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Negotiating Myth and Reality: Social Introspection in Jayanta Mahapatra's Poetry

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ABSTRACT: Jayanta Mahapatra encounters historical and mythical elements in his local environment, which shape his socio-cultural perceptions. This exposure of his "self" occurs during moments of focused concentration. The poetry of Mahapatra is rooted on the fundamental connections between the self, realityand culture, where reality encompasses and surpasses the individual. For him, it entails the exploration of mythology and is intertwined with the realm of art and sculpting. He persists in his quest for a transcendent deity and for spiritual enlightenment in the connections between individuals, as well as between deities and artistic creations. Mahapatra firmly believes that tradition is a state of ongoing existence and it is essential to comprehend the current circumstances by considering the historical context and vice versa. His poetry exhibits a profound manifestation of reflection. Mahapatra's major poetry serves as a satirical contemplation of historical and contemporary religious, cultural and social aspects of existence. The poet's endeavor to derive significance from his emotional and intellectual life is often seen in Oriya culture. His poetry draws heavily on the experiences and emotions of Oriya life.

KEYWORDS: Mythology,Cultural perceptions, Spiritual enlightenment, Satirical contemplation

I. INTRODUCTION

India, a nation with a deep and profound belief in established religious ideologies, perceives the divine essence of God in all living and non-living entities. Multiple religious institutions in India embody the diversity of the manifestations of God, while yet upholding the fundamental aspect of His unity. The many manifestations of God may be seen across the whole nation via the worship of different deities, celestial bodies, plants, and even stones. These symbols embody the essence of God and are found in various regions of India, reflecting the authentic Indian culture. Virtually all individuals of intellectual prowess, encompassing artists, poets, writers, musicians, sculptors and priests, have been profoundly inspired and influenced by this theory. Its impact is so profound that they are all encouraged to instill and imbue this concept of 'goodness' in their offspring and to seek out the positive and divine aspects in every living entity. The soul inside each living creature is seen as a manifestation of God Himself. The profound connection to India has had a significant impact on poets such as Jayanta Mahapatra.

His poetry, which is overloaded with scientific imagery, abundantly proves the above-mentioned. His poetry demonstrates a rigorous adherence to scientific principles. Mahapatra, however lacking exposure to contemporary poetry, had a firm stance on languages that enlightened him to the potential of poetry. According to Tenor magazine (36), he had been consistently nurturing and refining it over the years. The many subtleties of words that seemed to have an origin beyond their literal meaning had a profound impact on him. It is conceivable that Mahapatra's intense enthusiasm for language motivated him to create poetry. He claims that it "spurred me forward". He has rendered several Oriya poems into English as a bilingual poet. This translation has led to the whole development of his own poetry in modern English. Mahapatra's first poetry remains unaffected by any literary trend, however his latter work has a stronger connection with poets from Latin America. Bruce King states that Mahapatra seems to have acquired a fresh approach to use the external environment in order to convey personal emotions, influenced by American poets such as Robert Bly, James Wright, and Walt Whitman throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s (Bruce 198).

The book "Mahapatra's Relationship from 1980" offers indisputable evidence of this fact. Mahapatra was deeply influenced by the poetry of Walt Whitman, particularly by the line "I am huge, I hold multitudes" mentioned in the epigraph of his book "Relationship", which consists of a lyrical series of twelve sections. Much like Whitman "Mahapatra has a sense of place and places things

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where they belong. Whitman's poetic techniques, such as the cataloguing of minutiae, the bare-chested depiction of the self, and the repeated allusions to locations, birds, animals, trees, rivers, and seasons, have been internalized by him" (Ramakrishnan 103). Mahapatra, an Indian author who writes in English, neither imitates nor is inspired by other current poets in his craft. (Ramakrishnan 104)

SOCIAL INTROSPECTION IN JAYANTA MAHAPATRA'S POETRY

Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry centers on India and its cultural aspects. His poetry is heavily influenced by the landscapes and stories of Orissa, which have a significant impact on him owing to his birth and upbringing in the region. What is interesting in his poetry is that he doesn't strive to fabricate Indianness in the mention of classic Indian imagery of tigers, snakes, snakes-charmers, jugglers, crocodiles etc., but he is genuinely Indian. The author's poems about Orissa demonstrate a remarkable sensibility and maturity, as he skillfully explores local and regional themes to achieve a sense of universalism. Poems like 'Orissa Landscapes', 'Evening in an Orissa village', 'The Orissa Poems', 'Dawn at Puri' etc., are Oriyan first in handling of the topic and nature, and thus they are Indian finally. Few poets possess the ability to create poetry with such comparable authenticity. In his poems, the vocabulary used is undoubtedly English, yet, the underlying sentiment or emotional response is distinct. It is exclusively Indian. K.A. Panikar argues that a study of the repetitive imagery in his poetry demonstrates his deep connection to the Oriya culture. The light of the eastern coast of India radiates through his poetry. The eastern sea pours its morning breeze across them. He, as a child of the sun and the sea, takes joy in summoning the god of fire and the god of water in poems like 'Sunburst', 'The Beggar Takes It as Solace'. Puri is a live figure in some of these poems. (Panikar 19)

The prevalent subjects of poverty, hunger and famine that define the condition of impoverished people in India form a significant aspect of Mahapatra's poetry. S. Viswanathan accurately acknowledges that Mahapatra has a sense that is both Indian and contemporary; and his reaction to the scenario is genuine and believable. The portrayal of Indian scenes, whether depicting rural landscapes such as village or urban street scenes like 'Main Temple Street, Puri', 'Dawn at Puri' or 'Sunburst' is consistently genuine. The artwork "Hunger" effectively highlights how poverty degrades and brutalizes sexual relationships. The complicated issue of hunger at three levels is addressed in a straightforward manner. According to Ayyappa Paniker, the poem's simplicity and power have elevated it to one of the highest points in Indian poetry written in English. This poem is a poignant tale of a destitute fisherman who permits his daughter to engage in prostitution in order to prevent famine. Mahapatra's reflects the plight of those marginalized by society. He contends that the poem is grounded in a genuine occurrence and maintains that it may have easily transpired to him or anybody else on the destitute shores of Gopalapur on sea. Mahapatra asserts with pride that he was chosen by the scenery of Gopalpur in his poetry. The poem meticulously captures the mental condition of both the fisherman and the protagonist. "A Country" is a poem by Mahapatra that is explicitly political, conveying the idea that pain is experienced universally, regardless of the social or political system in place. This poem is filled with many socio-economic and socio-political implications. The poem's central theme is on the pervasive issue of extreme poverty and hunger, which gives rise to violence. Poverty, being a worldwide phenomenon, is explored in depth.

The poem "Dhauli" has an elegiac tone and a speculative style. The depiction of foxes chewing on the flaccid genitals of the soldiers is a potent representation of the constraints imposed on masculine sexual potency. Grandfather has some connections with hunger. In the novel Hunger, the fisherman is compelled to engage in an act that goes against his moral principles: he reluctantly introduces his daughter to the profession of prostitution. He has pangs of guilt every time he entices customers for his fifteen-year-old daughter by speaking thoughtlessly. Due to the extreme hunger and malnutrition, many individuals were compelled to embrace Christianity as their only viable option for survival, a choice that was made by many others as well. It was the victory of the body over the soul. Mahapatra considers individual identity to be the primary component that influences the way people emotionally respond to reality. The central focus of the work is extreme poverty and hunger, which give rise to violence.

The poem explores the theme of poverty, which is a widespread and common experience. Nevertheless, the text does not provide a direct criticism of the political situation characterized by significant inequalities between the affluent and the

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impoverished, the privileged and the disadvantaged, in which any form of dissent against the prevailing social structure is ruthlessly suppressed. Mahapatra envisions a just global arrangement when he hears the distant lament of Hyeres, well aware of the deteriorating rural landscape and the people's profound suffering from starvation. The narrative has been repeatedly recounted over a long period of time and it has now taken on legendary significance. In his poetry, Mahapatra writes about hunger that has been the destiny of humanity throughout the years. The available options include engaging in prostitution, pursuing military conquest, undergoing conversion or resorting to violent revolutions. However, the poet continues to experience hunger, which is the root of their suffering and distress.

"Dawn at Puri" is a poetic exploration of the interplay between belief and uncertainty, set against the backdrop of the expansive shoreline of Puri. It depicts the solemn scene of a funeral pyre ablaze, accompanied by the ominous cawing of black crows. The presence of a sacred skull resting on the sandy shores, the sight of widows forming a line to enter the grand temple and the desperate movements of lepers as anonymous figures all contribute to the evocative imagery of the poem. Crows experience hunger, poverty, heat, dust, thirst, depravity and difficulty. There is no certainty in this situation; everything is fleeting and transitory.

One may readily locate a continuing rehearsal of dramatizing a human longing for the possibilities of the dying process of a renowned Hindu story, "The Dance of Shiva". The genesis of this story is intricately linked to the Indian Hindu lifestyle, which serves as the foundation for the construction of temples throughout India, particularly in Orissa. The poet immediately meets this entire operation, confronts its fading process in the lives of regular men and women in Orissa. The poet's language is characterized by a deliberate and purposeful progression. It exhibits a wide variety of subjects including temples, whorehouses, nature and love all of which reflect the poet's sensitivity towards the process of dying.

Mahapatra's lyrical portrayal of human relationships highlights the voice of women who silently endure agony, which he skillfully captures in his writing. Women stand out as the victim in several of his poetry. The author's principal thematic themes revolve on the hardships faced by women and their remarkable capacity for tolerance. He really admires ladies who embody the traditional ideals of pain and sacrifice. He firmly bases his belief on their ongoing battle. He uses them as a means to critique the social hierarchy that subjects them to exploitation and deprivation. In "The Whorehouse in the Calcutta Street" readers are welcome to meet the ladies at the whorehouse. We are reminded of the history of these women, their children under care, and their homes waiting for their homecoming in the darkness. They are victims of a significant plot. Political topics have consistently captivated several Indian English poets; however, they often avoid directness and honesty. Only a handful have had the guts to address them without reservation. Critics and readers sometimes criticize Indo-Anglian poetry for its perceived lack of courage or boldness, rather than for its outdated language or ambiguous rhythms. Conversely, Jayanta Mahapatra endeavors to maintain honesty while confronting and combating this obstacle in poems such as "The Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of a Republic".

A FRESH RIDE IN THE FIELD OF POETRY

He submitted poems to several journals as a method of evaluating his ability as a poet. Nevertheless, the number of rejections far exceeded the number of acceptances. Presumably, he directed his efforts on attaining a state of 'Modernity' in his poetry. Mahapatra asserts his desire to create poetry that is clearly different from the ones he remembers from his school days. (Ramakrishnan 36) Nevertheless, the unwavering commitment to language that he had diligently nurtured and refined throughout his life, spurred him forward. Consequently, with a degree of recklessness and audacious courage, he embarked on the task of composing a poem. In his first poem, titled "I hear My Fingers Sadly Touching an Ivory Key" he explores the many responses he received from various individuals. The Indian critics shown reluctance in acknowledging this work as poetry. Still, the poem received approval for publishing and subsequently featured in Chicago Review. According to him, he asserts that I was trying to construct in a distinct manner. Subsequently, the letters of rejection received from respected poets and editors further solidified the belief that this poetry was different from what was being published in this nation during that period. Amidst such circumstances, he began composing poems with great urgency.

His poetry was distinct from contemporaneous works in terms of its stylistic characteristics. The critic pointed out that my

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poems lacked explicit messaging and a distinct purpose. In essence, his poetry was devoid of definitive statements as he suggests. Mahapatra explains that he aimed to create implicit links in his work by combining images and symbols. This approach to producing poetry enhances the mystical and enigmatic qualities of the poem. Consequently, both readers and critics agree that Mahapatra's poetry is a formidable challenge to comprehend. Mahapatra acknowledges these allegations with satisfaction and asserts, "Several of my literary creations have been characterized as obscure. Nevertheless, the potential for the poem's own interpretation appears to be present, should this type of poetry hold any allure". (Ramakrishnan 38)

Mahapatra's early immaturity is evident from a background such as this. Mahapatra got to recognition with his first collection of poetry, "Close the Sky, Ten by Ten" (1971) which comprises forty-nine poems of varying lengths, tones and topics. Bruce King asserts that "Close the Sky, Ten by Ten" exemplifies Mahapatra's early oeuvre, since it prioritizes experimentation with form, language, image and sound above emotional expression. Although the majority of the language in this first book may seem juvenile, the author has a remarkable talent for shaping words with finesse. According to Bruce King, it is undeniably a fundamental aspect of the poet's work.

All thirty-three poems in Mahapatra's second book, "Svaymvara and Other Poems" (1971), are characterized by their experimental nature, similar to those in the previous collection. Like the last book, it also showcases his inept attempts to manipulate words and phrases in order to 'create' poetry rather than really creating them. The bulk of the poetry in this anthology is nebulous, irrational and dissatisfying. Nevertheless, there are two exceptional poems that exemplify the potential Mahapatra maintains in his subsequent works: "Blind Singer in a Train" and "Faith". Based on these two poetry collections, it seems that Mahapatra has mostly cultivated his poetics by independent intellectual pursuit. However, the mid-1970s saw a notable and significant change. The poetry of Mahapatra began to seem less contrived. According to Bruce King, the writing exhibited improved coordination, smoother flow, enhanced rhythm and more coherent sentence structure, indicating a shift away from intricate reasoning towards more conventional language. In relation to the themes, Bruce King asserts that they were depicted as products of conjecture regarding external stimuli, specifically the landscape and surroundings of Cuttack, where Mahapatra was brought up. The concerns and themes revolved around personal instances of enlightenment, hopelessness, remorse, longing and other transient fluctuations of emotion and understanding that originate within the mind.

Mahapatra's sixth collection, "The False Start" (1980), has forty-three poems. The poet's life in India and abroad, his friends and fellow citizens, his own country and other places are all discussed in this book, revealing the poet's inverted sensibility and his recognizable hermit-like meditativeness once again. It indicates both a noticeable improvement and a mellowing of his lyrical skills. Love, marriage, interracial relations and children are all subjects that are covered in his first two books of poetry in verse. He acknowledges that at first, he wrote love poems. The way subjects are handled changes when one reads poetry from Mahapatra's later works. After exploring the depths of love, he grounds his views in a variety of different lifestyle choices and analyses broadly the complexities of life that give it meaning. He maintains the nuances of a sensitive and time-bound man, including his estrangement, anguish, rising feeling of frustration as he ages quickly, his dread of death and the final victory of time over him. His mature poetry convincingly expresses his understanding of the social, religious and political realities of the day. The lover's poet transforms into a poet of life. His earlier and later poems are inextricably linked by this change in perspective on life.

After reading "Rain of Rites", he has become more sociable. His poetry primarily addresses social issues. As a native of the region known for its temple-building, my poetry often references rituals, priests, crows and lepers. His aim in each of these situations is to comprehend the nature of humanity. His poetry establishes a dialogue between traditional rituals and modern sensibilities. When it comes to the growing hypocrisy surrounding religious activities, he adopts a sarcastic stance. He believes that there is no religious solution to human suffering. Mahapatra considers the ritualistic aspects of Indian faiths to be meaningless. Therefore, 'Religion' is a recurring theme in Mahapatra's poetry. "Rain of Rites", "Waiting" and "Life Signs" primarily focus on religious practices and the accompanying anguish.

The primary concerns in the lives of Indian people are sex, hunger and famine, which are widespread in the country. These themes are also prominent in Mahapatra's poetry, particularly in his

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notable works such as "Hunger", "The Whorehouse on Calcutta Street" and "A Missing Person" from the collection "A Rain of Rites". Mahapatra's poetry carries a tragic-pessimistic tone due to his awareness of the poverty and suffering experienced by the Indian people, as well as the subordinate status of women in a male-dominated culture. K. A. Panikar emphasizes this point by stating "... The poet's primary interest lies in depicting the perspective of sadness, loss, melancholy, and rejection. Other Indian poets who write in English do not seem to display the same profound understanding of tragedy as Jayant Mahapatra does in his writing, which may be rather disturbing". (Panikar 23)

In his work "In His Relationship" (1980), the author delves into the ancient culture, history and mythology of the Orisa. This 12-part epic poem serves as a spiritual journey to reconnect with ancestral roots. It is worth noting that Mahapatra, having converted to Christianity, offers an outsider's perspective on Hindu culture and history. The poem explores the profound impact of the past on relationships. In "Life Signs" (1983), the concept of pain is explored to its fullest extent. Mahapatra directly addresses the socio-economic realities of the Cuttack environment. He vividly chronicles the suffering endured by individuals due to rituals, extreme poverty, sexual exploitation, starvation, famine, drought, immorality and government negligence. These poems can be seen as a critical examination of life itself. The author's encounter with the harsh realities of Cuttack is depicted as deeply distressing. In "His Dispossessed Nests" (1986), the social and political landscape takes center stage. Mahapatra convincingly demonstrates his understanding of contemporary events through this collection of verses. Once again, the poems focus on the profound agony experienced by individuals. The suffering of individuals owing to sociopolitical institutions, political leaders' betrayal, and the threat posed by multinational businesses has led to a gloomier social environment, with terrorism causing more distress. As a result, the typical person now experiences solitude and this grim reality is even more pronounced in the novel "Dispossessed Nests".

The themes of his poetry reflect a wide range of subjects. He possesses a deep understanding of the complexities of life. While he does not advocate for any particular way of life in his writings, he recognizes the inherent value of humanity. His contemporary sensibility aims to restore human dignity while also being concerned about the ostentation, decay, disorder and threat to traditional values. Mahapatra's sensibility is rooted in Indian culture yet he avoids relying on stereotypical Indian elements such as tigers, snakes, snake charmers, jugglers, crocodiles, etc. By not deliberately emphasizing his Indianness, he successfully avoids tired clichés and postures, thereby demonstrating his genuine Indian identity. His poetry about Orissa, where local and specific elements are elevated to a universal level, best showcases his Indianness.

II. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Mahapatra, as a contemporary writer, focuses on subjective memory and aims to establish a connection between individuals and their modern world. He views poetry as a complex craft due to its allusive language. His poetry primarily serves as a means of self-exploration and self-discovery. Mahapatra employs symbols, images, myths, metaphors and similes to convey a profound and impactful poetic vision. Despite his scientific background and extensive global experiences, Mahapatra possesses a deep affection for his homeland, which he expresses through unique Indian imagery, symbolism, and diction. As a result, he has carved out a distinctive place for himself in the realm of English literature.

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