



Pratidhwani the Echo

A Peer-Reviewed International Journal of Humanities & Social Science

ISSN: 2278-5264 (Online) 2321-9319 (Print)

Impact Factor: 6.28 (Index Copernicus International)

Volume-VI, Issue-IV, April 2018, Page No. 358-363

UGC Approved Journal Serial No. 47694/48666

Published by Dept. of Bengali, Karimganj College, Karimganj, Assam, India

Website: <http://www.thecho.in>

The search for Identity: A study of the poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra

Dr. Manjusri Mishra

Lecturer in English, P.N.U.A.College, Chatrapur, Udisya, India

Abstract

The Indian poets who express themselves in English have their cultural roots in their community. Many of these Indian poets have been educated abroad but since they belong to the middle - class, they find themselves alienated within their own immediate circle and even from the westernized ethos. Jayanta Mahapatra not only looks at the outside world, but also within nature itself the genuinely felt experiences of life in order to find out a meaning for himself. His poems deal with the question of self, search for roots and identity, Hindu culture, its rituals, spirituality, symbols and the lost heritage of the past. He does not like to ignore the world he lives in.

Key Words: Indian Poetry, Jayanta Mahapatra, self and Identity.

Introduction: The post - independence poetry of India, underwent a sea change as far as the themes are concerned. The poets are faced with the crisis of identity, and their poetry is one of the quests, a search of their self, a search for their cultural roots. The reason for such a theme of Indian poetry is not far to seek. The Indian poets who express themselves in English have their cultural roots in their community. Many of these Indian poets have been educated abroad but since they belong to the middle - class, they find themselves alienated within their own immediate circle and even from the westernized ethos. Some of the poets come from different racial backgrounds, but are nationals of India. For example, Nissim Ezekiel is a Jew, Dom Moraes is an Anglo - Indian, Daruwalla and Jussawalla are Parsees, Eunice De Souza is a Goan Christian. The Indian poet writing in English therefore finds himself alienated. So the poetry of modern Indian poets naturally turns on the theme of identity crisis in order to authenticate their identity.

After 1976, there is a beginning of a new phase in Indian English Poetry. There was a burst of a sudden creative energy in the works of Arun Kolatkars' "Jejuri", Gieve Patel's "How Do You Withstand, Body", Arbindo Krishna Meherotra's "Nine Enclosures", R. Parthosarathy's "Rough Passage", Jayanta Mahapatra's "A Rain of Rites", Nissim Ezekiel's "Hymn in Darksness", Shiv K. Kumar's "Subterfuges" and K.N. Daruwalla's "Crossing of Rivers". These poets reveal in their works the awareness of raw Indian identity. They seem 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. Thus modern Indian poetry centered itself around self in relation to society, history with family as the core unit and in relation to self, its own propelled emotions and feelings. So the themes of modern Indian poetry are secular, introspective and contemplative in thought and feeling.

Physicist, bilingual poet and essayist, he holds the distinction of being the first Indian English poet to have received the Sahitya Akademi Award (1981) for Relationship. In 2009, he was awarded "Padmashree Award", country's most prestigious award for his outstanding contribution to the field of literature. The poet not only looks at the outside world, but also within nature itself the genuinely felt experiences of life in order to find out a meaning for himself. His poems deal with the question of self, search for roots and identity, Hindu culture, its rituals, spirituality, symbols and the lost heritage of the past. He does not like to ignore the world he lives in. The problems of his people are his own problems. Reading through any poem in *Random Descent* proves beyond doubt that he is a poet of our times, straddling the urban-rural divide, at home within his own skin, his storm-tossed life. He tries to discover his self which he finds in the Indian ethos, from, *Close the sky, Ten by Ten* to *Random Descent* he introduces new modes requiring themes, new vocabulary family or home as important as his aspect of his poetry. He celebrates the concept of family or home as a cosmic one. He tries to relate himself into the visible and invisible dimensions of the family, its members both living and dead, with an intention for searching his roots and own identity.

The search for identity is a perpetual quest that never seems to end. Every now and then, when we feel as if we have found who we are, something comes along and shakes us. Once again we are left floundering in the sea of questions. Perhaps God allows us to go through this from time to time to test what is in our hearts, what we base our sense of self-worth and identity on. Our lives are such contradictions. All of us who have tried so hard to make sense of it, to make sense of who we are, will find that we are often a mess of contradictions. But we all still try. We try to fit our lives into nice little controllable moulds. We seek stability, security, predictability. In our lives, we try to reach a state of comfort, and put into plan theories that assure success. But we kid ourselves if we think we can find predictability in our lives sufficient to define ourselves by it.

Three barriers lie in the search for one's identity. The first is the barrier of pride. The second barrier to our goal is our past. The third barrier to reaching our goal is our lack of perseverance. Pride causes the ascendancy of the flesh and quenches the Spirit. It is only when we humbly admit that we cannot, that the Spirit empowers and enables us. The past continues to grip us with fear such that each time we try to go forward, the past pulls us back. But we must realize that as we step in faith into a new tomorrow, God will lift us far above our past, into His glorious purposes. Perhaps the testing of our faith at the outset of our first step into a greater promise is to test that which is in our hearts, to break our reliance on ourselves, and to burn away our false and selfish motives. We press on. We must expect

opposition so that when it does come, we will not become discouraged and fall away from our goal.

An intellectual at home, with the latest concepts and theories, Mahapatra was also concerned with Indian philosophy and literature, with family relations in India, and with himself as someone moulded by a wide variety of influences. The Indianness is a part of his past, the seed from which he grew and to which he remained inextricably linked. Often such links are childhood fears, the beginning of some anxiety, disenchanted memories of family. There might also be themes from Indian classical literature. His poetry is rich in images and cultural echoes as words reflect and interact with other words to bring in a wide variety of associations. Some of the poems are difficult to discuss as they blend the psychological, philosophical, and full of rich ironies, allusions, references. His poetry is essentially the poetry of struggle: struggle with self, struggle to come to terms with the outer and inner. But, eventually the struggle is expressed more in an ironic tone than in a tragic note. There is less frustration and more depiction in his poetry. Historical sagas and day to day anecdotes of his time are woven together in his poems. He is aware of his land, its topography, its folktales, traditions and myths. It adds in to the meaning of his poems. He borrows his symbols and images from the realm of history. He narrates his present putting it side by side with myths of the land; he holds a mythopoeic vision when it comes to description of his land and its realities. He explores and turns over every stone of the time in a hope to find a new meaning and a new symbol and a new myth to connote his meaning. All the unvoiced voices find echoes in his poetry. Myth, Mysticism, History and varied imagery includes importance in his realm of poetry. Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry bears a kind of cross section of the exotic culture and represents socio-culture deterioration of the present generation. He always tries to go deep into the problem. He is concerned about the present state of India. His poetry has a wide range and his thematic circle includes both past and present in its diameter.

In this paper I have tried to emphasize the making of the poet to place him and his work against the literary traditions of past that he has inherited. To comprehend his poetry in vacuum is impossible; hence it becomes essential to relate it with his past and the present, his native land and culture.

Jayanta Mahapatra is one of the well acclaimed Indo-English poets for the originality of developing a theme in a familiar way. The scope and treatment of varied themes in his poetry is just like metamorphosis of real facts of life into symbols projecting human experience in pictorial form. He presents his depth of feelings rooted in Indian culture and its ethos. Being born in Odisha, he seems to be deeply attached to its environment. Mahapatra has rightly stated his view while receiving the National Akademi of Letters Award in the following words:

To Orissa, to this land in which my roots lie and lies my past and
in which my beginning and my end, where the wind knees over
the grief of the River Daya and where the waves of Bay of

Bengal fail to real out today to the twilight soul of Konarka, I
acknowledge my debt and my relationship. (Mohanty ii)

His poetic exploration of the places to which he belongs turns out to be a search for the self. This is a sense of belonging to the place of his birth and the landscape of his native land, which relates him to his poetic craft. He is firmly rooted in Odisha soil.

Odisha and its landscape constitute the core of Mahapatra's poetry. He is a real observer of the land and its cosmos. The landscapes along with the various cities play a significant presence in his poetry. The landscape, the seasons and the environment are the primary sources of Mahapatra's poetic imagination. It helps him to contemplate on his personal feelings. The poetry of the artist displays an undercurrent of romantic passion and surrealistic vision. The poems depicting the Orissa landscape are 'Dawn', 'Village', 'Old Places', 'A Twilight poem', 'The Captive Air of Chandipur-on-Sea' and so on. The temple, the priest, the beggar, the fishermen, the crow, the leper, the rickshaw puller – all are presented as living characters.

Landscape in Mahapatra's poetry becomes the chief source for the real understanding of his poetry. He pasteurizes the actual inner facets of life by alluding to the landscape. His poem entitled 'A Country' depicts the vision of such inner reality:

Sometimes at night, when all voices die
my mind sees earth, my country –
to accept sacrifice ...
(...)
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.
And not understanding myself,
Not understanding you,
like the still strange shapes of hills in the distance,
I, too, listen to the faraway wailing of hyenas
aware of the dying countryside around them,
tortured by hunger and the reek of decay in the air
after the age-old myths have been told all over again.
(Life Signs, 29-30).

The poet wants to articulate his identity with reference to the past, land as well as the sense of belonging which helps in to get connected with the place and community. It seems to be an important way of establishing the identity of a poet. According to Bijaya Kumar Das:

A poet's response to the landscape of his country, his sense of the tradition and culture of the land of his birth and many other factors go to the back, to make him assume an identity of his own. (Das 106)

Jayanta Mahapatra draws prolific and detailed portrait of the physical, historical and political India in his poetry. His poetry gives us a picture of the home land, he inhabits both physically and emotionally. His poems regularly emphasize the love for the land and condemnation for the time. The poetry of Mahapatra is limited to a particular region of the country. The impression one receives; is that, he is using the local specifics to represent the nation as a whole. There is no doubt that his physical and poetic location is Odisha. His poems display a constant reaffirmation of his deep and passionate attachment to the land. In one of his poems "Going out For a Walk" he says:

Where I live
My coming home defends my smile.

(Close the Sky, Ten by Ten 12)

As an outsider, there is an underlined pathos and pessimism to everything he writes about Odisha, both past and present. The people of Odisha are victims of history, politics and nature, the socio-economic consequences of centuries of misfortune being what they have inherited. He felt deeply the hunger of the people and the mute suffering of the women and the children. He expresses his deep attachment to his land by exposing all her wounds and putting on them the healing touch of his empathy. He is writing from within his land and about his people, and his stance, is one of a critical insider who gives amplitude of local detail to land authentic city to his images.

Mahapatra remembers the history of the land in which he is inhabited and his verse fulfills his desires. He re-imagines the past and re-presents the present from the place where he has taken birth. The living past of Odisha and its present combines his vision in the 'Burden of Waves and Fruits'. He says:

I move with the delirium of the past,
applaud with the lean, withered dawns of my hands,
to set my lips on shy white jasmines
that harden into the stone breast of Konark dancers.
And further he writes:
as though in anticipation
of the brutality of the oppressors
unable to escape the trances
of my place, my endurance
simply creating gestures of magnificence.

(Burden of Waves and Fruit, 45-46)

He speaks out directly about the ground realities with its context. His poetic world is weaved with Indian consciousness.

Conclusion: The poems of Mahapatra are a representation of his communion with the various landscapes of his identity. Odisha, his home land is the source of paradoxical views expressed in his poetry. A sensitive reader would always wonder about the persona of Mahapatra, unless he gets acquainted with his background. The poet feels his self has transferred into a place or landscape. Out of fear his mind raises the question about existence in the present and doubts for the future with a wounded past in the heart.

Reference:

1. Das, B.K. Critical Essays on Poetry. Delhi: Kalyani Publishers. 1993. 106 Print
2. Mahapatra, Jayanta. Burden of Waves and Fruits. Washington D.C: Three Continent Press, 1988. Print
3. ----- . Close the Sky Ten by Ten. Calcutta: Dialogue, 1971. Print
4. ----- . Life Signs. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983. Print.
5. Mohanty, Niranjan. The Golden Voices: Poets from Orissa Writing in English. Berhampur:
6. Poetry publication, 1986. ii Print