



THE QUEST FOR SELF IN ORIYA SOIL: A STUDY OF JAYANTA MAHAPATRA'S POETRY

Dr. Chandra Shekhar Dhara

(Assistant Professor of English, Midnapore City College, Kuturiya, Bhadutala, West Bengal)

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ABSTRACT



The Post - Independence Indian English poets with their cultural roots in their community are facing with the crisis of identity, and their poetry manifests their quests for self and roots. We can feel a radical shift in their writing—a shift from the macrocosm of the country to the microcosm of the self. In the hands of Nissim Ezekiel, A.K. Ramanujan, R. Parthasarathy, Arun Kolatkar, Kamala Das and Jayanta Mahapatra the Indian English Poetry has acquired new dimensions. At present, Jayanta Mahapatra stands tall in the realm of Modern Indian English Poetry enriching the Indian poetry in a different way by dealing sagaciously with the Indian culture in general, and the Oriya culture in particular with a mythopoeic vision depicting real Odisha with its topography, its folktales, traditions and myths. He uses English idioms for Indian text and his poems deal with the question of self, search for root and identity exploring Indian sensibility and ethos, especially the Odisha landscape, its religion and rituals; history and myth; hunger and poverty and the complexity of human relationships with wonderful poetic craftsmanship. Although Christian by birth, Mahapatra's creative self is primarily Hindu in terms of myth, symbols, folklore, idiom and psyche. He learnt to respect Christ but his inner self is ardently Hindu. This dual identity has created a sense of insecurity and alienation in his poetry.

My paper aims to present Mahapatra's quest for self identity in Oriya soil through his consciousness of the Oriya tradition and culture with which he identifies himself in his poetry.

Keywords: *Indianness, Oriya-Soil, Quest, Culture, Self-Identity, Tradition.*



With the advent of globalization, post colonialism and post modernism in our motherland the Modern Indian English Poetry has blossomed on its own, contributing a lot to English language so as to bring it alive and rich in its syntax to establish an indigenous tradition of Indian English Poetry. The Post - Independence Indian English poets with their cultural roots in their community are facing with the crisis of identity and their poetry faithfully represents the quest of their self and their cultural roots. Their poetry seems to be oriented along three distinct avenues: the modes of affirmation in terms of myth and history, quest for the self in and through love, modes of negation in terms of longing for dissolution and death. This has displayed itself in three identifiable manifestations: the first is a past-oriented vision which is associated with a sense of loss and hopelessness which is a sort of cultural pessimism, the second-a future-oriented vision, that arouses a desire to transform the world, the third is the attitude towards the present times, a historical, a moral, neutral, stoic, ironic, ambivalent, absurdist. This type of expression falls under two kinds. The first mode of expression is subjective in which the poet looks inward, the second mode of expression is objective, where the poet looks around, observing the reality that prevails around him. These may be termed as "voyage within" and "voyage without" respectively. In the hands of Nissim Ezekiel, Jayanta Mahapatra, A. K .Ramanujan, R.Parthasarathy, Arun Kolatkar and Kamala Das the Indian English poetry has acquired new dimensions. We can feel a radical shift in their writing—a shift from the macrocosm of the country to the microcosm of the self.

Physicist, bilingual poet and essayist, Padmashree Award winner Jayanta Mahapatra holds the distinction of being the first Indian English poet to have received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1981 for *Relationship*. He draws prolific and detailed portrait of the physical, historical and political India in his poetry. He holds a mythopoeic vision depicting real Odisha with its topography, its folktales, traditions and myths. His poems deal with the question of self, search for roots and identity, Hindu religion, its culture, rituals, spirituality, symbols and the lost heritage of the past bearing a kind of cross section of the exotic culture and represents socio-

culture deterioration of the present generation with wonderful poetic craftsmanship. He considers Orissa as the seed-ground of his flourishing art. Orissa is the hub of his iconoclastic perambulations. He admits his indebtedness to the soil himself as:

"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 knees over the grief of the River Daya and the waves of the Bay of Bengal fail to reach out to day to the firelight soul of Konarka, I acknowledge my debt and my relationship" (Niranjan, 65).

Mahapatra's commitment to the locale is similar to that of Whitman's nineteenth century New York, Robert Frost's New England, WB Yeats' Sligo and Nissim Ezekiel's Bombay. Cuttack, Bhubaneswar and Puri form the background of Mahapatra's poems. A sincere look at his poetry enables us to understand that poet's task is not only to paint the picture, but also to remind people of their past, their roots and the benign nature that moulded and shielded them. The subjects of his poetry are often parts of the topography of his own psyche; he explores his own feelings with painstaking and often painful honesty but never loses sight of their universal participation.

Although Christian by birth, Mahapatra's creative self is primarily Hindu in terms of myth, symbols, folklores, idioms and psyche. He is twice removed from his immediate surroundings—first he was born in a Christian family and second, he writes in an acquired medium, English. He learnt to respect Christ but his inner self is ardently Hindu. This dual identity has created a sense of insecurity and alienation in his poetry. Despite these factors, Mahapatra's poetry reflects a deep awareness of the Indian background. It faithfully describes his native landscape or his relationship with his land. In this context Dr. Jayeep Sarangi writes:

"Linguistic multiplicity and cultural diversity in India may apparently contribute to a poet's identity; but in reality, these forces remain committed to defining, and authenticating a distinctive identity. Jayanta Mahapatra is a Christian, living in a Hindu society—a society which pays



maximum homage to Lord Jagannatha, the presiding deity of Orissa. Jayanta Mahapatra's grandfather accepted Christianity out of compelling forces of famine and poverty. There is always a sense of insecurity and alienation in his poetry. He perpetuates his quest for identity and he is keen on the assertion of his self-emanating from a veritable part of his holy land and its rich socio-religious traditions. (Sarangi ,5)

Mahapatra was born on 22nd October, 1928 in Cuttack, Odisha. He belongs to a middle class Christian family. His grandfather, Chintamani, adopted Christianity during the devastating famine in 1866 that shook Orissa and drove him to the verge of death. He finally staggered into a mercy camp run by the white missionaries in Cuttack. He was provided with food and shelter, in return for which he was persuaded to adopt Christianity, to which Chintamani yielded. Thus Jayanta Mahapatra was a Christian by inheritance and upbringing though he imbibed much of Oriya culture. In the early stages of his poetic career he makes a "journey within" and presents the realities experienced by his individual self.

By virtue of his birth and upbringing, Jayanta Mahapatra is firmly rooted in the landscape of his native land, Odisha. The important places of his state, Cuttack, Puri, Bhubaneswar, Konarka, the Chilika Lake, its legends, history and myths, its tradition and culture, its past, present and future, have occupied the landscape of his mind. In his first volume of poems, *Close the Sky, Ten by Ten* he emerges as a poet in the making, who reveals commendable capacity to mould the language like clay. His second volume, *Swayamvara and other poems* (1971) shows his remarkable maturity in poetic language and style. His next volume *A Rain of Rites* (1974) is conspicuous for the depiction of Indianness, especially the depiction of Orissa landscape with its religious rites and rituals. Another volume *The False Start* (1980) deals with the theme of silence. *Relationship* (1981), Mahapatra's masterpiece, achieved prestigious Sahitya Academy Award. It is indeed a modern epic, a poetic depiction of Mahapatra's innate relationship with the root culture, religion, history, legend, rituals, traditions and myths of Odisha which have shaped his

personality and psyche. *Life Sign* (1983) reveals Mahapatra's concern with the external world.

During the course of evolution of his poetic career it is observed that in the mid Nineteen Eighties there was a shift in location from Orissa to Punjab and Bhopal. The volume titled *Dispossessed Nests* (1986) contains poems that speak about the Khalistan issue and the Bhopal gas tragedy that resulted in innumerable deaths, disfigurement and mutilation. In *Temple* (1989) the poet sublimates death. Life is elevated even in its most miserable condition. Mahapatra highlights women as the subject of endless human sufferings and points out possible redemption by means of many myths. In *A Whiteness of Bone* (1992) the poet raises the theme of his poem to the level of National importance. He speaks effectively on Mahatma Gandhi, his principles and his sacrifice. In later volumes like *Shadow Space* (1997), *Bare Face* (2000) and *Random Descent* (2005) he speaks about contemporary problems, the suffering of women, the burning of the Australian missionary and his two sons. The slim volume titled *Land* (2013) has poems in which social themes are recurrent. With the maturity in his career Mahapatra started looking around his own self. He makes a "journey without" that drives him to present the social realities. His poems are regarded as the most sustained, rigorous and carefully defined exploration of the land, people and lifestyle of India in general and Odisha in particular.

Throughout his life and literary career Mahapatra has a passionate quest for Oriya self through his consciousness of the Oriya tradition and culture with which he identifies himself in his poetry. The landscape of Odisha, as depicted by him in his poetry, is not simply the picture of the scenic beauty of Odisha but it also comprises the physical landscape—the temples, the ruins, the inevitable presence of the mythical Past. Landscape is brought in close relation to the culture of the people. The golden triangle—Puri, Cuttack, and Konarak supply the chief ingredients to weave the fabric of Mahapatra's poetry. History, legends and myths associated with these places constitute the central theme of his poetry.

The Oriya landscape acts as the objective setting bringing about the mental evolution of the



poet. The famous town Puri is considered to be a sacred place by the Hindus. It is the sacred place of Lord Jagannatha, the presiding deity of Odisha. The Hindu devotees find redemption and celestial peace at Puri. His poem, *Dawn at Puri* emerges as a realistic document of the Hindu psyche and their age-old beliefs and traditions. He is well aware of the Oriya environment and firm roots in the orthodox cultural convention. The poet is disappointed with the hollowness of traditional practices and customs. Here the poet ironically brings out the incongruities in the Indian life, as well as landscape. At Puri, we find a stretch of beach called 'Swargadwara' or 'Gateway to Heaven' where the dead are being cremated. Many pious Hindus or widows feel that it is possible to attain salvation by dying at Puri. People from different parts of India mingle together irrespective of caste, colour and creed. The poem brings out through successive images the characteristic atmosphere of Odisha, its sufferings, poverty, hunger and its age-old customs and rites and rituals. The image of the crow, sand, widows, the shell caught in a net – all evoke the early morning ambience of the sea beach at Puri.

The image of widow is an important image for Mahapatra. It associates the disagreeable. Their presence here places the poem in its specific Indian locale. The widows, in a country like India were, and in some societies still are forced to live a life of austerity. They are therefore characterized not as 'old' but as women who are 'past the centres of their lives'. Their wait for the access into the Great temple also becomes symbolic of their waiting for death. They are lost in the darkness of overwhelming unconsciousness. The poet is not free from those conventions and practices. His ageing mother has expressed her "last wish" to be cremated in this beach.

"her last wish to be cremated here
twisting uncertainly like light
on the shifting sands." (*Dawn at Puri*, lines-
16-18)

The 'sullen pyre' reminds the poet of it. Thus we come across a very faithful portrayal of the Oriya landscape around the poet. Crow's cawing and the skulls on the sands indicate the poverty of India.

The history of Odisha, the myths, the legends and rituals associated with its soil draw Mahapatra's attention and he tries to revive them in his poetry. *Grandfather* and *Dhauri* both talk about the historical Orissa; the wars fought in Dhauri and the after-effects like famine in *Grandfather*. *Dhauri* is a historical poem; its time is the one when war of Kalinga was fought and the time immediately after that. Oriya soldiers massacred on the banks of river Daya, their blood flowed through the river Daya and their corpses were scattered on the battlefield to be torn by vultures, wolves and jackals. The poem also challenges masculinity and sexual power of the soldiers when he says "buried into dead hunger with its merciless worms guided the foxes to their limp genitals". The image of the foxes gnawing at the limp genitals of the soldiers is a powerful evocation of the limitations of male sexual power.

Grandfather is a poem reflecting nostalgia. The poet is bursting with questions as to why his grandfather embraced Christianity and to seek answers he turns to his long dead grandfather and his diary; diary which is stained yellow by the dye of time. In this poem Mahapatra reveals the struggle of his wounded psyche to come out of its cocoon. The speaker is haunted by the invisible spirit of his grandfather he calls his grandfather a board that has helped him and his children to grow and move ahead. He asks his grandfather what were his conditions at that time how afraid and hungry was he; how coward was he to leave his own family behind who stayed in the blurred part of his heart. He asks about the nature the rivers the trees the wind the animals and compares how all those images were empty just like his own stomach. Mahapatra seems to have grasped the intensity and dimensions of the terrible crisis faced by grandfather. The poem questions validity of religion. Is religion more necessary than food? Is religion or god more important than life of a living being? The poet reconstructs this imaginary debate in the mind of the grandfather and the reader. Poem is critique to some state imposed social order which feeds people but at the cost of their lives.

When Mahapatra grew and acquired maturity he understood the compelling situation of his grandfather and also the advantages he enjoyed,



his education at a missionary school and so on. The poet appears to have changed in his attitude to religion. But the agony abides in him that the poet asks in *Grandfather* –

“What did faith matter?

What Hindu World so ancient and true for you to hold?” (*Grandfather*, lines-24-25).

The poet analyses the consequences of that great famine and feels the pricks of the conscience. The poet understands that it is no use to hold our ancestors responsible for the change of faith and regrets. Poverty and starvation drove his grandfather to accept a new religion. He says that

“We wish to know you more,

We wish we know what it is to be, against dying,
to know the dignity ... (*Grandfather*, lines-38-40)

The poet rediscovers his grandfather and realises the misery his grandfather had experienced when the terrible famine struck the society.

His poems depict Indian women in a helpless and objectifying light. A major example of power of male and sexuality is seen in his poem ‘Hunger.’ In ‘Hunger’ the poet has opened theme of hunger in three different ways; hunger for food, hunger for solitude and sexual hunger. The speaker, the girl and the fisherman are all trapped like fishes in the net of hunger. Speaker is a loner and wants peace of mind and heart but he thinks the way to peace will be satisfying his sexual needs. Fisherman or the girl’s father pushes the young girl into prostitution and becomes the one to get all her customers. One reading can be to sympathize with the father but in my viewpoint the father is shameless old hag who instead of doing some work takes the easy way out to use his daughter. The girl is cold as rubber or her compassion with the rubber could mean the lose elasticity of her vagina because of continuous sex. The poem shows different perspective of how hunger affects people.

Often Mahapatra’s poetry is full of doubt and despair over the hunger and poverty of his own country, the utter lack of values and principles which have eaten away the goodness and integrity of a country. The orbit of his poetry includes not only the cultural inheritance but also the socio-political

setup. The evil of prostitution finds a space in Mahapatra’s poetry. Prostitution occurs on account of social injustice and economic disparity. Poems like *Hunger* have a disturbing reality to reveal: the excruciating poverty which could drive a father to dish out his own daughter as a prostitute—

“I heard him say: My daughter, she’s just turned fifteen

Feel her. I’ll be back soon, your bus leaves at nine.” (*Hunger*, lines 16-17)

The poet’s comment on social problems and ills is not an objective portrayal of reality, more often it is the poet who is an unconscious participant in this vicious game of wants, desires and betrayals.

Mahapatra is a realist. His poetry gives us a picture of the homeland; he inhabits both physically and emotionally. His poems regularly emphasize the love for the land and condemnation for the time dealing with the Oriya soil and possess Indian sensibility. *Relationship*, Mahapatra’s Sahitya Akademi Award winning masterpiece, illustrates of his quest for his roots. In this volume he comes out with his real strength containing myth, tradition and history of Odisha, the land of great historical, cultural and religious values. *Relationship* is divided into twelve sections and begins with an invocation like in an epic. Its chief concern is to know the origin of this Universe:

“Once again one must sit back and bury the face

in this earth of the forbidding myth,
the phallus of the enormous stone,
when the lengthened shadow of a restless vulture . . .” (*Relationship*, lines 5-9)

Mahapatra believes that myth is always a part and parcel of the earth. So he stresses the need of invoking the earth. The manner in which the invocation is made by the poet, shows that he is to deal with the problems of humanity in general. *Relationship* is a poem of unrelatedness, in style as in topic. It speaks of the poet’s rediscovery of relatedness with his own ground; it trembles with a hope of a discovery of being and comes close at times to betraying his own spirit. It yearns for the comfort of home for the end of fallibility and guilt; whereas the truth of the poem could only have been reached by fallibility. It is tempted by total identity



with the myths of home, but cannot avoid the discordant memories. The locale also has a great bearing on *Relationship*. The poem is centred round in a monumental historical ruin. The poem is indeed a deliberate attempt on the part of the poet to connect himself with his self and with the land of Odisha both in time and beyond it.

In this poem, with a sense of nostalgia, he fervently remembers the heroic past of Odisha. He exhibits the glory and pride of the ancient Odisha in his poetry. He recalls with reverence the prowess of his ancestors who fought the Kalinga War in 261 B.C that converted the emperor Ashok into a deeply religious man. In this connection, he refers to the river Daya which serves as a witness to his ancestors' heroic effort that has acquired a mythic dimension. The poem is set in Odisha. Living in the present Odisha the poet cannot shrug off his ties with the past empire once known as Kalinga. Kalinga was a maritime nation in the past. It was rich and prosperous. The kings of the dynasty who ruled over the vast empire from 6th to 13th century A.D. were great patrons of art, literature and architecture. The majestic Sun temple of Konarak was built under the fostering patronage of the king of the Ganga dynasty in the 13th century. The temple is ruined today but its relics can capture the hearts and can glorify the Oriya craftsman's search for the beatific vision in the realm of art and aesthetics. Mahapatra's flowing verse form takes the readers from reality of the present to myth and legend-strewn past and back again to the reality. The narrative, with its measured tapestry of images drawn from the past and present of the place, creates a dream impression of the lasting impact. The poet takes us from the ruins of the 'phallus' to its beginning in the 13th century. He revitalizes his sense of historical past in recapitulating the legends tagged to the temple's finish.

Mahapatra's treatment of sex and love is a contrast to the calculated cynicism of Ezekiel, the flaunting melody of Kamala Das or the sly indulgence of Shiv K. Kumar His love poetry is based on the Indian tradition of wedding, which allows the union of the body only after the wedding. His poems of love exhibit the sanctity and purity attached to the relationship between the lover and the beloved, which is expected to build a strong family

relationship Mahapatra expresses such a cultural sensibility in the poem *The Indian Way* which says that the lover will not touch the lady love until the wedding is over. He discovers within himself the conflict that always troubles him due to his innocent faith being blurred by his mother's fetishes and himself one among the many who celebrate festivals in Cuttack town. The more the poet tries to understand the people and their place, the more sorrowful he becomes. The poet is shocked by the living death in their lives. The poet says that the people are uprooted from the true tradition and are leading a "wooden life" being insensitive to "the burnt whispers of the wind at Konarka / like the lost faces of a lost language at Dhauli" (*Waiting*, line-57). The people hardly show any sign of life, rotting in fear, suspicion, sloth and inaction. Their lives resemble the familiar old ruins hardly showing any sign of life.

Thus, many of the poems of Mahapatra are a search for the self. The search for the self gives a sign of continuity to his poetry. Memory helps the poet delve into the depths of the past that enables his search into the self. With the aid of memory he tries to discover his own roots, and find solace from the burdens of the present. He seems to have found a voice and a medium entirely by the force of a surging need within him to express and relate to his own inner self. He is on record claiming that he is an Oriya poet who incidentally writes in English. In the last few years he has moved to his native tongue-translating from and writing verse in Oriya. Contrary to his contemporaries, Mahapatra shows few signs of recognizing the inherent conflict of the Indian religious sensibility, militating against the tongue of its expression. He like all mortals is afraid of death, afraid of the death of language, afraid of oblivion and therefore continually laced through his poems is his search for his identity, the search for self, the desire to establish himself so that the sands of time do not erase his name and fame. He feels trapped in the whirl of his ancestral lineage and, therefore, time and again, he questions the existence of his being. The alienation caused by his grandfather's conversion into Christianity and his own English language education by British teachers voices anguish within him. He never lays open his emotions but smoulders



below the surface. The guilt of his conversion and the barrier of language bar him from baring his soul and so he hides behind his self-made barriers of isolation. Odisha landscape is a strong presence in his poetry and breeze of the East flows through his poems. The profound roots of his soul seek vital links with the infinite. Carrying the burden of his alienated soul he journeys along, probing, analysing and still searching. His Christianity is like an albatross around his neck, and like the ancient mariner he suffers in silence. When despair and disillusionment reach their zenith, then hope revives like a phoenix and soars once again. In the process of exploring his roots he falls back on the deposits of the racial past so that the self gets deciphered by the redeeming phantasmagoria of the place. The self gets absorbed in the place. Mahapatra's poetry is redolent of the Odisha scene, steeped in history, legend and myth.

As a writer, Mahapatra is able to transform the storm-tossed land of Odisha—a land ever tagged with the sights of famine, misery, starvation etc. into an instrument of life and art. According to him, landscape is not only a physical phenomenon rather it is a parameter of life and faith, unchangeable as his own body. He moves very often from local to universal. His poetry encompasses the macroscopic India in the microcosm of Odisha. The problems he has experienced and observed in his own place, he could associate them with the problems that are universal and omnipresent. He is of the opinion that a poet's identity cannot be only his private and personal upbringing, his response to landscape, his consciousness of the tradition and culture with which he identifies himself makes up his identity. He confirms his inseparable identification with his native land in one of his poems, *Somewhere, My Man*:

A man does not mean anything
But the place.
Sitting on the riverbank throwing pebbles
into the muddy current,
a man becomes the place. (*Somewhere, My Man*, lines 38-42)

So, there is a fusion between the man and the place. In order to provide the nourishment to traditional Indian ethos in his poetry, Mahapatra takes recourse to the locale—the social, topographical and cultural

background of his birth place. So, Srinivas Iyenger rightly observes: "No true poet can escape tradition, for all our yesterdays are involved in the poet's deeper consciousness; and no true poet can escape the pressure of the present, for he is in it and of it, and the best he can do is to relate the immediate present to the living past.." (Iyenger, Page-641-42).

The strength of Mahapatra's poetry comes from his living intimately with his native place. The place, with all its ethos and myths, its loves and beliefs, superstitions and transitions have been governing factor of his poetry. As an eminent Indian English poet, he shows an eloquent expression of the eternal silence of the unknown and his sensibility is essentially Indian. The secret of his success lies in not disowning his Indian inheritance and not falling prey to what has been called 'a feeling of alienation' He presents his depth of feelings rooted in Indian culture and its ethos. Being born in Odisha, he seems to be firmly rooted in Odisha soil. He is an Oriya to the core. The sun of the eastern coast shines through his poems.

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