

Jayanta Mahapatra: The Progressive Poetic Voice of Modern India

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Abstract: This research paper examines the life and work of Jayanta Mahapatra, arguably one of the most influential and prominent contemporary poets of India. It also attempts to highlight his contribution to the progression of modern Indian poetry. Mahapatra's poetry is deemed significant in its exploration of various themes such as existentialism, spirituality and the human condition and also addresses social issues such as poverty, corruption and gender inequality.

The study begins with an introduction to Mahapatra's life and background, delving into the social and cultural context that shaped his identity as a poet. Then, it highlights the poetic style, language and imagery Mahapatra uses, drawing an analysis of his literary works and the unique use of metaphors and symbols to convey complex emotions and ideas. The study also examines Mahapatra as a post-colonial poet and analyses his contribution to the development of modern Indian poetry. He impressively broke away from the traditional poetic forms and themes to explore new avenues of creative expression reflecting the cultural,

social and political context of modern India, providing insight into the contemporary Indian experience through poetry.

In conclusion, this study analyses Mahapatra's life, background and his literary prowess, therefore, putting his poetry on a pedestal as the 'voice of modern India' as it represents his noteworthy contribution to the evolution of Indian poetry.

Keywords: Jayanta Mahapatra, modern, Indian poetry, existentialism, spirituality, social issues, poetic style, imagery, post-colonial, voice of modern India.

Introduction

1.1 About the Poet: Jayanta Mahapatra

Jayanta Mahapatra is a renowned Indian English poet. He was born on 22 October, 1928 into a prominent Odia Christian family and attended Stewart School in Cuttack, Odisha. He completed his M. Sc. in Physics from Patna University, Bihar and began his teaching career as a lecturer in physics at various government colleges in Odisha from the year 1949. These institutions were Gangadhar Meher College in Sambalpur, B.J.B College in Bhubaneswar, Fakir Mohan College in Balasore and Ravenshaw College in Cuttack. He retired from his government job in the year 1986 and began his journey from physics to poetry in his late fifties. But his love for poetry began when he started writing from the age of 38. Several publishers initially rejected his short stories, until his poems were published in international literary journals which led to his immediate exposure to the realm of literature. He was soon invited to participate in the International Writing

Program at Iowa, which further brought him international fame and exposure.

Jayanta Mahapatra is the first child of Lemuel Mahapatra and Sudnasubala Rout Mahapatra and was brought up in a lower-middle-class Christian family, according to strict Christian rules. In some ways, throughout his childhood he was isolated from the surrounding Hindu lifestyle. This childhood as a Christian in a Hindu neighborhood is reflected in some of his works. Furthermore, this also affected Mahapatra's personality as he began to have differences with his mother in ways that limited him from relating with others outside his family. Thus, Mahapatra developed a permanent disapproval to his mother although he remained very fond of his father. In a nutshell, it can be concluded that he grew up as an introverted, reclusive, and detached child. His family situation and his childhood experiences manufactured complex emotions in a child which found their way into his poetry. As a child, he had a very bitter school life. He was bullied and even sexually assaulted which gave him scars both physical and mental. Although his physical wounds and scars healed over time, his mental wounds left him scarred for life. As such, in his later stages of life he found his much needed solace in poetry which brought a healing touch to the wounds that never seemed to go away.

In contrast to his relationship with his mother, Mahapatra's father was always a source of inspiration for him. They enjoyed a very pleasant and gratifying relationship. Lemuel Mahapatra often consoled his son in his troubling times and fostered in him, a love

for narrative art which stimulated his creative imagination early in life.

Apart from being a Christian in a dominant pool of Hindu populace, Mahapatra was also influenced by both traditional Indian and contemporary British culture. This was due to the fact that India was still officially a colony of the British Empire then. This led to a mix of both Indian as well as contemporary English cultural influences. And the most notable influence of them all was the spread of the English language, which established Mahapatra's yearning for the language at an early stage of his life. Later on, due to the rising anti-British fervor of the nation and under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, a popular movement supporting the independence of India gained momentum throughout the 1920s and 1930s. This led to India finally achieving its independence from the Britain rule in the year 1947 while Mahapatra was still a student. Due to the fact that Mahapatra grew up under colonial rule leads to his understanding of the theme of colonialism. He was deeply influenced by his multiple identities where he was a Christian in a Hindu dominated country which just found independence from its Christian colonial rulers. Furthermore, although as a student he was supposedly weak in English, he soon found himself writing in English literature even when he was a fluent speaker of his native tongue. These influences and the numerous life experiences of Jayanta Mahapatra during and after the colonial rule sets him as a post-colonial poet of a 'new' India.

1.2 Literary Works

Jayanta Mahapatra has written over 27 books of poetry, seven in his native language of Odia and the rest in English. His poetry volumes are: *Relationship*, *Bare Face* and *Shadow Space*. Besides a knack for poetry, he has also experimented with myriad forms of prose. Some of his published books of prose are: *Green Gardener* which is an anthology of short stories and *Door of Paper: Essay and Memoirs*. Mahapatra is also known as a distinguished editor and has been a vital part of the literary magazine *Chandrabhaga*, named after Chandrabhaga, a river in Odisha. Moreover, his poems have appeared in many prestigious and well known poetry anthologies, such as *The Dance of the Peacock: An Anthology of English Poetry from India*, published by the Hidden Brook Press, Canada.

Although he began writing poems only when he was in his forties, his meticulous work and relentless grind of writing more and more even after multiple rejections by various publishers, in time established him as one of the most successful poets in English Literature in India. The publication of his first book of poems, *Svayamvara and Other Poems*, came in the year 1971 was closely followed by the publication of *Close The Sky Ten By Ten*. The long poem *Relationship* is known as one of Mahapatra's well known poems which established him well into the literary world as he became the first Indian English poet to win the Sahitya Akademi award in the year 1981.

Mahapatra has also dabbled in translation work as he often translated his own work from Odia into English

simultaneously while he was composing his original poems in English and Odia. Moreover, he has translated poems for both the well-established as well as the young writers of Odisha, West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh. Some of his translations are often published in the literary magazine, *Indian Literature* published by the Central Sahitya Akademi of India and some of these are also featured in his own magazine *Chandrabhaga*. In his poetry, Mahapatra transforms the most simple basic things into sacred in an attempt to best describe the cultural life of his people. His poems always frequent the setting of Orissa which invokes the regionalism aspect in him. Amidst this familiar setting the narrative of the poem is always intersected by Mahapatra's own experience and reactions towards his homeland. Similar to that of T. S. Eliot, he tries to create order out of disorder and solidarity out of chaos by merely performing his duty as a poet who knows how to create the poem with all the elements borrowed from personal knowledge and experience.

Although Mahapatra writes in English, his poetry feels distinctively Indian. His early struggle in the world of poetry can be credited to his efforts to express his Indian experience in the English language. He carried out this experimentation and exploration both in theme and language throughout his career in poetry thus making it his own specialized type of Indian poetry exclusive to him.

As discussed before, many of Mahapatra's poems feature Orissa, his home and the themes in his poems are often tradition, spirituality, hunger, death, and rebirth. His questioning, gloomy and

sometimes skeptical poetry evokes the Indian belief in cultural inactivity and inevitability. His poems portrayed that he was raised in the belief that "things happen as they do because ...of things that have happened before, and that nothing can change the sequence of things." Therefore, it can be observed in his work that Mahapatra often writes about immediately perceived physical and social realities without necessarily probing for their causes.

Another reason for the constant theme featuring the rural Indian sensibility in Mahapatra's poetry may lie in his lack of understanding with the world of poetry. Mahapatra's main specialization is in physics and he himself agrees that he hasn't read much poetry in his life and that he only started writing until he was almost forty years old. In fact, he produced his first volumes of poetry after experimenting with writing short fiction and participating in writers' workshops.

Mahapatra is known for writing in a discursive poetic style. He noticed that in Indo-Anglian poetry, there is a certain absence of sympathy for suffering and that troubles him. Therefore, he emphasizes key social issues in his verse, thereby generating critical debate among readers and scholars about these subjects. His subjects often include the social issues that plague the Indian subcontinent, such as: the exploitation of women and children, poverty, death, suicide, hunger, crime, war, violence, religious bigotry, prostitution, etc. He feels these issues very close to home, in Orissa.

In his poems, Mahapatra uses symbols and images from his surroundings often the natural scenes that evoke a sense of

native sensibility. His allusions to a variety of relatable subjects make his poetry rich in substance and resonate with deep meaning.

CRITICAL STUDY AND ANALYSIS

2.1 Jayanta Mahapatra: A Post-Colonial Poet

Postcolonial literature can be termed as the literature of the people from formerly colonized countries. Postcolonial literature particular confirms to the problems and consequences of the decolonization of a country. It ranges especially from questions relating to the political and cultural independence of the subjugated people to the themes such as racialism and colonialism. And accordingly, a wide range of literary theory has evolved around the subject. These literary theories approach the role of literature in understanding and apprehending the concept of cultural imperialism. Post-colonialism refers to these theories in literary texts, in speech or in discourses that aspire to challenge structural inequalities and establish social justice.

Jayanta Mahapatra can be described as one of the most innovative and progressive English poets of modern India. He is deeply touched by the shocking realities of the country and writes expressively about the hunger, myths, traditions, customs, rituals, anger, frustrations, love, etc. as well as topics involving the socio-cultural diversity and unity of the nation. Mahapatra's extensive work in literature exudes a certain leaning towards post colonialism. His poetry aims to unravel many features of post-colonialism such as the intricacies of a haunting past, the search for identity and discovering one's own roots. Mahapatra's writing enlightens the

native tradition protesting the former colonisation and subjugation of the people and thereby establishes a discourse on national integrity and identity. He inspires a sense of 'Indianness' through his content and the form of his poetry. His usage of symbols and images in his poems evoke a sense of linguistic versatility. These are some of the features of a modernist and post-colonial work in poetic literature.

Jayanta Mahapatra's adherence to the modernist movement can be seen in his open-ended literary forms and the use of symbols to provide coherence to a non-linear and fragmented structure. However, Mahapatra's poetry also unravels multiple facets of post-colonialism as a haunting colonial past, search for roots and identity. Having lived under colonial rule for a significant amount of time, Mahapatra understands the general issues of his people, the structural inequalities and social injustices. He writes to enliven his native tradition in an attempt to contrast the subjugation of the former colonisers and also aim to establish a national identity.

Mahapatra's is known for his depth in the feelings expressed through his poetry. His poetic imagination is also a culmination of various themes. One such recurring theme in his poems is the Orissa landscape. The Orissa landscape described by Mahapatra in his poems represent India's cultural and religious glory and compares it to its present hollowness and gloomy modern existence. He ponders over the intricacies of the modern relationships, love, sex and all such feelings and shows a significant poetic craftsmanship. His poetic craftsmanship, his command over his native language, his description of the landscape of his native land elevates him to

decolonize his poetry. Through his poetry, he establishes his own identity as well as the nation's identity which was subjugated due to colonisation. Through his poetry, one can observe that Mahapatra wishes to establish his own identity, his native place's identity and the nation's identity. In comparison to his contemporaries such as Ramanujan, he also is in search for his roots and identity. Through the description of native temples, landscapes and myths, he strives to find the identity and roots demurred by the colonisers. He writes about his native rituals, customs, the temples of Konark and Jagannath, the places of Puri and Dhauri vividly in his poems. Even though he seems tormented by the ghosts of a colonial past, he finds peace from his native roots.

Like a typical post-modernist poet, Mahapatra advocates the use of the theme of transnationalism in his poems. He writes about the rise of cruelty and violence in the country and is disappointed by the lack of development of the nation after independence, i.e. the post-colonial era of India. His poetry strikes a tragic note when he describes poverty, the plight of the masses and the women who are only seen with the eyes of 'lust' by men. In the poems, "Hunger", "Whorehouse in Calcutta Street" and "Man of his Night", Mahapatra sheds light on the theme of sex. Although Mahapatra recognizes this theme as a symbol of love and procreation, he also terms it as a symbol of perversion, used for animal pleasure and monetary gain.

Jayanta Mahapatra's poems are woven with intricate layers filled with myths and legends, which he presents in national spirit. This makes him truly a post-colonial

poet who also has a keen interest in the nation's politics. This interest is highlighted when he uses Mahatma Gandhi as a myth in one his poem. As a post-colonial poet, he mourns the plight of his nation as he describes the various social issues plaguing the country through his poetry. He feels the growing corruption and degeneration in the modern man and he often finds himself in turmoil over the modern scenario of underdevelopment. He mourns for the people who are being dragged through the pits of poverty and is pained by the sights of malnourished children. He unwraps the chaos and gloom and presents us with a scenario that even after independence, the nation is still under the ethos of colonisation. Specifically in his poem, "Seeing things in the dark", he describes a very gruesome image of society.

Jayanta Mahapatra can also be termed as a deconstructionist like most post-colonial writers. He observes the ethos of contemporary realities, analyses it scientifically and writes it with plain objectivity. He successfully adjusted the English language with an indigenous tradition which can be observed in his usage of Indian or native symbols and imagery in the English language. Thereby, creating his own blend of Indian English.

In conclusion, we may state that Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry reeks of post-colonial factors. Through his work, he decolonises his English poetry, protests against imperialism and shines a blinding light at his indigenous culture and tradition. He stands firm on his glorification of his native past and evokes a hope through his search for his identity and roots.

Bruce King in 2008 stated that, “Mahapatra’s vision and obsessive writing poetry as a hopeless search for meaning in the human condition is a characteristic of post-modernism”. He successfully discovered a new English idiom and promotes a new identity independent from the clutches of the colonisers. Thus, All these postcolonial traits, such as: the multiplicity of themes, motives behind the subject of writing, use of symbols, a new idiom of the English language and his general outlook towards society, all of them justify his position as a leading post-colonial Indian English poet.

2.2 Jayanta Mahapatra: Voice of Modern India

Jayanta Mahapatra is undoubtedly one of the most innovating and progressive writer of modern India. His vast knowledge regarding multiple subjects and his acute poetic imagination allows him to canvas out the terrain of poetic literature. In doing so, he has come a long way from when he was rejected by multiple publishers. In Mahapatra’s pursuit of excellence, his relentless study of poetry: rewriting, revising his own work has made him one of the greatest poet in Indian English literature. He tries to establish a postcolonial approach in his poetry by constantly revising his poems, which leads to the most significant and meaningful creation of a perfect idiom in Indian English poetry. Jayanta Mahapatra writes mostly about the people and places of Orissa. His sensibility towards his nativity is deeply immersed in the local landscape– a vast array of temples, rivers, mountains, marketplaces, brothels, forests and the

multiple seasons, along with the cultural norms such as- the rites, rituals, ceremonies, etc.

Due to his contribution towards the literature, Mahapatra has been acknowledged by his peers as well as the general literary enthusiasts as one of India’s most innovative, ingenious and progressive poet. His work has garnered interests from all over the world and he has received multiple accolades from esteemed organisations and sources. In the year 1981, for his book “*Relationships*”, Mahapatra became the first Indian poet to win a *Sahitya Akademi* award for English Poetry. He also has secured multiple accolades from abroad such as: the Jacob Glatstein *memorial* award conferred by Poetry magazine, Chicago and the *Allen Tate Poetry Prize* for 2009 from The Sewanee Review. In 2009, He won the SAARC Literary Award. He was also conferred with a Padma Shri, the fourth highest civilian award of India in the same year. In the year 2006, he was awarded a D. Lit. Degree by Utkal University, Odisha and later on he was awarded an honorary doctorate by Ravenshaw University on 2nd of May, 2009. His poems were published in international literary journals such as Critical Inquiry, the Sewanee Review, the Kenyan Review, and the New Yorker. His poems were published in poetry magazines across India as well. He has received countless other literary awards for his published poems. Another one of his exploits in the west was when he was invited to participate in the International Writing Program (IWP) at Iowa among 22 selected international poets. This provided him with an opportunity to go out of India and acquire international exposure which later helped him expand his career in

literature. Later on, from 1976 to 1977 Mahapatra was a visiting writer in this International Writing Program, where he traveled to Australia and Japan in the years 1978 and 1980 respectively. He also continued to teach physics as his main income source until he retired in 1986.

Mahapatra was also a part of a trio of poets who are credited as the founders of Indian English poetry. These poets are A. K. Ramanujan and R. Parthasarathy. But over time, Mahapatra managed to carve a niche for himself and acquired a tranquil poetic voice different from his contemporaries.

Jayanta Mahapatra's essentially Indian sensibility intermingled with his flawless command over the English language, his ingenious poetic imagination, his brevity and precision in expression of feelings via words, his use of enthralling images and symbols in his work places him at the peak of Indian English poetry. This can also be confirmed by his long list of achievements, acknowledgements and accolades that he has collected along the way on his journey of poetic literature. Therefore, we can state that Jayanta Mahapatra is indeed a voice of Modern India. A voice deeply rooted in the pits of Indian English literature, which questions, ponders, imagines and creates a feeling of 'Indianness' in the English language imposed by the colonisers, thereby decolonising it.

Conclusion:

It is believed that post-colonial Indian English poetry didn't see the light of day well until the 1960s and after. Yet, this form of poetic English literature in India has proven to be more and more amazing, responsive to

instances and diversified in nature. It has acquired its own specialization and discovered a voice. This voice can be learned through the poet's ingenuity for carving the idiom of his own world. Indian English poetry, through various poets' works and influences is at a point where it is more malleable to adjust and adapt readily, often naturally. With conscious efforts, the poets draw out the subjects, the issues, the socio-cultural features out of the historical Indian tradition and merge it with the very language used by the former colonisers as a tool of subjugation over the local language. One such poet is Jayanta Mahapatra who with his poetic imagination and genius employs a feeling of 'Indianness' through the English language in his poetry. Therefore, this study tries to understand Jayanta Mahapatra as a post-colonial poet who has carved a niche for himself in Indian English poetry, thereby becoming the modern voice of Indian poetry by merging the techniques of the modes of expressions.

Jayanta Mahapatra, who is situated in Orissa, has made enormous contributions towards the betterment of the Indian English poetry through his experimental topics and native poetic idiom. His themes include social subjects plucked from reality, such as poverty, patriarchy, crime, prostitution, corruption, communal disharmony, ecological imbalance, social discrimination, etc. These topics are depicted as humanely as possible and are highlighted through his poetic imagination.

His poems showcase his strong attachment towards his roots as well as his childhood experiences. Mahapatra draws inspiration from himself and his childhood

experiences. From the Oriya fairy testimonies to the myths, legends and Indian epics, many of his poems are a search for his own identity. This search of identity gives a sense of continuity to his poetry. Scenes and experiences from memory help him dive deep into the past and continue his search for his root and identity. Not only his experiences but also through his surroundings such as the Orissa landscape, the mountains, the temples, the villages, the ocean, the people; through these elements Mahapatra tries to paint an Indian painting of poetic imagination in the English language. With the aid of this memory, he continues his attempts at discovering his roots and find peace from the burdens of the present. The past memories help him erase the fear of aging, death and the fear of change in the present. The concept that in order to cope up with the pressure of the world without exploitation of any resources, one should simply take on a journey to discover one's own self. The poetic creativity of Mahapatra affirms this concept and reiterates this through his poems.

Readers who encounter experiences which might get captured inside the framework of a poem are often the ones most attracted towards Mahapatra's poems. With these experiences guiding the readers, they must solve the intricacies of Mahapatra's poetic creations. Mahapatra through his expertise in the poetic expressions generously incites the reader's involvement with the poem. The poems don't express any message written in well-phrased forms. The meaning of Mahapatra's poetry lies within the poem itself. They make the readers gaze inwards, question themselves and make way for a personal discovery.

Jayanta Mahapatra is the voice of modern Indian English Poetry. He is progressive, innovative and can be termed as one of the most important post-colonial writer in Indian Literature. This study is an attempt to understand Mahapatra and his work as a post-colonial poet who takes inspiration from his past experiences. He writes about the socio-cultural topics plaguing the country as well takes inspiration from the landscape and his surroundings. He talks about nature, pain, agony as well as poverty, prostitution and the welfare of women. His topics and themes range very wide and almost reach every general subject of critical study. For his work, his poems and his contribution to literature, he has been awarded with multiple accolades across his career. Now at the age of 92, Jayanta Mahapatra is still alive and kicking creatively. His latest book '*The Puri Poems*' in 2018 deals with the deepest of human emotions such as grief and nostalgia.

Therefore, we can rightfully conclude Jayanta Mahapatra as a genius in his expertise over his work and can be termed as the 'progressive poetic voice of modern India'.

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