

JAYANTA MAHAPATRA THE CONFSSIONAL MAN AND THE POET.

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ABSTRACT

Jayanta Mahapatra is one of the rising stars on the firmament of this species of Indian poetry. His work is of such intrinsic worth that he had already come to be regarded as the forth great poet writing in Indian English today. The rest are Nisim Ezekiel, A.K. Ramanujan, Kamala Das. The poetry of these new poets voices the tragic plight and sorrows of the Indian people and the contemporary Indian milieu and reality, are also universalized and generalized. This topic attempts at a study of the poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra, his ironic treatment with superb use of imagery with reference - to some of the more representative poems in the perspective of his commitment to a personal vision embedded in the materials practices, values of oriya culture and rituals of some people of India. The idiom of Mahapatra's poetry is governed by an acute awareness of the cultural and socio-political ethos of his native place, his vision transcends all national boundaries to achieve a universal significance. This given problem aims at exploring the Imagery and Irony in the poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra to substantiate the contention that the images of locale, eventually build his visionary world characterized by pain and suffering, woman, children exploitation, social injustice, superstition, Pseudo – religious traditions etc. It will also examine the poems of Jayanta Mahapatra in terms of the embodiment of oriya consciousness and suggests that the authenticity of the poetry of J. Mahapatra lies in his keen perception of the physical reality and his deftness in nativizing the English language to embody the soul of an Indian milieu. The enormous contribution to the growth of Indian poetry in English, although he sporadically ventured into the realms of fiction; He will be remembered primarily for his poetry, his use of Irony and Imagery on love, sex, rituals and social injustice voicing democratic mode.

Keywords: superstition, exploitation, social injustice, love.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most widely known and published Indian English Poets of our time is Jayanta Mahapatra. He is one of the first Indian English poets to have been honoured both at home and abroad. He is a prolific poet. Like Nissim Ezekiel and A.K. Ramanujan; he is widely read and

discussed both at home and abroad. But unlike Ezekiel and Ramanujan Mahapatra is difficult to read for obscurity, complexity and allusiveness in poetry. He is rather in the company of Shiva Kumar and N. Daruwalla creating continue images and learned vocabulary that immediately set him a class apart from most of his contemporaries. At the same time in his desire to acclimatize and indigenous tradition to English language and create a new Indian English in idiom, he shares some of the concerns of the well known Indian English in idiom, he shares some of the concerns of the well known Indian English poets of the our time. Therefore, to study Mahapatra in isolation seems to be as difficult task, especially when he has influenced a number of contemporary Indian English poets and brought recognition to this new poetry by winning the first ever award by the National of Letters for his book of verse "Relationship" in 1981. In order to study his poetry in its proper perspective one should take the background and development of Indian English poetry into consideration to arrive at a balanced judgment. That is why I have taken the background of Indian English poetry into consideration to facilitate my evaluation of Jayanta Mahapatra as a contemporary Indian English Poet.

There was certainly something radically different in Mahapatra's poetry that there was a decisive shift from the trend set by such poets as P. Lal, Nissim Ezekiel, A.K. Ramanujan and R. Parthasarathy. This change as Mahapatra himself reflects was constituted of " a strong stand on language", "new modes of expression", " the need to invest (his) own legends" and above all" the ideas of the self", which served as the main reference, point in his poetry. Reflecting on his beginning as a poet Mahapatra says:

"It was apparent to me that I was not writing the kind of poems in which meaning was stated clearly and explicitly and that this poetry did not have a sharp focus was what the critic has in mind when he commented on my book. In order works, this poetry had no flat statements. What I was perhaps trying to do was to put together images symbols and Irony so that the reader could draw the implicit connection for himself."

Born in 1928 in Cuttack, Jayanta Mahapatra was trained as a physicist. Dilly-dallying with photography and then with short fiction, he began writing poetry. Born and brought up in Orissa, he might have written in his mother tongue Oriya, thought of course, he did not for several good reasons. But he comments on his choice thus. "I am In love with English and then, my schooling was in English and I learnt my language from British School masters mainly from English novels". Further he feels that he can express himself better in English than in Oriya.

Mahapatra was twice removed from his immediate surrounding first, he was born into a Christian family in predominantly Hindu society and second, he wrote in on acquired medium, English which was conventionally considered not adequate to encompass the cultural spirit of his native land. Yet the themes which dominate his poetry are related to such stark realistic of India as hunger myths, rituals, sexuality, spirituality the self and the eternity. His poetry describes the local, its environs and landscape or the relationship of his self to his land. Hence, in this study

emphasizes on the need of analyzing and evaluating the form and the vision of his poetry in the perspective of the locale, in terms of the images drawn from the geographical, social and cultural sources of native land of Orissa. The place with all its ethos and myths, its lives and beliefs, superstitions and transitions has been governing factor of Mahapatra's perception and visions.

In many of his autobiographical statements articulated in his short prose pieces and interviews, Mahapatra has repeatedly and candidly said that when he started writing poetry did not go beyond a few poems of Wordsworth, Yeats and Shelly prescribed in the school syllabus. At heart he is a romantic, only his intellect sharpened by the profession of teaching physics won't let him indulge in it. In his poetry one feels the presence of "the still, sad music of humanity" of Wordsworth, the sweeping typical grace of Shelly and the sensuousness of Keats. He has always remained close to the romantic notion of the poet inescapable presence in the poem. Though his property does not lack to the distanced and detached self of an Ezekiel, it nevertheless embodies in such a self a deep subjectivity that sets in apart from contemporary Indian poetry in English.

The element of subjectivity helped him to relate himself to his milieu and landscape in a delicate way never done before in Indian English poetry- the exploration of the inner self in intricately woven with his childhood experiences as much as with the Oriya fairy-tales, myths, legends and the great Indian epics. Along with these sources close to his locale, he updated himself with a voracious reading of modern classics of the world. The tight-knit family life, the rites and rituals associated with the cyclic agricultural seasons the rich tradition of arts and crafts and an easy, quiet pace of life are some of the major Orrisan elements that recur in terms of irony, imagery, confessional mode, metaphor and symbol. Trying to express the appeal of Mahapatra's poetry to eastern readers, Norman Simms says that specific local customs of Orrisa, in his poetry

"One constantly catches the irony, images and potentialities of a contemporary western sense of the myth of the eternal turn".

Jayanta Mahapatra, like many other Indian poets writing in English is bi- lingual. Before taking to writing English, he had been writing in Oriya, his mother tongue and his oriya poetry also ranks very high. He has also translated in to English the works of a number of noted Oriya poets. Thus his 'Countermeasures" (1973) is a collection of poems of Soubhagya Misra, translated from Oriya. The path of an Indian poet writing in English is beset with a number of difficulties. The genuineness of his sensibility and his language are like doubtful and he often resorts to devices, both in his mother and manner, which may be called "gimmicks" as so many attempts 'to sell' Indian English poetry abroad. Often there is distortion of syntax and use of unusual words, phrases and imagery to startle the readers and create an impression of Indianans. He is self conscious that he is writing in a foreign tongue and so his expression is often laboured and forced. There is too much of intellection resulting in the lack of emotional depth. Only bi-lingual poets have been able to avoid such pitfalls.

Mahapatra's sensibility is essentially Indian, but he does not create the impression of Indianness by bringing in such traditional items as tigers, snake, snake charmers, jugglers, crocodiles etc. he is really Indian because he does not consciously try to be Indian and thus is able to avoid many a hackneyed cliché and posture. His Indianness is seen at its best in his poem about Orissa, where the local and regional is raised to the level of the universal "Orissa Landscape', evening in a Orissa village', 'Dawn at Puri' etc. are Oriya first, and therefore, Indian too. Of how many other Indo-English poets could we say something like this with equal validity? The sun of the Eastern coast of India shines through his poems Mahapatra, 'a child of the sun and the sea', delights in involving the God of fire and the God of water in poems like 'sunburst', 'The Exit', Indian summer poem', 'this stronger', 'My Daughter' and 'the Beggar take sit as solace' Puri is a living character in several of these poems. The temple, the priest, the beggar, the fisherman, the crow- these rise before us in all their objective reality and concreteness and then slowly transform themselves almost imperceptibly, into monument like images, symbols, giant confessional mode and outstanding symbols. 'Taste for tomorrow', for example is a vignette of Puri with a number of such symbols of reality.

In such poem he is an Oriya poet first, but he is Indian too. What is happening in Puri in the quoted above is typical of Indian as a whole. Similarly 'Bazaar 3 p.m. in Orissa' is about Orissa, but it is also about India as a whole. "The prostrating Woman' 'the crawling people', the exhausted Rickshaw puller, are not merely Oriya, they are Indian also. Hunger and starvation, which characterize the life of the Indian poor, form the theme of a number of Mahapatra's poems.

Poverty, hunger and starvation have been chronic in India and they are the most significant faced of the life of the Indian Masses. They also constitute a major theme in Mahapatra's poetry. The theme is studied from various angles and points of view and poignant realities are brought out with intensity and credibility as in "Hunger", The 'whore house in Calcutta Street' and Man of his right'. These poems are full of Irony and confessional elements. The poems are also about three different studies of male sexuality, the women exploitation, consciousness of the poverty and suffering of Indian masses and of woman as victim of lust in a male dominated society, imports to Mahapatra's poetry a tragic pessimistic tone. The poet's dominant concern is the vision of grief, loss, dejection, rejection. The tragic consciousness does not seem to operate in the work of any other Indian poet in English as disturbingly as in that of Jayanta Mahapatra. "The Samba wind", the Darken room", "The intrigues at my finger tips"- these objects and images put their unmistakable emphasis on the sombre vision. The recurring portraits of woman in his poetry point specifically to these aspects; 'they are drawn' with sympathy and with precision. Such few lines as

"The good wife lies in my/ through the long afternoon, dreaming still/ unexhausted, by the deep roar of funeral pyres/ in the darkened room, a woman cannot find/her reflection in the mirror"

These lines indicate the commercial exploitation of sex makes woman's destiny a tragic one, and takes it all mechanically, tried, bored and insensitive. She is merely as passionless tool and she suffers both of the contemporary system. It is perhaps this quality of the true poet's social concern, which matches Mahapatra's engagement with the cultural pressures of the Indian, especially those casual by the generational compulsions and constraints, that lends real substance to the body of

his verse and elevates it to major status.

Another major theme of Mahapatra's poetry is Human relationship and this relationship centre round sexual, artificial love. The poems are admirable for he used the ingenious devices. Mahapatra excels in love poems, especially those expressing through the accoutrements of rhetorical Irony, the fragility as well as the stasis international relationships. The stasis is never accounted for in terms of tangible common places such as infidelity or in compatibility; more often it results from a staleness that enters life through the systematic certainties of familiarity and routine.

The encounter between man and woman is grippingly presented Mahapatra's treatment of love and sex is quite a contrast to the calculated cynicism of Ezekiel, the flaunting sick melody of Kamala Das. In "The whore house in a Culcutta Street" we find the man who wanted to know more about women, turn into a statute and the body disobeys;

There is a moral anguish here, which has been absent for a long time in Indian poetry in English. Mahapatra's confessional mode through Ironic presentation of love as a moral presence in a sex taunted world avoids usual sentimental blabber. The poet very masterly used Irony and imagery confessional mode in his poetry to point out the pseudo-love and Exploitation of innocent and helpless woman. So, love, marriage and sex loom large in the poetry of Mahapatra, but his more recent poetry shows a considerable widening of his interest to include contemporary reality in all its immense variety.

As Shelly was influenced by the French Revolution, So, Mahapatra was also influenced by the contemporary Indian Politics. His writing range was not bound to any restricted field. Bravely did he write the political condition of the post-independence era, which necessitated to the country.

His interest in politics is revealed by an early poem on Gandhi. More ambitions attempts at interpreting contemporary reality are to be found in two longer poems. 'The Tatted Taste' and 'The Twenty fifty Anniversary of a Republic', Indian poet writing in English usually avoided in convenient topics of this kind. It is difficult to write good political poetry. The political matter tends to hang loose or remains undigested and unabsorbed into organic structure of the poems. Many Indian poets in English deal with it in round about or indirect ways; some do not like to touch it. Jayanta Mahapatra deals with it with complete success in poems like, "The twenty fifty Anniversary of a Republic". Mahapatra is sincere, painstaking artist who revises, polishes and re-

polishes till perfection is achieved. For example, in "the whorehouse in Calcutta", expressions like "The little turnings of blood/ at the far edge of the rainbow" and "her lonely breath threshed against your kind" are terse and suggestive. But the repletion of "little" and 'dark' look like a mannerism, which is rare in this poet. His choice and arrangement of words and imagery cannot be bitter. His diction is remarkable for its economy and brevity. He uses the fewest possible words to express his meaning, so that it has become usual to speak of his poetic shorthand. The success of a number of his poems results from his mastery of English, mastery rare in Indian English Poets.

Conclusion:

An important aspect of his diction is the use of humanizing epithets for the inanimate and the non-human. Thus we get sublime imagery and expressions like "furious wrinkled wall," "indulgent sunshine", "melting festival" etc. in this way the inanimate springs to life and powerful 'verbal drama' is exacted. Also the human is linked up with the non-human, the microcosm with the macrocosm and the 'oneness of all' is essentially 'mythopoeia' and he is constantly making myth by exalting the ordinary and the trivial to epic-dimensions and imparting it human attributes. Thus in the 'sun-burst' the cow becomes half woman, half Goddess, while the phenomenon of a bull riding a cow is referred to as, "two Gods copulating on the warm tar" Mahapatra is a poet of promise. He began writing in English quite late in life, when he was already middle-aged. But within the short period of ten years he has achieved eminence, and is already ranked with the greatest names in the literary field, i.e. Ezekiel, Ramanujan, and Kamala Das. His essentially Indian sensibility, his mastery of English, his mythopoeia imagination, his economy of phrasing and startling images are all the signs and symbols of a great poet which as he continues to write, are bound to take him to heights not yet attained by any other Indian English poet.

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