inner ‘I’ continue to baffle the egoistic ‘you’, not knowing ‘where was I when I lost it’. Mahapatra’s psychological triumph lies in the mastery of the immeasurable silence over measurable words, epitomized by the all-enduring Indian woman:

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 lonely body hides (A Rain of Rites 7)
Placed in the cosmic sphere of the ‘darkened room’ of the modern world, the woman with the lighted lamp in her hand seeks her real identity. But her inability to ‘find her reflection in the mirror’, marks her as a missing person in the society. Her silent suffering devoid of any objective of existence and effaced of the consciousness of the self, affirms Mahapatra’s faith in the victory of the human resolution over external distress. Unable to fathom the distance between the visible and the invisible, the body and the spirit, she misses self-knowledge. But to put up with life, the sense of loss and solitude need the purgatory touch of the ‘drunken yellow flames’ of knowledge, better delineated as spiritual strength. It is only then that the essential being would be discernible.

It is through his attainment of the wisdom of life, the organic reality that he desires to negotiate with the cause of his sorrow that is death. Death is an undeniable reality. But it is possible to conquer death by raising oneself to the level of the deathless. Though it is difficult to advocate wisdom at the face of death, though death takes us back to the useless broodings of defeat and degeneration, still it need be comprehended that death is not synonymous to the end of life:

It is just a mirror
marching away solemnly with me, lurching
into an ancestral smell of rot, reminding me

of secrets of my own: (“Grass” Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets 63)

The poet apprehends that like the ‘scythe’ which terminates the life of the ‘bland heads’ of grass, he would also have to surrender with ‘childlike submissiveness’ to the scythe of death. The ‘dark dread’ of death as opposed to a more powerful communion with life, absorbs the egotistical self and this calls for purification. The realisation of the cause and effect operation, promotes all fear of the apparent meaninglessness of existence to an elevated stature of life where joy and sorrow, beauty and ugliness, victory and failure are equally communicable.

Mahapatra’s philosophical reflections reshape our ordinary perceptions and ‘apprehensions’ on ‘death’. Steeped in the depths of Indian philosophy, his secular and spiritual life diffuse in the pursuit of spiritual illumination. In an effort to measure death, what reaches his hands is an ever increasing strain between the humanistic dilemmas of affirmation and denial:

Again and again you look to the light,
hoping it would somehow find your kingdom,
but there beyond is the cold bank of darkness
where every man stands alone, for himself.

Like the fleeting clouds, you appear to chase
an invisible soul in the sky,
and something comes between you and the sky,
an impasse of a question without answers. (The False Start 74)

The principle of existence lies in the impasse of incertitude and for Mahapatra, it is this humble sense of uncertainty which can be felt at the heart of things—a trait so characteristic of the post-modernist criticism. The delusion of ordinary life and the blend of the opposites are the typical concepts of Indian aesthetics which have rendered a quality of suggestive philosophical mystery to Mahapatra’s poetry. This hard-won perspective in a world of indeterminacy and mystification helps him assert human behaviour in a more convincing manner:

To wait for purpose is to be devoid of meaning. (A Whiteness of Bone 35)

Traversing the mysterious labyrinths of the mental horizon, the poet is finally able to place the self in the context of the multitudinous culture. His poetic-philosophic concern
invests not only his poems but also human life with greater value and meaning. Mahapatra’s psychoanalytical study involves an exploration ‘in the museums of our guilt’ (*Relationship 13*) and thereby establish an affinity between the individual soul or spirit and the collective unconscious. In his award-winning book *Relationship*, the poet tries to locate his ultimate roots in the primaeval stones of the Sun Temple at Konark where the lost glory and heritage lay hidden. The poet desires to revitalize this lost glory by taking recourse to the myths of Orissa, the overwhelming sculptures, the ‘gandharvas’ and ‘apsaras’ all of which symbolize the mystery of life and death:

> Once again one must sit back and bury the face in this earth of the forbidding myth, (*Relationship 9*)

Ultimately, Mahapatra’s pilgrimage to the living Oriya past to realize the present comes full circle through the realization that he needs to surrender to the altar of his origins wherein rests the infinite myths of his race and the unceasing rhythm and zest of life:

> I know I can never come alive if I refuse to consecrate at the altar of my origins (*Relationship 18*)

The spirituality of the Indian poet with a Christian pedigree confirms his status to be that of a modern Hindu, a religious revivalist. The hidden psyche of the poet-rebel elevates the superstitious, god-fearing, withered dogmas of religion to a height of supreme consciousness of man’s inherent power and creativity. The poem *Myth* is intended to stand face to face with a ‘myth’ which ‘shifts/ swiftly from hand to hand, eye to eye’ (*A Rain of Rites 22*). The mysterious rituals, so long locked and scared away ‘into the dark, dank sanctum’, is now being confronted and coloured with a renewed and modern sensibility.

The thought-provoking philosophical outlook of the poet adds a new dimension to the concept of genesis. ‘The spirits of knowledge’ has its seeds in ‘the stony silence of the men’ and ‘the myth’:

> Maybe nothing came from anything, a long drawn-out yawn from nowhere. (*Random Descent 13*)

The apple ‘in the world’s foyer’ ‘roll down the road’ embracing within its arms the past and the present, reducing the poet to an infinitesimal speck in this cosmic flow. The only thing which matters is the identity of the poet in consonance with the myth and tradition which cannot be eroded by time. The mellowed psychology sounds clear when he expresses his intention to ‘Walk on. / But where?’ (*Random Descent 43*). No matter how powerful, confident, graceful be the ‘walk of wild feet’, but the destination is always unknown. Owing to its pluralist identity, an otherwise specific detail is rendered non-specific to encompass a broader socio-cultural ambience. Madhuri Dixit, the celebrated actress, operates as a multi-dimensional symbol of the entire country:

> With our hidden cruelties, we will wait, Madhuri until your pain assumes a brazen shape we can see, until the day before yesterday is the day after tomorrow – until your ageing womanhood becomes pregnant with youth, leaving behind a body that had lost its horse and riders, breasts humbled, in total silence. (*Random Descent 36*)

With the growth of the thoughtful poet, silence is redefined. It ceases to be an inability to correspond and emanates as a symbolic device of probing into the unknown, the arcane that can hardly be fathomed by the sensory world. Intensely aware of the elusiveness of silence, Mahapatra ventures to measure silence with the antiquity of stones, the myth of sleep and the cleansing effect of rain. ‘Rain’, as if, permeates the poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra and the poet has no hesitation in admitting “I think I have always written one poem. That is rain” (Jayanta Mahapatra in conversation with R. K. Swain) (*Swain 77*). The poet’s parched
existence in a decaying world makes him look at rain for the desired renewal. In an interview with Rabindra K. Swain, Mahapatra explains what rain signifies to him:

There are two things which connect human beings: what is above and what is below. The sky is above you and the earth beneath you and anything that connects earth and sky is rain. It is a bond you cannot miss. It has a process itself. It is a link. Therefore, rain is a linking process, and so, the very act of your living (Swain 44)

The poet’s origin lies in a land of silence where the mystery of living is stored in the engravings of the ancient stones. Stone, emerging as the ‘lingam’, depicts the people’s idea of Lord Shiva, the latent power and source of all creation. An awareness of the necessity to bring the past back to life, makes the poet invoke the stones – whether they be ruins of temples or the phallus of Shiva:

there I stand, close to the stone,
trying to smear it with blood
to give it life, (Waiting 23)

Meena Alexander explains the relevance of stone in Mahapatra’s poetry: Stone is crucial to Mahapatra’s 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 (42). In a poem entitled The Stones, its import is justified in such lines as:

Stones, whose eyes have had no expression in them
Stones, like governments, who have no honour at all
Stones, whose long arms easily batter and kill (Random Descent 47)

With the passage of time, the glory and pride of the age-old stones have been defamed. But, it is the stones which will continue to remind us that ‘we haven’t lost our minds’. Thus ‘we will let them live’ since amidst the holocaust around us, the stones only retain the mystery of survival. Truly speaking, stone stems from the earth and draws sustenance from it. Naturally, it is the stone – the poet’s consciousness of the self – which will unite him and establish his roots with the vast world:

. . . . At the touch of stone
the immensity becomes your own: gods, fathers, sons,
binding into earth, becoming one and centre. (A Rain of Rites 13)

Time plays a paradoxical role – it heals the wounds caused by life’s sufferings and helps man realize the mystery of death through an acceptance of the timelessness of time, which is nothing but understanding life better. It is the poet’s acute concern with time that makes him measure death with the silence of stones:

And who would not sharpen his limp present on stone,
who would not take a few steps
into that garden that sleeps with dreams in its flowers (Burden of Waves and Fruit 56)

It is the silence both within him and without, which the poet accumulates and internalizes to defend him from the realities around by uniting dream with reality.

The ultimate appreciation of the philosophy of existence issues from the poet’s description of dust:

It’s dust, colouring those secret horizons
of the bone day after day,
true prophet of life’s sunset. (Bare Face 31)

It is in the dust that the mythic, the historic and the present unite – an open secret, the comprehension of which is a rare elevation of the inner self.
Mahapatra’s philosophical concern strikes a keynote with the description of a ‘rabid civilization’ caught in the entrails of a total solar eclipse. Placed against a backdrop of darkness, the poet’s temper also strikes the darkest note of caution. The panic caused by the eclipse in both the human and animal world make them synonymous—the simple pilgrims left destitute like hunted dogs and the cautious movement of the crocodile under water equated to the frightened Brahmin priest in the temple. But above all, the poet’s philosophical insight reigns supreme when he portrays his profound understanding of the man-god correlation. In the temple of ‘Jagannath’—the protector of the whole universe—the banner of the Lord is prepared out of the blanched human skin. The barbaric treatment of the human lot coincides with their ever believing submissiveness to the insensitive God, an astonishing diffusion of crude diplomacy and god-fearing religiosity. The poet’s study of the fundamental nature of reality and existence is simply ‘the disrobing of human values’ in an ever-eclipsed state of survival.

At times, a hue of self-pity, though melancholic in nature, lay bare the beauty of the poetic soul:

A lonely pigeon floats past
like a spirit
over twenty-four docile sheep being herded
to the municipal slaughter house. (*Burden of Waves and Fruit* 20)

The secularist bearing of the poet from an existential standpoint finds expression in:

In the new temple man has built nearby,
the priest is the one who knows freedom,
while God hides in the dark like an alien. (*Random Descent* 32-33)

In this irreligious milieu, the steering of fake religiosity has come to the hands of the imposters, reducing God to a nonentity. Freedom, in the real sense, is therefore a far cry for the common man. In the poet’s endeavour to map the psychic landscape of his inner world, the physical gets coloured with metaphysical intentions, the material facts get transformed to spiritual conceptions. A dawn at Puri, the sacred place of pilgrimage, awakes our consciousness to ‘a skull on the holy sands’ (*A Rain of Rites* 28). The tension between such opposing realities as ‘skull’ and ‘holy’ transcends the physical to philosophical status. ‘Skull’ signifies the dearth of healthy values of life. A classic dealing of archaic rituals with an enlightened sensibility, Mahapatra unearths the deep seated tension in our unconscious between rationality and education on one hand and faith and religion on the other. The ‘white-clad’ widows bereft of all dreams and with their indifferent austerity know only how to wait patiently for death. The eradication of their individual identity with the death of their husbands has reduced their lives to one of abiding lifelessness. Mahapatra chooses the concepts of ‘karma’ and ‘moksha’ from Hindu philosophy and metaphysics to bring to the forefront the paradigm of social exploitation. In the opinion of K. Ayyappa Paniker, the various characters making their presence in the Puri poems like the temple, the priest, the beggars, the lepers and the crows rise before us in all their objective reality and concreteness and then slowly transform themselves, almost imperceptibly, into monument-like images and symbols. A persuasive appeal in favour of stoicism becomes evident when, confronted with death, the poetic persona, ‘hunched and trembling’, rhetorically asks:

Which is the wisdom I could use? (*A Whiteness of Bone* 18)

But the ‘silenced shout of a child’ which ‘drifts into its mother’s arms’ makes him ‘learn to let fall/ those words with casual indifference’. It is in this clear-eyed acceptance of a shadowy conviction, wherein Mahapatra’s mystery holds sway. Brooding on the knowledge of our bones, the mother of creation hatches the ultimate truth of life which the poet wants to perpetuate in the notes of the shepherd’s flute:

Breathe softly into your wooden flute,
Shepherd. Through your notes
you would let my death live, *(A Whiteness of Bone 61)*

Standing on the threshold of death, the age-old tenant need to vacate the earthly body of all obsessions and references—an intensity of vision which makes us reminiscent of W.B. Yeats. Such philosophical statements as ‘deep inside, acceptance of time turns lies to truths’ *(Temple 14)* further enrich the graph of Mahapatra’s truth-seeking consciousness. Mahapatra’s poetry is a tireless endeavour to trace his ultimate philosophical-metaphysical roots through a final awareness of man’s divinity:

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mysterious inheritance
in which roots stick out here and there from the dung,
of broken empires and of vanquished dynasties,
and of ahimsa’s whimpers;
for before I go to sleep
or go into the unknown in me:
this house of blind windows built inside,
doesn’t the fear it provides accelerate
our happiness? *(Relationship 34)*
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A willing inheritor of the ‘mysterious inheritance’ of his country’s past, the poet, seeks to establish a relationship between the past and the present, a vivacious affinity with the human cosmos. His meditation on the psychic level enables him to undertake a journey from an outer to inner vision of self identification. The urge to capture the denotation of life makes him probe from the conscious to the sub-conscious level of his mind. Consequently, Mahapatra’s contemplation on such psychological experience as sleep and dream is brain storming. He describes sleep to be that undeniable reality ‘which protects the shores of life from savage storms’ *(Relationship 21)*, ‘a coarse cage that can hold a larger life’, ‘the hiding-place without beginning or end’ and above all ‘the largest circle that transcends/ the angles of man’s consciousness’. In the hands of this thoughtful poet, sleep is transcended to the level of mythic happiness, the begetter of joy and harmony. The poet’s capability and confidence to grow beyond his own self and reach out to a greater self blended with a magnificent tradition, find utterance:

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Is anything beyond me that I cannot catch up? *(Relationship 38)*
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Mahapatra’s poetry is responsible to his own conscience and his motherland Orissa bringing about an integration of the inner self and outer reality, proving to be a happy departure in the era of post-colonial Indian English poetry. It is the role of a poet to be a prophet of truth and an illuminator of cognizance. Jayanta Mahapatra’s poetry poses a challenge to our very being in discovering the basic human capacity of the self. This final ambition is achieved by means of transmuting the personal to the philosophical and psychological analysis. Mahapatra’s philosophy rests on the contention that our way of life is the way of art. His ingrained sadness from childhood has made him perceive that life is not linear but has to be lived in a circle. Study of Physics helped him in query on mystery – that between life and death, between straight line and a circle, between understandable and ununderstandable, between inner and outer world, between self and other. A study of his philosophy and psychology reveals his poems to be a true reflection of a time-tested consciousness and a ripened sense of existence. An admirable combination of mystical philosophy and reflective psychology imparts a special uniqueness to Mahapatra’s poetry.
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