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# Spectrum of Varied Themes in the Poems of Jayanta Mahapatra and his Contribution to Indo- Anglian Poetry

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## Introduction

Jayanta Mahapatra is one of the major Indo- Anglian poets. His place is substantial among the Indian poets who write poems in English. He shows as great a command of English language as Nissim Ezekiel, Ramanujan and Keki N. Daruwalla. He was born in 1928 in the city of Cuttack in the state of Orissa. He became lecturer in Physics in Ravenshaw College, Cuttack. Vilas Sarang points out that Jayanta Mahapatra is one of the unusual stories in the history of Indo – Anglian poetry. It is strange, indeed, that an eminent professor of Physics and an Oriya poet, not only wrote in English but wrote with dignity and distinction. Jayanta Mahapatra once admitted that he is, "an Oriya poet who incidentally writes in English" (Raveendran 11). Vilas Sarang adds his opinion to it: "Indeed, Mahapatra effortlessly 'translates' a profoundly Indian spirit into English" (Sarang 15). He began writing English poetry quite late at the age of forty. However he produced ten volumes including the book - form and the poems published in foreign journals. His major poetic volumes are: *Cloze the Sky, Ten by Ten (1971), Svayamvara and Other Poems (1971), A Father's Hours (1976), A Rain of Rites (1976), Waiting (1979), The False Start (1980), Relationship (1980), Burden of Waves and Fruit (1988)* and *Temple (1989).* His poetry became popular not only in India but also in the various parts of the world. The cities such as Chicago, Victoria, Manchester and Melbourne appreciated his poems even before the recognition by India. Later on, when he is recognized at home, the Indian government honored him with Sahitya Akademi Award in 1981 for his poetic Volume *Relationship.*

## Wide Range of Themes

A wide spectrum of themes is depicted by Jayanta Mahapatra in his poems. His thematic concerns are various and he handled these varieties of themes like a skilled master. The excellence of language and words used by him in his poems matches with the significance of his themes.

> "In his poetry, both theme and technique go together as he experiments with language poem after poem in trying to acquire inwardness with it. He is capable of using English language with passionate precision that helps him to establish his identity as India's foremost poet in English" (Das 44).

Unworthy, ordinary and trivial words find no place in his poems. Only the significant words according to the theme and dignified words occur in his poems. It is quite natural that his various poems have the features of the culture of Orissa. The Orissa landscape, its cultural history and

background, the social life of Orissa and the rites and rituals of the people of Orissa constitute the important and significant theme of his poetry. This is the best example of his regional outlook. However, the use of his themes and treatment of language is universal. His poetry is neither narrow, nor limited as far as themes are concerned. Besides, Mahapatra deals with various other themes in his poems. This includes human relationships, Indian social problems, love, sex, marriage, morality, human nature and Mother Nature. Thus, it is quite clear that the thematic range of Mahapatra's poetry is wide enough to be called universal and appreciated.

**The Orissa Landscape and Use of English Language**

Jayanta Mahapatra deals with Orissa landscape in his various poems. These poems are *Dawn at Puri, Taste for Tomorrow, Slum, Evening Landscape by the River* and *Events*. Among all these poems *Dawn at Puri* is the most conspicuous, the most realistic and the most interesting poem. It presents the endless crow noises, a skull lying on the holy sands and,

> "White-clad widowed Women
> past the centers of their lives
> are waiting to enter the Great Temple" (*Dawn at Puri,* OUP 14).

Similarly, *Taste for Tomorrow* also depicts a scene at Puri with crows making noice. It has a very wide street, with its lepers and religious people thronging at the door of the temple. Puri figures prominently in various poems of Mahapatra. The temples of Puri and Konarak also have a impressive place in his poems. Cuttack, Bhubneshwar and Puri forms the background of his several poems. As far as language is concerned Mahapatra faces a kind of dilemma of choosing language for his poems. He, once, voiced this dilemma:

> "I am in love with English. And then, my schooling was in English and I learnt my language from British English masters – mainly from English novels; so, blame H. Rider Haggard and Edgar Rice Burroughs and Ballantyne from whom I caught the first delight of words gravid with meaning. Further, I feel I can express myself better in English than in Oriya. And, I have done a lot of translations in verse from the Oriya" (Mahapatra 21).

**Oriya History and Culture**

In some other poems, Mahapatra deals with Orissa landscape, its culture and the ancient history of Orissa. These poems are: *The Orissa Poems, Orissa Landscapes,* and *Evening in an Orissa Village.* M.K. Naik rightly asserts:

> "Mahapatra's poetry is redolent of the Orissa scene and the Jagannatha temple at Puri figures quite often in it" (Naik 207).

His powerful imagery and careful use of words creates such an impression on the mind of the readers as if the reader himself has visited Orissa and has observed all scenes, situations and people there. Mahapatra's treatment of the landscape imagery makes the readers feel that they are transported to that region of the country. One of the best examples of such kind of landscape

imagery is Mahapatra's poem *Evening Landscape by the River*. The scene in this poem is adjacent to the river in Puri where cremation of dead takes place. Here one can witness death all around and it highlights the futility of life. Here the general atmosphere is gloomy and may be the poet is visualizing his own death and that is why sadness remains alive in the surroundings. The mood of sadness is evident in the very opening lines of the poem:

> "This is the kind of sadness which closes the eyes.
> Here the memory for faces of the dead never
> appears" (*Evening Landscape by the River,* OUP 22).

This is a sad poem by Jayanta Mahapatra but it has sharply constructed imagery.

**Themes of Sex, Sexuality and Social Concerns**

In the earlier phase of his poetic career, Jayanta Mahapatra deals with the themes of Sex, Sexuality and later on he diverted himself toward the social concerns. M.K. Naik points out in this connection:

> "His most characteristic note is one of quiet but often ironic reflection mostly concerning love, sex and sensuality in the earlier poetry and the social and political scene in some of the later poems. His style has an admirable colloquial ease, punctuated by thrusts of striking images as, for instance, 'his lean-to opened like wound' and 'the one wide street/lolls out like a giant tongue.' His muted brooding occasionally results in extremes of either excessively cryptic statement of verbal redundancy and in weaker moments he is seen echoing other poets, as in the Eliotesque 'mornings/Like pale yellow hospital linen'; but his better work indicates a poetic voice which promises to gather strength in the years to come" (Naik 207).

One of his most significant poems in this connection is *Hunger*. This poem depicts the theme of sexuality and poverty. In fact sexuality and poverty are here interlinked. This is a poem about a hungry fisherman who lives with his hungry daughter. For the sake of their poverty, hunger and money, the daughter has to resort to prostitution. A customer visits her compelled by his hunger of sexual urges. The fisherman even tells lies that her daughter has just turned fifteen:

> "I heard him say: My daughter, she's just turned fifteen...
> Feel her. I'll be back soon; your bus leaves at nine.
> The sky fell on me, and a father's exhausted wile.
> Long and lean, her years were cold as rubber.
> She opened her wormy legs wide. I felt the hunger there,
> the other one, the fish slithering, turning inside." (*Hunger*, OUP 24).

He invites the customer to 'feel' his daughter and also to finish the business soon as the bus would be leaving at nine. As soon as the fisherman leaves the girl opens her 'wormy legs' and the costumer feels hunger there. The hunger is here of the two kinds, the hunger of the sexual urges and the hunger of the belly. This poem is based on true incident and it presents a true plight of poverty and miserable life.

**Sexuality and Prostitution in *The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street***

*The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street* more elaborately presents the theme of sexuality and prostitution. Here the customer wants to indulge in his fancies. He has watched the beautiful girls on the hoardings and the posters in the streets and public places which arouse sexual urges in him. To satisfy his urges he visits whorehouse in a street of Calcutta. Here he hopes to get a number of beautiful prostitutes whose faces resemble the beautiful faces of the posters which he has seen in the posters and hoardings. He is happy that he is getting this opportunity to see those beautiful girls. At the same time he is guilt conscious as he is visiting a notorious place and ill – famed house. However, he chose to enter the house to satisfy his sexual urges. He also wants to learn something more about women. As far as the prostitute is concerned, like a professional, she did everything to please her customer. She also betrays her profession when she says to her customer to,

> "Hurry, will you? Let me go,
> and her lonely breath thrashed against your kind.
> (*The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street*, Poetry Magazine 143).

In this poem, the relationship between a customer and a prostitute is depicted in the most realistic manner. The psychological issue is also raised by Mahapatra in this poem. The setting and the environment of the poem is familiar. Even then the treatment of the theme in this poem is simply fascinating. At the same time the poem also have some social implications. The profession of prostitution would continue even without the concern of poverty. However, it could become more hygienic and safe from the health point of view as depicted in this poem.

**Psychological and Philosophical Themes**

The mental capacity and the poetic caliber of Jayanta Mahapatra are proved by him as he has originated various poems with several different themes. He has also written a number of psychological, reflective and philosophical poems. These poems are: *The Logic, Grass, The Exile, The Abandoned British Cemetery at Balasore, Total Solar Eclipse* and *The Moon Moments.* These poems are the most impressive psychological poems written by him. *Total Solar Eclipse* depicts both the approaches – the scientific approach as well as the superstitious approach. The Scientific approach is indicated by the movement of the moon in between earth and sun. And, the Superstitious approach is hinted by the reference of fearsome Brahmin priest:

> like the fearsome Brahmin priest in the temple….
> using darkness to be a portent of the gods
> who had just revealed a last occasion
> to hide the disrobing of human values
> by a rabid civilization. (*Total Solar Eclipse,* Life Signs 22).

The superstitious Brahmin priest is here treating the dark sun as a 'portent of the gods.' He is trying to make the gods happy who would be inflicting some catastrophe on the mankind out of their anger. It will be the punishment for human beings for their sins. The poet also believes that

the solar eclipse can be regarded as "a disrobing of human values by rabid civilization." The poem has a variety of psychological and philosophical scenes. Other than these profound ideas, this poem has a rich animal imagery of cobra, the hyena, the vultures, the sparrows and the crocodile which are the symbols of life and death.

**Philosophical Aspect of *The Moon Moments***

*The Moon Moments* also have some philosophical and realistic elements. It has realistic effect in the lines such as:

> "Those women talking outside have clouds passing across their eyes"
> (*The Moon Moments,* OUP 36).

These lines have the feeling of social concern which is related to the socialism and the doctrine of brotherhood and love. These ideals are difficult to attain. The poem have a psychological value also as the poet says,

> "How can I stop the life I lead within myself--
> The startled, pleading question in my hands lying in my lap
> while the gods go by, triumphant, in the sacked city at midnight?"
> (*The Moon Moments,* OUP 36).

The inner soul of the poet is asking him questions and he is walking alone in the street trying to find the answers of these questions. While he is alone his mind philosophizes:

> "Always there is a moon that is taking me somewhere."
> (*The Moon Moments,* OUP 36).

Here the ideals of a philosophic mind are evident. Man always speaks of social ideas and values, but not from his heart. In this poem, the poet utters the true and noble ideas straight from his heart. The style of the poem and the treatment of the subject totally suit the dignity of the theme. *Total Solar Eclipse* and *The Moon Moments* are the poems which have the rich vocabulary and here the poet establishes himself as a noble mind and a great scholar.

**Realistic Elements in *The Exile***

*The Exile* is again a philosophical poem but this is a poem which is best known for its realistic elements. Various well known and the real things of everyday life are depicted in this poem. Land's distance, the hills charred by the heat of the sun, the corpses burning on the funeral pyres, the old and ailing parents, the squalid town, the long - haired priest of Kali are such realistic elements in the poem which are true to life and are recognized by everyone. The best philosophical line of the poem is:

"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. (*The Exile,* A Rain of Rites 12).

Here the soul of the poet is torn between good and evil. The old age concept of tussle between good and evil creates the scene of philosophy. The elements of realism and surrealism can be clearly seen in this poem. In fact, in blending of these two elements, *The Exile* can be named in the category of the poems like *Total Solar Eclipse* and *The Moon Moments.*

**Heart – Rending Silence in *The Abandoned British Cemetery at Balasore***

In the poem *The Abandoned British Cemetery at Balasore,* the poet enters an abandoned cemetery where the dead bodies of young British are lying neglected. Nobody visits to see them except the lizards and scorpions. It is a silent place but this silence is heart – rending:

"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).

The silence in the cemetery is more troublesome for the poet than the death of the young persons. In *Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets*, Mahapatra himself admits:

> "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" (Parthasarthy 59).

Such deaths at last give way to the profound thoughts. The poet here satirizes the narrow – mindedness of people. He tells that an iron – rusted anchor was lying buried in the sand in the cemetery. In the distant future, it is quite possible that people might start worshipping the anchor. In the eyes of future generations this anchor might acquire the status of deity.

**Imagist Poetry**

Inspired by the Imagist Moment of early twentieth century, which was started by Ezra Pound, Jayanta Mahapatra also wrote some Imagist poems. *A Summer Poem, A Missing Person and Dawn at Puri,* are the imagist poems. This kind of poetry required use of free rhythms, concreteness and a conciseness of language and imagery. One of the most prominent imagist poems of Mahapatra is *A Summer Poem.* It is a very short poem which contains various images which are concrete but not connected to each other. In the opening of the poem, there is somber wind blowing. The priests of the temple are shown chanting in loud voices. Today they are chanting with louder voice than that of usual daily chanting:

"Over the soughing of the sombre wind
priests chant louder than ever;
the mouth of India opens" (*A Summer Poem,* OUP 8).

Thus the country here is identified with the chanting priests and the poet is making fun of them. Crocodiles have moved into the deep waters and heaps of rubbish is seen smoldering in the morning sunlight. Among these disconnected images, an intimate picture of a "good wife" is presented in the last lines of the poem:

"The good wife
lies in my bed
through the long afternoon;
dreaming still, unexhausted
by the deep roar of funeral pyres" (*A Summer Poem,* OUP 8).

The good wife is also used here as irony. She is good as she is doing harm to nobody. She is an Indian wife waiting for her husband lying in the bed. Perhaps she is not happy in her married life. And she keeps lying in her bed, dreaming, and hearing deep and loud voices coming from the funeral pyres nearby. Thus, this poem fulfills all the requirements of Imagist poetry. The rhythm is free, the images are concrete, and the poem is concise. The wonderful use of symbolism is also evident in this poem.

**Conclusion: Jayanta Mahapatra's Contribution to the Indo – Anglian Poetry**

When all the above stated facts are considered, it is absolutely right to say that Jayanta Mahapatra is one of the major Indo – Anglian poets. His contribution to the literature, especially to the Indo – Anglian poetry is quite substantial. He could be ranked among the world's best Indo – Anglian poets as far as themes of his poems and his treatment of them are concerned. He made his own place among the other major Indo – Anglian poets such as Nissim Ezekiel, Ramanujan and Keki N. Daruwalla. Perhaps, it is because of the fact that he shows great command on English language. Other reason behind his success is his originality in the subject matter and use of suitable words. He falsifies the general belief of English writers that Indian should not write in English language. In fact, Jayanta Mahapatra is the only poet whose sensibility and upbringing is totally Indian and yet has written highly successful poems in English language. His way of enlargement of themes in his poem, the originality in his treatment of subject, use of suitable words and phrases and the beautiful use of imagery are the most important contributions of Jayanta Mahapatra to the Indo – Anglican poetry. Sometimes his imagery becomes realistic, sometimes surrealist, and sometimes symbolist. M. K. Naik rightly asserts in this connection:

> "An intensive scrutiny of Mahapatra's imagery reveals that his images are dawn from two worlds viz., the exterior world of phenomenal reality and the surrealistic world and the way these two worlds are related is equally significant. The image is for Mahapatra not merely what Wyndham Lewis called, the primary pigment of poetry; it is almost his characteristic way of reacting to experience, ordering it and recording it" (Naik 104).

Sexuality and sensuality are also the part of his some poems. However, he never makes them vulgar. By incorporating all this major factors, he enriched and enlarged the scope and range of Indo – Anglian poetry.

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