



# Exploring the Poetic World of Jayanta Mahapatra: A Reflection of Introspection and Universality

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## Abstract:

*This research article delves into the diverse poetic world of Jayanta Mahapatra, an eminent Indian poet known for his deeply introspective and contemplative works. Through an analysis of his distinguished literary contributions, this study highlights Mahapatra's ability to intertwine personal experiences with the larger universal themes of human existence, spirituality, nature, and social issues. Drawing on his unique style and thematic concerns, we shed light on the poet's creative vision, poetic techniques, and the impact his work has had on the global literary landscape.*

**Keywords:** contemporary, evocative, introspection, mythology, smouldering.

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If we look into modern Indian poetry in English, we will find that it is genuine as well as sincere in its form and texture despite having less experience. Though the language is foreign, the Indian milieu places an important part of the language through its sensibility and the spirit and thus moles the language according to the Indian context. Actually the Indian poets not only have the courage to write in English but also have the potential to express their emotions and views in a foreign language with sheer elegance. In this respect Jayant Mahapatra writes:

"Yes, there's a poem growing  
With a foreign language which keeps my head  
up,  
I don't try to explain  
Whether it is the right thing to do or wrong".  
(Mahapatra *Interview*.)

Jayanta Mahapatra began his career as a professor who taught Physics in Ravenshaw College, Cuttack and his career as a poet began much later when he was forty years old. That is the reason why he is called a late

bloomer in poetry. Mahapatra's poetic themes are based on versatile subjects and the regional elements with locale of Orissa. Human relationships, socio-cultural problems, love, morality, spirituality, history and mythology are the dominant themes in his poetry. Keeping his surroundings in the background, Mahapatra taken the help of various images, symbols and mythical icons to elucidate his poetic viewpoint. M.K Naik is of the opinion that "his poetry is a systematic experiment with the images and imagery is the single language in his poetry" (Naik, 99). In his poetry we can find abundance of various social and religious elements that artistically intertwined with images and symbols. Being a teacher of Physics, he could not leave his analytical and reasonable outlook in his poetic world as he said, "Physics did make me more analytical helping me to break ties with my ancestral beliefs; and still, the basic quality of acceptance, of an unshakable closeness with my destiny persists" (Prasad, 292).



The universality of Mahapatra's poetry is his use of vivid and evocative imagery. His poems often rely on descriptive and sensory language to depict the beauty of nature, the harshness of life, and the complexities of human existence. These images, rooted in his Indian landscape and culture, become powerful metaphors that can be appreciated and understood by readers from diverse cultural and geographic backgrounds.

Mahapatra was born and brought up in Orissa and thus the landscapes of Puri, Konark find abundance in his poetry. In his famous poem, "Dawn at Puri", the picture of the sea beach of the holy city of Puri finds its centre stage. Mahapatra here tries to portray the realistic surrounding of the sea beach where noises of the crows, skulls lying here and there and white clad widowed women waiting to enter the great temple of Lord Jagannath Here we are introduced to those people who despite living in nominal condition but there is a solemnity in their eyes.

"Endless crow noises  
A skull on the holy sands  
tilts its empty country towards hunger.  
White-clad widowed women  
pass the centres of their lives  
Are waiting to enter the Great Temple.  
Their austere eyes  
stare like those cut in a net,  
hanging by the dawn's shining strands of  
faith".

(Mahapatra, *The Best of...*29)

The portrayal of the town of Puri is also to be found in Mahapatra's another short poem 'Test for Tomorrow'. Here also a similar kind of reference has been made on the crows that have come out of the nests. Along with that the picture of a wide street is also been depicted by the poet. This only wide street of Puri is compared to the huge loosely hanging tongue of some monstrous creature. In this poem we are introduced with five faceless lepers whose faces have partly been eaten away by the disease. On the other hand a large crowd gathering is found.

"At Puri, the crows,  
The one wide street

lolls out like a giant tongue.  
Five faceless lepers move aside  
As a priest passed by.  
The crowds thronging the temple door."

(Mahapatra, *The Best of...* 36)

Mahapatra's poetic universe also depicts the summer season in India especially in Odisha through his poem 'Indian Summer Poem'. In this poem there is a picture of a mournful wind blowing and producing moaning sounds. From the chanting of the mantras by the priest to the crocodiles moving into deeper waters in the river are all been portrayed in the poem. In the next picture we witness the dung-heap smouldering in the morning sunlight and giving out smoke. The picture of a good wife lying in the bed in the long afternoon is also being depicted to reflect the very spirit of an Indian summer, more precisely the summer in Orissa. Despite being categorised as regional, these images have significant universal appeal. The seasons, landscapes and the environment are those elements which gives Mahapatra's poetic imagination a free play. Apart from this there are many other poems like "Dawn", "Village "A Twilight Poem", "Old Places" etc. Where we can experience the vivid picturisation of the landscapes of Orissa. To understand Mahapatra's poetry we have to understand the portrayal of Orissa's landscapes as his images come with deep meaning. As M. K Naik explains, "A scrutiny of Mahapatra's imagery reveals that his images are drawn from two worlds- the exterior world of phenomenal reality, and the surrealistic world. The way these two worlds are related is equally significant" (Naik, 99).His poem "A Country" is the best example about this inner reality.

"Sometimes at night, when all voices die  
My mind sees earth, my country-  
To accept sacrifice...

.....

Whenever 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".  
(Mahapatra, *Life Signs* 29-30)

Jayant Mahapatra is famous for his historical consciousness and just like dramatist Girish Karnad, he too has shown a great interest in the myths, history, legends and rituals associated with his motherland. That is why, on many occasions he tries to exhibit the glory and pride of the ancient Orissa in his poetic creations. From the reference of the famous Kalinga war which converted the emperor Ashok into a religious person to the description of the river Daya which serves as a witness to his ancestral heroic actions are all find their places in his poetry. However, Mahapatra understands that the glory of his state is not visible in today's era. It is evident in his poem "Relationships" which tells-  
"it is hard to tell now  
what opened the anxious sky,  
How the age-old proud stones  
Lost their strength and fell,  
And how the waters of the Daya  
stank with the bodies of my ancestors;  
My eyes close now  
because of the fear that moves my skin:  
the invaders walk along the only road they know  
that leads to their bloody victories."  
(Mahapatra, *Relationship*. 14)

Having said that Mahapatra has touched the poetic spirit of Odisha by narrating the myths associated with Lord Jagannath and his Rath Yatra, the legends of Sun Temple of Konark and even various erotic engravings that are found on the pillars and walls of the temples. Many legends and folklore associated with Hinduism and Orissa find important places in

his poetry. For example, in his poetry, "Konark", tells the legend of the twelve year old boy who happens to be the son of the chief architect of the great Sun Temple. It is believe that the Crowning slab of the temple could only be fitted in its proper place by this boy as all the efforts made by the other artisans have failed.  
"Konark, black in sleep,  
cold beacon of my silent land,  
messenger of death.  
Here the little boy in a dream

.....  
while  
The shadows in the stone  
are wrenching the light away  
from its roots,  
an inside me  
is the boy I found  
tracked by stone,  
The ceremony finished,  
his thin black cry  
Pointing at my life."  
(Mahapatra, *Relationship*. 22 - 23)

Apart from the myths and legends, another aspect of this description of locale is the quest for roots. The search for identifying oneself with the local environment is one of the very important aspect of Indian English poetry. Not only Jayanta Mahapatra, poets like A.K.Ramanujam and R. Parthasarathy have also invested their poetic endeavour to describe their ethnic roots. Whereas in his poetry, "The Disposed Nests", Mahapatra deals with the contemporary socio-political events like ethnic turmoil in Punjab and Bhopal gas tragedy to narrate the socio-political sensibility of a poet. In this genre, Mahapatra writes poems like, "Hunger", "The Warehouse in a Calcutta Street" where he deals with the problem of economic distress of Indian citizen. On the other hand, in "The Twenty-fifth Anniversary of a Republic" Mahapatra expresses his displeasure with the current state of affairs in India. Out of frustration he even ironically asks if anything has gone wrong with his country which had become a republic long time back but still has

nothing remarkable achievement to be remembered.

Women empowerment is another important subject which Mahapatra has touched and strongly advocates through his poetry. In "A Rain of Rites", he has shown the three generations of women i.e. grandmother, mother and daughter. He has shown the issue of suffering of women from various sections of the society like housewife, rustic girls, widows, whore, nuns and old women.

"Before the morning paper comes I know  
that Lata's rapists and killers  
have been set free, for that is how  
it has always been."

(Mahapatra,  
*Swayamvara ... 47*)

Another reason for the universality of Mahapatra's poetry is his use of vivid and evocative imagery. His poems often rely on descriptive and sensory language to depict the beauty of nature, the harshness of life, and the complexities of human existence. These images, rooted in his Indian landscape and culture, become powerful metaphors that can be appreciated and understood by readers from diverse cultural and geographic backgrounds. For example, in his poem entitled "Sun Worshipper", he draws the image of ancient Hindu tradition and culture. The poem has beautifully portrayed how Hindus worship the sun by offering water at the dawn:

"with case he pulls off a silverSS  
of orange sun into necessary hands,  
cups them over his head, together.  
The water runs down in vertical lines.  
the dawn suddenly is normal again."

(Mahapatra,*Swayamvara ... 24*)

One thing we must admit that Jayanta Mahapatra is out and out and original poet and thus he was not influenced by any other poet and his poetry is remarkable for his poetic imagination and depth of feelings. Having said that, we must not forget that

Mahapatra's themes of political and social issues, such as poverty, inequality, and violence, make his poetry relatable and relevant on a global level. These issues are not exclusive to a particular region or culture, but are instead part of the universal human experience. Mahapatra's poetic voice in addressing these concerns brings a sense of unity and shared understanding, appealing to readers who seek poetry that goes beyond personal introspection and connects with the wider world.

Overall, the universality of Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry lies in his exploration of timeless human themes, his ability to create vivid and powerful imagery, and his engagement with social and political concerns. By tapping into these universal aspects of the human experience, his poetry resonates with readers across different backgrounds, cultures, and languages.

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