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Variegated Aspect of the Poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra

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Abstract

Much of modern poetry speaks about contemporary life and society. Poems of today are short and compact. They deal with various aspects of common life. Delicate feelings and personal notes are handled deftly. Creative work in poetry is a discovery of oneself at a particular moment which just happens and it does not follow a particular programme. Poetry is discovered, not invented. It is a free and natural blooming that takes place in a language rather than a planned composition meant to be accommodated in a framework, already existing. The poet creates a new form which helps him know himself, see himself, and analyse himself. It is like self-creation and self-realisation, which reveal the beauty of poetry that flows from the heart of the poet. Poets like Jayanta Mahapatra pictures the live and vital nature of earth and society and the themes of their poems bring forth and present the important places of Orissa. English Poetry in India, today makes the English language more malleable to change with ease and naturalness. The poets draw their themes, with conscious efforts, out of the glorious ancient Indian culture. The collage of concrete images derived from the multi-dimensional learning of science, economy, geography, philosophy, psychology, ethics, scriptures and so on vindicates the realistic trends that pervade modern poetry. It is in this context, the researcher feels that a study has to be undertaken on Jayanta Mahapatra who has carved a niche for himself in Indian poetry in English by merging the inward and outward modes of expression.

Keywords – Personal Notes, Self Realization, Vital Nature of Earth and Society, Scriptures

Mahapatra's writing is a prized heritage of the humanity. He has transcended the limitations of birth and place. It is not the poet's responsibility to keep the world informed and advised to face the great disaster and explained in terms of natural laws and immoral social practices and irresponsible political decisions world-wide. One should not expect the poet to write about these atrocities though the poet does not want to see them all. But the immoral social practices and political aberrations around turn into traumas which he cannot escape and which become the subject of his poems.

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The history is a record of many crises in the human relation to ultimate reality. Modern poets in the 1950s and 1960s reveal their experiences and their awareness of others and provided Indian society with new insights. The search for roots is the trend in modern Indian poetry. English poets have a mission for identity with Indian culture and its background. Indian poets have the ability to apprise the reader about the relevant social issues. Much of the modern poetry speaks about contemporary life and the society. Mita Biswas puts this fact beautifully in her article, *Search for Self in the Contemporary Indian Poetry: A Study of Selected Poems of Kamala Das and Jayanta Mahapatra*:

Haunted by a sense of loss and estrangement, the Indian English poet is locked up in a Hamletian dilemma. In world of ineptitude, quest for one's identity, the search for one's roots and the discovery of self and the affirmation of his belonging become indispensable anchors in the poetic outbursts of contemporary poets. (48)

From the very beginning to the present, Indian Poetry in English has progressed as a successful literary genre. It is remarkably great. Poetry written in English today in the world has an identity, based on nationality and culture, religion, tradition, custom and heritage of the soil along with the authentic picture of contemporary life. Indian poetry presented a fusion of past and the future. Dr. Mirza Sibtain Beg points out in his article, *Jayanta Mahapatra: A Thematic Glimpse* that, "Indian poetry shows a remarkable fusion of the future and past and exhibits its proclivity towards novelty and simultaneously it exudes penchant for indigenous culture, custom and communities" (114).

Although Christian by birth, Mahapatra's creative self is primarily Hindu in terms of myth, symbols, folklore and idiom. Though his grandfather became a Christian he was totally a Hindu. Christianity is something Mahapatra learnt at his mother's footsteps. There were evening prayers at home. He learnt to revere Christ. But Hinduism is a part of him too. That is his inner self and his inner self is totally Hindu. Like all other branches of literature, poetry deals with human belief. This world of a constantly changing alignment between dream and reality seems to constitute the world of poetry. Poetry mirrors reality of contemporary life. It is something that comes out of his heart.

Poetry is an expression of intense feelings and minute observation about human beings. It reveals the process of the poet's mind. It portrays the spectrum of life in all its shades and hues. It has ability to communicate the real quality of experience. It is a meeting place of the inward and the outward sensibility.

Identity crisis becomes the most relevant issue in Indian English poetry. The problem of identity crisis becomes a national theme. Mita Biswas states, "The search for identity at the end of the twentieth century is inspired by a feeling of alienation, which is relation to psychological and physical exile or both" (46). She further adds:

Identity may be defined as a process of creative self- realization. It has been established that to create an identity is part of the essential business of an artist. It is

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the perennial sustaining creative and abiding force of an artist. The poet must find his roots and endeavor to search for the self in order to define himself. (47)

Identity is one of the prominent themes in Mahapatra's poetry. It surfaces from his personal life emerges as one of the major themes in Mahapatra's poetry. He unfolds the layers of history, religion, myths and past in order to know his identity and his self. R. Shankar comments, "Jayanta Mahapatra is one such poet tormented by identity crisis for being alienated from Hindu culture and his incapability to employ Oriya as medium to reflect his feelings, emotions and ideas" (07).

Mahapatra looks for his identity by reacting and responding to the social problems. He is strained between the two religions; Hinduism and Christianity. He identifies himself with the place, tradition, culture, myth, religion and time. R. Shankar observes in the book entitled, *Jayanta Mahapatra: The Poet Quest for Identity*:

A study of Mahapatra's poetic works reveals his identity with the world in varied aspects. Identity is essential for the survival of man, in pursuit of which 'quest' forges ahead. The idea of 'quest' emerges in man when some discontentment lingers in the mind of man. (14)

The contemporary reality is a great concern for Mahapatra. Mahapatra's poetry turns toward contemporary crisis and pain. His poems deal with the problems like love, hunger, problems of women, sex and religious fanaticism. His concern with the contemporary situation makes the poet focus on the somber aspects of the present day world. He turns to the contemporary situation tracing the predicament of frail human lot. He speaks about contemporary issues. The poet identified himself with the complex problems of the society as a humanist. His poetry reveals the problems like identity, love, hunger, sex, religion, anger, myth, loneliness, self and quest for roots mingling with geographical, social and cultural sources. These problems are the greatest problems in our country.

Jayanta Mahapara is a significant poet with "an authentic voice" among the contemporaries in the Indian English Poetry. He occupies a position of considerable importance with his quest for identity. He was born on 22 October, 1928 in Cuttak, Orissa. He has been the first Indian English poet to receive the prestigious Sahitya Academic Award for 'Relationship' in 1981. He is an Oriya poet. He is also a winner of Padma Sri, the fourth highest civilian honour in India. He loses his identity in religion, because of conversion to Christianity. He began writing poems when he was in the age of 40. All his working life, he taught physics at different colleges in Orissa. Mahapatra attempts to relate himself to his country India, especially to native province of Orissa, its tradition, rituals, customs, milieu, legends, myth, superstition, religion, history, spiritualism, poverty, landscape and life style. Mahapatra was influenced by the great poets like John Keats, William Wordsworth, William Carlos, Allen Ginsberg, T.S. Eliot, Emily Dickinson and Ezra Pound.

The present paper attempts to examine Mahapatra's quest for identity in myth, culture, tradition, social concern, time consciousness and indeterminacy with reference to his

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poetic works. This present study encourages the reader to become better informed and thoughtful towards seduction, poverty, sexuality and exploitation through the poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra. It also opens new vistas for the reader and researchers.

Hunger is one of the most outstanding poems of Mahapatra. It was published in 1976 from the collection of poems 'A Rain of Rites'. This poem is a representation of modern people's poor life. In this poem, Mahapatra focuses on poverty which is the greatest problem in our country. Laxminarayana Bhat observes in *Modern Indian Poet Writing in English: Jayanta Mahapatra*:

Poverty and sexuality play havoc in the life of men and women debasing them to sub- human levels: a father is prostituting his girl-child, hardly out of her teens, luring a prospective customer in casual business- like manner that is most shocking. It is the stark poverty that has driven the fisherman- father to this extreme path. (179)

There are two kinds of Hunger; one is the hunger of food and another is the hunger for sexual gratification. There are three characters in this poem, a tourist, fisherman and fisherman's daughter. The father wants to sell his daughter, and daughter has become a helpless and victim of male desire. The protagonist and the girl are victims of their hungers. The fisherman tells the tourist that his daughter is only fifteen:

I heard him say: My daughter, she's just turned fifteen
 Feel her. I'll be back soon, your bus leaves at nine.
 The sky fell on me, and a father's exhausted wife.
 Long and lean, her years were cold as rubber.
 She opened her wormy legs wide. I felt the hunger there,
 The other one, the fish slithering, turning inside. (24)

This poem focuses on the emerging survival sex and child prostitution in India. It asserts that women struggle for their own identity. In this poem, the poet reflects the moral degradation of poverty stricken men and women. It shows contemporary reality. At certain points, Mahapatra realizes that the poet is one who sings of pain. He thus tries to identify himself with the complex problems of the society as a humanist.

Another poem of Mahapatra entitled "*Grandfather*" represents the tension and conflict in the poet's mind. In this poem, the poet articulates his view that he may lose his identity physically like his grandfather:

Did you hear the young tamarind leaves rustle
 in the cold mean nights of your belly? Did you see
 your own death? Watch it tear at your cries,
 break them into fits of unnatural laughter?

How old were you? Hunted, you turned coward and ran,
 the real animal in you plunging through your bone.

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You left your family behind, the buried things,
the precious clod that praised the quality of a god.

The imperishable that swung your broken body,
turned it inside out? What did faith matter?
What Hindu world so ancient and true for you to hold?
Uneasily you dreamed toward the center of your web. (67)

His grandfather, Chintamani adopted Christianity during the devastating famine in 1866. Though his grandfather became a Christian, he was totally a Hindu. He has expressed his dissatisfaction with the decision of his grandfather in the poem “*Grandfather*”:

The separate life let you survive, while perhaps
the one you left wept in the blur of your heart.
Now in a night of sleep and taunting rain
My son and I speak of that famine nameless as snow.

A conscience of years is between us. He is young.
The whirls of glory are breaking down for him before me.
Does he think of the past as a loss we have lived, our own?
Out of silence we look back now at what we do not know.

There is a dawn waiting beside us, whose signs
are a hundred odd years away from you, Grandfather.
You are an invisible piece on a board
Whose move has made our children grow, to know us, (67)

The poet is sad that the hunger drove his grandfather to change his religion. He feels himself in exile. The sufferings constantly haunt his mind. He feels alienated because of his Christian identity in the Hindu society. In the identity crisis, he finds that he has been ruined by his grandfather while converting himself to Christianity. Rabindra K. Swain observes in his book entitled, *The Poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra: A Critical Study*:

As the poet tries to identify himself with the myth and legend of the land, there is an attempt to merge himself with the crowds, he hopes to resolve the duality that dwells within him, of his being born to a Christian family and his psychological assimilation into a Hindu ethos. (104)

Mahapatra’s Relationship brought him the prestigious 1981 Central Sahitya Academy Award in India. He also won the Gangadhar Tiher National Award for poetry (1995) and Vaikom Mohammed Basheer Award (1997). All this fame and critical acclaim won by Mahapatra are not an accidental one, for he has emerged from a literary tradition that has deep root in the soil. This poem focuses on the contemporary issues of quest for identity. The poet is torn between the past and the present. The long narrative poem ‘Relationship’ is set in

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Orissa and it embodies the myth and history of the land. It shows Mahapatra's sense of belonging to his native place. As Mahapatra writes in "Relationship":

My existence lies in the stones
 which carry my footsteps from one day into another,
 down to the infinite distances,
 I know I can never come alive
 if I refuse to consecrate at the altar of my origins. (11)

This poem generates a nostalgic vision. It illuminates his inner being. The depiction of landscape shows Mahapatra's search for identity. Here, the poet also finds out the relationship of his inner self with his locale, he gradually becomes aware of self-identity. It reflects the burden of Mahapatra's racial memory. It articulates his unbreakable relationship with the rich culture, myths, tradition and history of Orissa. As L. Bhat asserts that, "In Relationship, Mahapatra's quest pushes him further deep to explore the whole gamut of socio-cultural history of his land in order to establish a meaningful bond with it. His personal destiny is inseparably linked with the destiny of his land" (95). This statement shows the complete picture of the poet's isolation, loneliness and loss of identity.

His themes range from sex to nature from religion to superstition, from the metaphysical to the physical, from the personal to the impersonal. In all his poems, whatever the themes may be, there seems to be a meditative and reflective quality. The authenticity and the universality of his poems come from the very fact that it presents a down-to-earth world out of the imagined one. His poetry reveals the changing perspective of modern Indian poetry. He underlines the presence of truth in poetry. Mahapatra identifies himself with the society. His poetry covers up all aspects of human life. It is a "quest for belongingness". The following statement by Laxminarayana Bhat clarifies this point, "Therefore, we need this orientation to understand the way Mahapatra orders his experiences and to grasp the nature of its duality which he attempts to convey in his poetry" (110).

Mahapatra has established himself as a significant poetic voice. His sense of belonging to the society reflects his immediate reaction to the grotesque events in the contemporary life. His poetry bridges the gap between the traditional and the modern. A sense of loneliness haunted Mahapatra always. This feeling of loneliness and sense of rejection influence his poetry to a great extent. It can be said that his poetry represents a Christian poet's search for identity in a society dominated by Hindu Culture. It is a constant attempt to tide over his sense of alienation. As Laxminarayana Bhat states:

Today's world is topsy-turvy and is heading straight for its imminent destruction: the migratory birds do not fly to their destination to enjoy more sunshine and to breed in a more congenial atmosphere as they should. It seems that these birds too are condemned to embark on a reverse migration to colder landscape with scanty food. (143)

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It may be concluded that Mahapatra is very talented Indian English poet of our time who has inspired a number of budding poets. He reflects the bare reality in Indian society. He reveals his identity with the historical past as well as the problems of the present society. He articulates his quest for identity with the problems of the society and sufferings of the people. He tries to unearth all possible ways for identity in the inner realms of his heart. It can be said that his poetry shows the pain, suffering and a sense of loss. Therefore, his poetry is a journey into the self in an attempt to understand the mystery of life.

Mahapatra has strong belief in the present. He hopes that the world of poetry redeems him from the phobia of loneliness. He believes that the past helps him establish his identity in the surroundings around him. He thinks that time teaches how to understand things better and realize the importance of life. It can be said that his poetry is filled with personal guilt, hunger, pain, remorse desire and moments of renewal. Therefore, Mahapatra's poetry becomes strikingly different from that of his contemporaries. Jayanta Mahapatra's poems abound in symbols, imagery and allusions to encompass the human condition. Mahapatra seems to have been influenced by the imagist movement especially by Eliot and Ezra Pound. The poet, being rooted in the traditions of Orissa, introduces so many religious images and symbols in his poems. He always tries to go deep into the problems. Thus, it is said that Mahapatra is a successful Indian poet writing in English.

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