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Indian sensibility in Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry : A Critical Study

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Abstract

One of the most widely known and published Indian English poets of our time is Jayanta Mahapatra. 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 his poetry. Mahapatra's desire to acclimatize an indigenous tradition to English language, and create a new Indian English idiom is seen in Mahapatra's poetry. He shares some of the concerns of the well known Indian poets of our time. In order to study his poetry in proper perspective, one should take the background of Indian English poetry into consideration to assess the evolution of Jayanta Mahapatra as a contemporary Indian English poet. His poetry represents the Indian sensibility right from the hoary past to the present age. In this context, he is the most intense of Indian poets writing in English. He is an Orissan poet writing in English.

Key Words: Obscurity, Indigenous, Indian English idiom, Indian Sensibility

Jayanta Mahapatra, A.K. Ramanujan, R.Parthasarathy, Arun Kolatkar and Kamala Das turn inward to get into their roots. While A.K..Ramanujan's mind seems to be perpetually busy probing the areas of strength and weakness of his Hindu heritage, Kamala Das highlights with boldness the sexual permissiveness and uninhibition rooted in her native culture and produces arresting affect on the reader. Post-Independence Indian English poetry is genuine because it is deeply felt and addressed to the whole community. Indian situation forms a vital part of it. The superstition and folk belief that exist in Indian society, turns out to be a favorite theme of recent poetry.

Jayanta Mahapatra is firmly rooted in the Orissan soil. Puri, Konark, Cuttack, Bhubaneswar form as it were, a quadrangle in the landscape of Mahapatra's poetry. He wrote a number of poems on Puri, one of the great sacred places of pilgrimage of the Hindus of India. Since the temple of Lord Jagannath at Puri " points to unending rhythm, dying in this place will take one to Silence the ultimate desire of a human being which will enable him to attain nirvana. Mahapatra's poetic exploration of the places to which he belongs turns out to be a search for the self. A sense of belonging to the places of his land of birth and to the landscape of his state urges upon the poet to relate it to his poetic craft as shown in the following lines:

A man does not mean anything

But the place

Sitting on the river Bank throwing pebbles

Into the muddy current,

A man becomes the place.(Somewhere, My Man)

As V.S. Sahane has observed that the main focus of his poetic creativity seems to be centered on the “naked earth” and mythological, symbolist or aesthetic structures firmly rooted in the naked earth of which Orissa and India form a significant part.¹ Mahapatra’s central Sahitya Academy Award winning book, **Relationship** is in a way quest for Mahapatra’s roots. For the poet the Orissan landscape is the objective setting of his mental evolution, the phases of which get mixed up with lyrical vocabulary of the humanist creed. The poem being set in Orissa embodies the myth and the history of the land. “As the conflicting principles of man and nature, history and Auto Biography and faith and suffering interact against the vast panorama of Orissan landscape, the poem shows a dialectical progression where every synthesis in further analysis turn into a thesis.”² In some of Mahapatra’s poems; Indian landscape, seasons and environment become the starting point of giving his imagination a free play to reflect on his private moments of desire, despair, guilt and illumination.

The making of the Indian English idiom :

Jayanta Mahapatra’s contribution to the creation of Indian English Idiom is immense. Mahapatra’s use of language is interwoven with his growth as a poet through successive books of verse. Poetry for him is a craft that needs to be chiseled. 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.

Mahapatra’s choice of English as the medium of poetry has given a new dimension to Indian English idiom. Like Ezekiel, P.Lal, Kamala Das, A.K.Ramanujan, Shiva K.Kumar, Mahapatra too contributes substantially to the creation of a new Indian English idiom. His use of English language has been influenced by his scientific knowledge. He often uses the language in an erratic and arbitrary manner. From the beginning of his poetic career, Mahapatra lays emphasis on the language of poetry. In one of his early poems, “The Faith” he has used an unusual collocation of words in describing the Puri temple.

That sentence of old

Moves him towards the furious wrinkle walls?

The Puri priest standing in indulgent sunshine

Plays a small ridicule across the melting festival

Safe in place above a pile of hard eyed ancestors.

Using humanizing epithets for inanimate nouns like ‘furious wrinkled walls’, indulgent sunshine, and melting festival is deliberate usage by the poet. He tries to create an impression on the minds of readers by using such unconventional epithets. Using English language in a subtle way to bend and modulate the rhythms of it to the needs and nuances of Indian experience, Mahapatra tries to come to terms with Hindu mythology and its celebration of the belief that the Universe is boundless that everything occurs simultaneously, and all possibilities may exist without excluding each other.

Apart from concentrating on beliefs and rituals, Mahapatra also makes use of the current situation in contemporary society to give his poetry a distinct Indian flavor and create a new Indian English idiom. It is in this aspect that Mahapatra is in the company of Nissim Ezekiel, Shiv K Kumar, R.Parthasarathy, Kamala Das and O.P.Bhatnagar who underline this typical Indian sensibility in their poetry. K.Ayyappa Paniker has rightly stressed this point in the following words:

Indian poetry in English necessarily refers to two parameters: Indian and English. Indian may mean, either written by Indian citizens or written about Indian subjects or even expressing Indian sensibility. This implies that there is a sensibility that is identified with the land and the people of India. National sensibilities are ultimately based on racial and cultural factors. Whether they are inherited or acquired is another moot question.(K.Ayyappa Panicker)³

Jayanta Mahapatra's Relationship(1981) and two recent volumes Burden of Waves and Fruit (1988) and Temple (1989) reveal a distinct Indian sensibility that immediately arrests one's attention. History, myths, legends, folklore all go together to establish a distinct idiom and identity in these volumes. The publisher's note to Burden of Waves and Fruit rightly stresses this aspect: There are many rivers in these works, much rain and Sun, long evenings and a few dawns—occasionally, there are intimate glimpses of friends, lovers and a son. India is every where and nowhere. (Washington D.C.,1988)⁴

Mahapatra has in a way succeeded in acclimatizing English language to an Indigenous tradition. His use of Indian imagery and symbols in English language in his own way, has contributed to the growth of an Indian English idiom. A creative writer has the right to use and twist a language in his own way and to his own advantage. Jayanta Mahapatra like other important Indian English poets Nissim Ezekiel, P.Lal, R.Parthasarathy and Kamala Das, has twisted English Language to suit his themes. Mahapatra's use of language is different from other Indian English poets in many ways. He uses some of the scientific words and his imagery is often drawn from Science. He is to some extent successful in conveying his thought content through his deliberate choice of difficult words in a verbose style. He has acclimatized the native Oriya tradition to English language. Hence, in his poetry one sees the growth of an Indian English idiom, which makes his poetry distinct from poetry written English in other countries of the world.As far poetry is concerned,Mahapatra opines that " Poets are expected to make sense of life.If they find life today in fragments, they must not leave it that way. Perhaps they should have the desire to produce poetry that transcends the ills of the modern life...." (JIWE,Jan,2000:4)⁵

Jayanta Mahapatra as a post-Colonial poet, writes to establish a native tradition by resisting the former colonizer and asserting national identity. The importance attached to the critique of Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak and Homi K.Bhabha has resulted in the dissemination of Post-colonial theory. Two important texts ,**The Empire Writes Back** (1989) by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin and **The Encyclopedia of Post-Colonial Literature in English** (1994) edited by Benson and Connolly have popularized the term ' post-colonial' and lent respectability to post-Colonial literature. Semantically post-colonialism means something that has a concern only with the national culture after the departure of imperial power. Like colonialism, Post-colonialism is a state of consciousness; a crucial stage in the continuum of our cultural process and self-awareness. Colonialism involves two types of imperialism—political and cultural. Therefore, myth and history, language and landscape, self and the other are all very important ingredients of post-colonialism.Jayanta Mahapatra tries to bring alive the past of his own country in a new Indian English idiom. It is in the line of the thesis that the writers of the epoch making book, **The Empire Writes Back** put forth a re-assertion of nationhood by the post-colonial poet. Mahapatra rightly says in a poem called, 1992:

You say you are a poet;

You sit next to me

And talk to me from a distant country.

Yet your own past is too large

For you to talk sensibly about it. (Shadow Space 1997: 14)

In the post-Colonial era, the bravery and heroism of the struggle against colonialism during our freedom struggle seems to be missing. This grieves the poet and in a voice marked by anguish and shock, Mahapatra asks:

And I, writing my poem again

What do I remember of faith and past hopes?

And then, he denounces the present generation for failing their ancestors

Mine was a generation that paid homage
to Gandhi and Tagore, saw in my mother
the state of Dostoyevsky's Grand Inquisitor.

It was the end of the war.....

(Ibidem 16-17)

As nationalist writing is the hallmark of post-colonial literature, Mahapatra like his counterparts in African and Caribbean countries focuses on reconstituting from the position of historical, racial difference and tries to gain cultural identity along with socio-political identity which had been affected by colonial experience. Jayanta Mahapatra like other leading post-colonial Indian English poets such as Nissim Ezekiel, A.K.Ramanujan, Shiv K. Kumar, R Parthasarathy and a few others believe that our 'identity be symbolized a new'. The phase of nostalgic harking back to the colonial past is over and Mahapatra has realized the world and felt it in his pulses. Poetry becomes a medium to interpret life and source of sustenance for him. Thus, he takes a bold attempt to depict the reality in this harsh world which engulfs us in a poem called, "The Stories in Poetry".

Mahapatra says,

The world plots on

And poetry stumbles and falls

Everything is called sacred

In my land, Even poems. And children

Who are sold and bought everyday

In the streets of Bombay and Calcutta.

Through words

I try to recover my balance

Not let life get too far ahead of me. (1997 : 59-60)

As a true post-colonial poet, Mahapatra reflects on the same kind of injustice elsewhere, as he finds in his own country. Discrimination against suffering humanity deeply upsets the poet and disturbs him. Thus, he tells us in the same poem about the hunger in Somalia.

It's the world again

That must not take one unawares

A world where hundred die

Of hunger in Somalia and elsewhere---

Where poetry is no mystery;

Even the most tender embrace says

There is no heroism for us to live on. (Shadow Space 59-60)

If the hunger in Somalia disturbs the poet, the undernourished, half starved children of Kalhandi (a district in his home state of Orissa) makes him sad and depressed. The agony abides. Mahapatra's knowledge of native language (i.e Oriya) and inwardness with indigenous tradition and culture are a great help to him in decolonizing his poetry. Earlier he had made experiments with Oriya myths and heroic martial tradition in his Sahitya Academy Award winning book of verse, *Relationship* to give, as it were a local habitation and a name to his poetry. The landscape of his native place (Oriya in general and Cuttack in particular) coupled with the nuances of speech of the native people in India, Africa and Caribbean countries, Mahapatra has been busy with reviving the cultural identity that had been damaged by the colonial experience.

The use of Indian imagery and introduction of Indian singing birds into the realms of poetry is in the right direction of decolonizing Indian English poetry. Mahapatra has made an effort to evoke a typical Indian atmosphere by describing the Indian sky, landscape, birds and even abandoned temples in his poetry. In our country sometimes some temples are abandoned and rituals are not performed. Then, in some cases the worship resumes after sometime. It is described in a poem called, "Abandoned Temple" , and thereby re-creates an actual scene in the following lines:

A wandering boy hurls a rock through

The ruined entrance, Shadows in retreat fly:

The serpent girls, elephant gods, fiery birds,

Mosquitoes slap the Siva linga in ignorant stillness,

A long shiver running down the shrine.

The attempt to build a lively atmosphere out of the surroundings and evoke a sense of nativity is part of the strategy of post colonial writings. The post-colonial writers seek to describe the indigenous culture and thereby assert their nationality that is both lovable and enduring. Tran nationalism is an important ingredient of Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry. History is being repeated in the perpetuation of violence and cruelty in the present time. The poet feels sad to see that the post-colonial era is not much of an improvement on the colonial era--- rather it seems to

be a continuation of it. Contemporary scene unfolds harsh realities of life and the poet gets disturbed about it. Thus, he writes:

Men here build cities,

Cities work their way

Into a maze of stories

From where man's mind

Fail to see ahead.

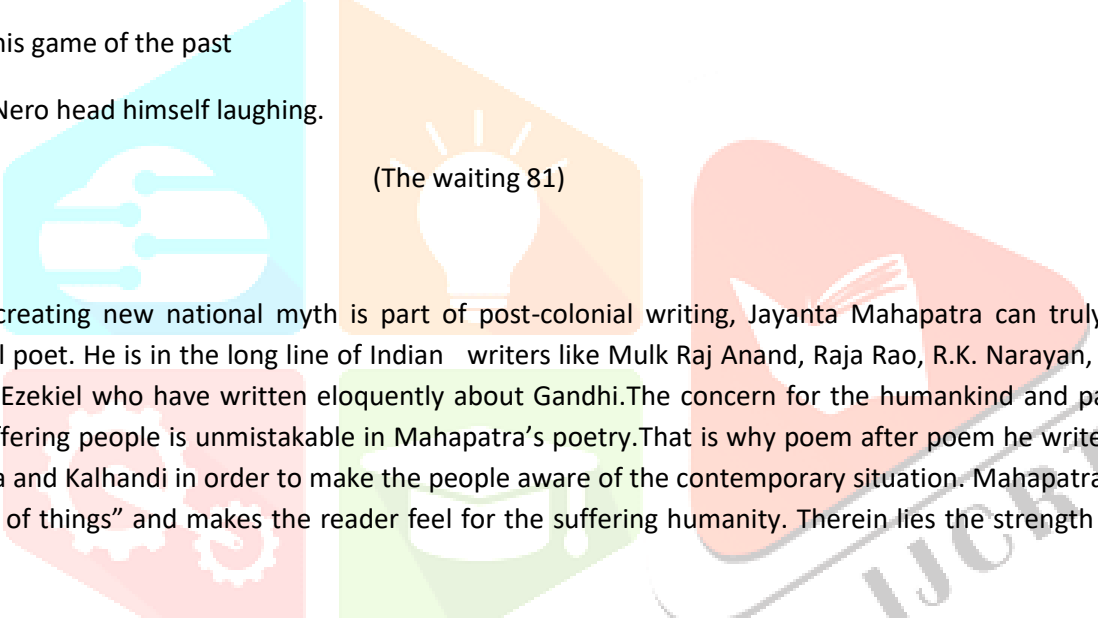
The lessons are the same

A Story of the future

Is not much different

From this game of the past

When Nero head himself laughing.



(The waiting 81)

If creating new national myth is part of post-colonial writing, Jayanta Mahapatra can truly be called a Post-colonial poet. He is in the long line of Indian writers like Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan, Chaman Nahal and Nissim Ezekiel who have written eloquently about Gandhi. The concern for the humankind and particularly the poor and suffering people is unmistakable in Mahapatra's poetry. That is why poem after poem he writes about Nicaragua, Somalia and Kalhandi in order to make the people aware of the contemporary situation. Mahapatra as a poet "sees in the life of things" and makes the reader feel for the suffering humanity. Therein lies the strength and greatness as a poet.

The desire to write about an indigenous tradition and culture and establish an identity independent of the colonizer in the recent history, immediately puts him on the forefront of post-colonial poets in our country. Mahapatra's poetry, to borrow a term from Raymond Williams, is largely an 'indicative' text which reflects the contemporary society in its totality. To read his poetry is to acquire a kind of empathy with the contemporary life. Mahapatra has successfully decolonized his poetry and made it a vehicle for the expression of Indian scene in the post colonial era. What is more is that he along with other Indian English poets has created a new Indian English idiom that gives a local habitation and a name to post-colonial poetry in our country. Mahapatra is deeply rooted in his soil and at the same time like a true post-Colonial poet; he also writes about other people in different parts of the country and the world. If Post-Colonialism is another name for globalization, Mahapatra achieves it in a limited scale in his poetry.

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