Jayanta Mahapatra is a famous Indian English poet, deeply rooted in Indian ethos. He stands tall among the many rootless Indian English language poets. His deep patriotism, humanism, and nostalgia for the lost glories of his race stir Mahapatra’s listless, enslaved compatriots. He is a true poet of the soil. He is a gifted poet fascinated by the Indian heritage, myths and legends. The poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra against the broad perspective of Indian poetry written in English particularly, in the Post-Independence phase.

Mahapatra seems closer to the modernist movement of the first half of the last century with its open-ended form and reliance on recurring symbols to provide coherence to non-linear, fragment structures. Mahapatra’s persona is of an estranged, distanced, sensitive artist rather than that of an invisible or playfully prominent post-modernist author. As in modernist writers, there is less importance on the material world and more emphasis on subjective memory and the inner self, the psychological, in contrast to the post-modernist’s emphasis on almost totally self-enclosed art forms. Mahapatra’s is an elite art, aimed at a small, discriminating readership. His poetry takes the past into its orbit, infuses it with the present, and looks forward to the future. It at once encompasses the history, the myths and embodies a vision for the future. As a literary artist, he obtains the tradition and enriches it with his individual talent. He has been successful to a great extent in bringing a native tradition alive in his poetry.

In Mahapatra’s poetry, personal feelings are intensified as the poet questions the existence of the self; the other often takes the form of local society, and especially Hindu culture, ritual and spirituality, symbols and the past from which he has been alienated by his grandfather’s conversion to Christianity and his own English language education. Mahapatra observes his environment and listen quietly, sensitively to his inner feelings, the sources of his poetry, bringing momentary perceptions of relationships and fleeting images of contrast. The poems appear a continuous relation of aspects of the isolation, loneliness, solitude, alienation of the self from external realities in a world without apparent purpose. This is the existential dilemma of most modern literature. While Mahapatra’s world is filled with personal pain, guilt, remorse, hunger, desire, and moments of renewal, his environment is filled with symbols of belief by the ordinary lives of the people of Cuttack, the temples, the Hindu festivals, the ancient monuments. Poverty, deprivation, and prostitution recur in his verses.
A poet’s positive response to his geographical as well as cultural surroundings plays a significant role in understood, appreciated, and endured in the light of the past and one would learn how to live from other people’s lives. Mahapatra’s conception of man’s relation to what he perceives brings him face to face with history and myth when his ‘self’ is discovered in the act of attention. The interaction between; self and reality - the reality that eludes but includes man-form the bedrock of Mahapatra’s poetry, which, for him, is the exploration of myths and it is linked with the world of art and sculpture. Hence, he continues his quest for an essence divine and for grace in relationship between man and man, ma and god and god, men and sculptured art. Mahapatra seems to have the conviction that tradition is continuity and one has to understand the present in terms of the past and the past in terms of the present.

There is a profound sign of introspection in his poetry. The poet has tried to create a symbol establishing a deep thematic relationship between the inner worlds with the outer world. Poems like “Orissa Landscape,” “Evening in an Orissa Village,” and “Dawn at Puri” are the representations of his own native place. Mainly in “Taste for Tomorrow,” Puri on sea is represented as a real lively character in his poetry. Temple, priest, beggar, fisherman, now all these material truth have become accelerated in his inner consciousness, that they are gradually converted into intellectual symbols and images in the heart.

At Puri the crows
The one wide street
Lolls out like a giant tongue
Five faceless lepers move aside
As a priest passes by
And at the street’s end
The crowd thronging the temple door;
A huge holy flower
Swaying in the wind
Of greater reasons. (11-20)

Here the tone of humanism of a sympathetic, poetic hero is reflected. The assemblage of deformed, leprous beggars in the Bada Danda communicates the pain and poverty of life. They turn aside at the approach of the pandas and priests. The Singhadwar becomes over-crowded and sonorous with temple bells. One can visualize the directness of the scenery of Puri temple and Bada Danda. This poem is presented with sharp satire and humanism. The recurring images in Mahapatra’s poems reveal that he is an Oriya to the core. The sun of the eastern coast of India shines through his poems. The eastern, sea sends its morning wind through them; Mahapatra, a child of the sun and the sea, delights in invoking the god of fire and the god of water in poems like “Sunburst,” “The Exile,” “India Summer Poems,” “This stranger,” and “My Daughter.”

Love does not have any existence in today’s life. Only burning passion is involved. The woman becomes the victim of the commercial, passionate instinct of exploitation. Her freedom is affected. She is to put up with everything after becoming a wife. She maintains a mechanical life.
She has neither emotion nor any interest. Only a fatigued, tired, exhausted, and tasteless life is her world. As if she herself is a mechanical creation, though a wife, but a prostitute on the other hand. She is forbidden to see her face in the mirror.

The good wife
lies in my bed
through the long afternoon
dreaming still, unexhausted
by the deep roar of funeral pyres
In the darkened room
A woman can’t find her
Reflection in the mirror. (43-50)

Engaged in love, the husband and the wife avoid the summer heat and float in the dreamland. It is a nice way to remain fresh and unexhausted even though outside the room there blows a severely hot wind carrying the burning intensity of funeral pyres. The poet gives a hint about two types of heat—the one outside the room due to the strongest sun-rays and the other in the married couple inside the room.

Love and passion in Mahapatra’s poetry are chiefly opposite to that of Ezekiel, Kamala Das and Shiv K. Kumar. There is no deficiency of feeling in Ezekiel’s skeptical style; there is the sick mentality in the poetry of Kamala Das and lack of feeling of a unique soul in Shiv K. Kumar’s poetry. The poetic hero, who had been to a whorehouse to study more about woman, is suddenly turned into an image. The body becomes absolute. He fails to be involved in the sexual act. Rather in “The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street”, the identity of a generous humanism and firm social consciousness are found.

You fall back against her in the dumb light,
Trying to learn something more about women
While she does what she thinks proper to please you,
The sweet, the little things, the imagined,
Until the statue of the man within
You’ve believed in throughout the years
Comes back to you, a disobeying toy.
And the walls you wanted to pull down,
Mirror only of things mortal, and passing by:
Like a girl holding on to your wide wildness
As though it were real, as the recurring voice
Tone the membrance of your half-woken mind
When like a door, her works close behind:
‘Hurry, will you? Let me go,’
and her lonely breath thrash against your kind. (28-42)
He is completely vanquished by the mismanagement, disorder, uncertainty and instability in Indian politics and by the pathetic condition of the common man in India. He has presented the ruined state of the Indian environment and poverty in an artistic way in the form of a satire of the contemporary socialism and of its leaders in his poem on “The Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the Republic” of India.

Do we want to feel the ground
give way beneath us?
This is a barren world that has been
Prowling round my room,
Epidemics in the poisoned air,
Dusty streets stretching away
Like disgruntled socialists. (9-15)

In “A Country” Jayanta Mahapatra presents the picture of hunger and starvation in the countryside of India. The poem records the sorry plight of the people even after Independence. Struggle and Fighting could not change the condition of the people. He sometimes visualizes and thinks about the condition of his own country. He broods over the sorry state of his mother land. He sings:

Sometimes at night when all voices die
my mind sees earth, my country-
to accept sacrifice, the loss of friends,
and sons who vanished suddenly in seventy two.
However much I provoke and curse
I am unable to force an answer out of you.
Wherever I try to live,
In pious penitence at Puri
Or in the fiery violence of a revolutionary
My reason becomes a prejudiced sorrow
like socialism. (19-27)

Mahapatra wants to become a socialist. But he cannot understand others and himself too. He is puzzled. It is the great sorrow of the poet. Relationship establishes a sense of relationship between self and the other. The personal emotion of the poetic self I chiefly tied very profoundly with the environmental surroundings, tradition, and totality of life. Mahapatra has realized the heart-beat of the dead artists in the stone-carving art and sculpture of the temples in Orissa. He has also made an interaction with stone-carving and inscriptions. He has established the relationship between man god and eternity of time from Relationship to Life Signs, the wide range of the individual state of emotion to the universal level is seen in his poetry. Mahapatra has presented his own experience and impressions on the relationship with poetic words. As a poet, he has to fight with words. He is to choose words and to unfold words out of a handful of words.
But as a common man, he is very much conscious of the excessive implication and lack of words.

Yet I only know
this word which lets me survive inside,
this liberal ethic-
is one long error of experience. (6-9)

The language and emotion of Mahapatra happen to be so beautifully emerged, it creates an excitement of passion and emotion in the mind and heart of the readers, for which he becomes prominent among Indian English poets and also the most discussed in the field of international poetry. Jayanta Mahapatra is considered as one of the best Third world poets of our time who himself is the unity of his work.

*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 its 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 seems to survive its temptations. It is tempted by total identity with the myths of home, but cannot avoid the discordant memories: the thousands of dead at Dhauli, the bloody ground on which Buddhism is founded; the deaths inherent in the stones of Konarka, especially that of the mythological boy who solved the problem of the keystone of the temple and then jumped from the top of the temple into the sea. The myth is a threat then, as a mirror, but it is the only way onward. Just as words are threats, but also the only way:

I thought: those who survive the myth
have slipped past their lives and cannot define their reason,
the trees are getting sparse, the clouds dwindle into colder
he ancestral fires are no more snares,
purposes that resembled the webs of the sun (IX. 5-9)

This poem is set in Orissa. Living in the present Orissa the poet cannot shrug off his ties with the vast empire once known as Kalinga. Kalinga was a maritime nation in the past. It established regular trade with islands of Indonesia and countries of the far East. It was rich and prosperous. The kings of the Ganga dynasty who ruled over this vast empire, from 6th to 13th century A.D., were great patrons of art, literature and architecture. The majestic Sun Temple at Konarka was built under the fostering patronage of the King of Ganga dynasty in the 13th century. The temple is ruined to-day 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 the present of the place, peculiarly creates a dream-impression of 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 part in recapitulating the legends tagged to the temple’s finish. According
to the legend twelve hundred masons were appointed to complete the temple within twelve years. Failing to complete the temple within the scheduled period, the masons would be beheaded. Dharama, the chief architect’s son (twelve-year) fixed the crowning slab of the temple and jumped into the river in order to save the fearful masons.

Thematically the poem attains unity so far as it tries to dissect the straying strands of the poet’s individual self, and then to see the self in relation to the tradition that flows perpetually. The poem tries to show the incorruptible relationship one details with the forces of tradition and culture, in the course of his living. Thematic unity has been maintained throughout by the poet’s involvement with tradition, and contrasting this involvement with the poet’s loneliness, sorrow, suffering and sense of fear for aging and death, the structural unity has been maintained by the careful handling of a flowing verse-form. The poet chooses such a flowing verse-form not merely to juxtapose past and present, myth and reality, but also to sustain the balance between an individual’s emotional and intellectual relationship with the tradition in the process of his growing old. The flowing narrative, with uneven stanza, has a tendency to branch inward and to create a dream world of innate picturesque quality. There is overlapping of the images; but the profusion of images in every stanza baffles the reader and he apparently believes that the images overlap and collide and they are not functional.

The peculiarity with which Mahapatra’s poems flourish is that the words suggest images with lightning rapidity, and images get multiplied and all share a simultaneous existence with flashes at the core of the poem. Like any other modern poet Mahapatra is often tempted to illumine the lines with sparkling images. Similes and metaphors are often unusual but always functional in the sense that they can evoke an atmosphere, quite congenial to the immediate context, and thereby serve as an objective correlative of the emotion expressed.

Mahapatra turns inward to get into his roots. It seems natural that a poet with a live cultural past behind him, aware of his roots and perhaps prejudiced but those roots, has greater probability of writing significantly than one who has no knowledge of any Indian language other than English. Significantly than one who has no knowledge of any Indian language other than English. Significantly, the locale of Mahapatra's poetry is Orissa, which is a central metaphor for life. It acquires a larger frame of reference, where in the poet achieves a homogeneous cohesion between the inscape and the landscape.
Works Consulted


