

MORAL VISION IN THE POETRY OF JAYANTA MAHAPATRA

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ABSTRACT

The place and status of Indian poetry in English before and after Independence are open to debate. The unity holds different views about the quality of Indian poetry in English. Indian situation form a vital part of the new form of poetry. The superstitions and folk beliefs that exist in Indian Society become favorite themes of the English poets. Jayanta Mahapatra, A.K. Ramanujan, R. Parthasarathy, Arun Kolathar ad Kamala Das turn inward to get into their roots. There was a need to acclimatize English language to an indigenous tradition to write poetry effectively.

Jayanta Mahapatra's early poetry is largely a poetry of introversion. It deals with such private themes as love, loss, absence, and loneliness. Moreover this poetry is noted for the experiments Mahapatra makes with imagery, syntax and sound with a view to finding an idiom of his own. In his later poetry, however, Mahapatra becomes aware of the society around him. He reaches out to the other and casts a close look at social realities. He gradually becomes an extrovert. So his later poetry is concerned with the external world.

Mahapatra intimately observes the people around him and at their experience of poverty, hunger, and violence. He does not find any solution to these problems. But he is obsessed with and experiences a 'defenselessness' ('Movement,' Close the sky) in the face of these problems. He realizes that, since he is a poet, he cannot do anything other than portraying these painful realities of social life. Finally, he finds love as the redeeming principle through the practice of which the pain and suffering can be over come. This is his moral vision.

Close the Sky, Ten by Ten (1971), Mahapatra's first collection, deals with themes with a private significance. The forty-nine short lyrics of this collection express the poet's varying moods and feelings. In "Loneliness", the opening poem. Mahapatra expresses his self-awareness arising out of solitude:

Loneliness is of now, of the noises
Of the graves, of the silence of the waves,
Of the explosions
Of nameless, faceless, voiceless atoms,
Loneliness is a face alive
Labelled from my other selves,
Flames from the pyre of plundered second.
("Loneliness")

In the second collection, Svayamvara and Other Poems (1971), a precision of language and style is clearly noticeable. Now he begins to relate to the concrete and reject

the abstract, in both theme and expression. In the poem "Lind singer in a Train", Mahapatra says :

The academic ones walk his calculated steps
Across the packed box, hear the faded stick's
Tap of hope in the daily functions of spider
Flesh. Together they induce a spirited caste
amidst the companions of progression. (33)

In these lines the reaction of the 'academic ones' to a blind beggar is portrayed. They walk 'across the packed box', hear the blind man's stick, but they are indifferent to him, keeping busy satisfying the routine needs of 'spider flesh.'

The next collection, A Rain of Rites (1976), is mainly concerned with the poet's relationship with his past. In several poems he portrays scenes from contemporary Indian Society and discovers that he is not able to believe in the traditions he has inherited. He is Christian by birth but lives like a Hindu among the Hindus. In "Four Rain Poems". For example, he says:

Drifting across old scars, like a walk
In familiar country, simply celebrates
The abyss of voiceless rain, justifies nothing.
To have the amazement that is a symbol
Of what one left, and to return to a condition
For reality ... (24).

The poet takes the inherited tradition as an 'old scar' and a 'pond of dirty water' ('Five Indian Songs'9) 'drifting across it,' he accepts 'reality.' In "A Tree", he speaks about the thing : 'Something has come into me without my knowing it. Something (through the days) I have been powerless to stop' [sic] (34). Similarly, Mahapatra attempts to project the painful outside world. In "Hunger" he directly speaks of the suffering of the hungry millions in India. In this a poor fisherman sells his daughter to a stranger, albeit temporarily:

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. (44)

The themes and the images in poems like "Hunger" express the poet's increasing involvement with his society.

Mahapatra uses a plain syntax and diction, concrete images, and rather longish lines in *A Father's Hours* (1976). His themes in this collection are clearly social. Here, Mahapatra presents 'the problem-ridden, sex-ridden, violence-torn world beyond the microcosmic self (Mohanty, *The Sun Times* 4). The description of epidemics, dusty streets, prostitutes, statues of the dead, consciousness of the sweeping changes in the society is reflected in "Performance":

The prostitutes are younger this year:
at the police station they're careless to give reasons
for being what they are.

And the older woman careful enough not to show
their years. (18)

The poet is 'eager to disappear into living' (28). So he portrays his society and sometimes satirizes its mores and manners. He asks:

What is wrong with my county?
The jungles have become gentle, the woman restless
And history reposes between college girl's breasts:
the exploits of warrior-queens, the pride pieced together
from a god where the advantage lay
Is this where the advantage lay
Mina, my pretty neighbor, flashes round and round
the gilded stage.

hiding jungles in her purse, holding on to her divorce,
and a lonely Ph.D.

("The Twenty Fifth Anniversary of a Republic" :
1975/27)

The poems in *Waiting* (1979) describe the physical world and its rather ugly realities. The first poem, 'Morning I,' is replete with images associated with dirt:

He sweeper - girl walking by,
The can of human excrement
Cradled
In her frail arm.
A window
Is thrown open to the street.
Some woman's derisive look
Falls from the cool shadows. (1)

In the other poems one comes across images of a 'starkly naked Jain Monk', 'five faceless lepers', 'a legless cripple' etcetera. The physical world is the source of these images and themes. The poems like "A Country Festival", "Bhubaneswar", "Orissa", "The Temple Road", "Puri", "The Indian Way", and "Mahatma Gandhi" depict the squalor and misery of contemporary Indian life. Here is a touching portrayal of death:

Forget the frail girl dying
slowly of tuberculosis
before the abashed, silken breasts

have swollen with milk,
forget the experiments with truth,...
and the seventy five-year-old judge
who leaped to his death
into the sluice-gates of the Mahanadi. (60-61)

Mahapatra's social imagination is almost fully at work in *The False Start* (1980). One significant feature of the poems in the collection is his exploration of the relationship of the mind with the external reality. Mahapatra is obsessed with the 'barren world' 'epidemics the air' and 'dusty streets,' and his inability to grapple with their reality is extremely painful to him. As a poet, he cannot do anything about the pain of living. In an interview Mahapatra said: 'I am interested as a poet who wants to show the pain and suffering around him. Because that's all I can do. It is a passive weak sort of protest at what I feel is injustice and undue suffering (The Weekend, *Indian Express* 22nd July 80). So he portrays the 'pain and suffering' in the society with as much sincerity as he can muster. He becomes conscious: of that he calls the 'sudden need' to depict it.

Now the scent of time rises from the warm earth,
enough to burst open the desert of dead bone and dust
under my sudden need... (The False Start 61).

In *Relationship* (1980), Mahapatra achieves a distinct idiom to present his experiences of the society. This long poem divided into twelve sections encompasses two parallel modes of experience: one is the experience of his state Orissa with its myths, rituals, beliefs, and superstitions. The latter are symbolized by the ruined Sun Temple at Konark. Its first section, however, begins with the description of a myth of Orissa, and especially the Shiva Linga, and in the poet's dream a commutation is established between it and the 'artisans of stone,/ messengers of spirit' (9). He doubts, 'whether the earth/would let me find finally its mouth' (11). He distrusts his memories as false. But again he takes this 'forgetting' as an impotency (12), because he knows: 'I can never come alive/if I refuse to consecrate at the altar of my origins' (18). Caught in the web of sensuality, he fears he has no time to 'reflect the earth's lost amplitudes'. He rejects his entanglement with the sensuality of the world and is awakened by the calls of 'another world'. He says:

no, there is room enough for cries and whispers,
for a nameless sigh, for the sharp blade of love,
for another kindred ship of spirit(23).

He realizes that he can win the 'cries and whispers' through 'love' and, at last, understands the mystery of human suffering.

Life Signs (1983) is a collection of thirty-five poems in which Mahapatra speaks of the 'malarial lanes of Cuttack', 'the poverty-stricken people of the town', and 'the diseased air'. His world has now grown larger and his sorrow intenser:

The world that gradually spreads like fire
under my needs
has struck the sky's stars.
I am marked by the slow venom of need. ("Needs"

44)

These lines reflect the poet's 'inexhaustible sorrow, and unending, inevitable, pervasive oppression' ("Prasad" 9).

Mahapatra sees the starving people and feels sad for those girls who die of hunger 'before their breasts are swollen with milk' ("A country" 29). The other people he watches include: 'the poor servant girl,' fishermen of Orissa', 'mangled lepers', 'diseased hollow-checked children'. and also hunger, Mahapatra makes use of the symbol of his grandfather who, in real life a victim of a terrible famine, had changed his religion and survived the famine by accepting meals from the Christian missionaries.

Violence as a painful aspect of social life is presented thus:

Bells shake the new season's darkness,
the sand in the dry river-bed
loosens in spits of autumn wind.
Parakeets sweep the green on tamarind tops,
and here beside my broken wall
there is light talk of rioting and murder
on the festive day of Durga's immersion.
("Autumn", Life-Signs 11)

The reference in the last two lines is to the recurrent outbursts of communal violence in his country.

Violence is the central theme of *Dispossessed Nests: 1984 Poems* (1986). There are two long poems in this book: "Bewildered Wheat fields" and "A Dance of Jewelled Snakes". The former deals with the terrorism-affected people of Punjab while the latter with the victims of gas poisoning in Bhopal. Describing the painful atmosphere of Punjab, Mahapatra writes:

The dry riverbed
wrapped up in a shroud of moonlight.
A death lasts. (14)

Unnecessary killings continue in Punjab. Exploitation, corruption and terrorism trouble the innocent people. In contrast, 'the bewildered wheat fields' remain peaceful. People feel that these problems are caused by a corrupt administration:

the excited beat of lines of marchers
protesting against a corrupt government,
and the voice of the lonely woman
a voice which the roar
of the Minister's jet cuts short. (24)

Similarly, in the second poem, "A dance of Jewelled Snakes", Mahapatra describes the victims of gas poisoning in Bhopal. Leela: aged five, is one such victim. The poet observes 'her eyes deep and haed' (11) In the sockets. In a nightmare, he looks into those eyes:

Somewhere a dance of jeweled snakes
blinds two impoverished eyes,
somewhere the iron bars uselessly shake
the earth for man who's been too long in prison. (43)

In these poems, Mahapatra's impatience at these problems and apprehension of a dark future for his homeland are very prominent. He wonders 'whether this present will not enable us to live in' (45).

The 'book of earth', with its 'cold darkness' (7) is presented in *Burden of waves and Fruit* (1988). Mahapatra feels 'the earth' coming out of the 'darkness' for him. He describes the 'slums' and 'villages' where are left uncared for:

In almost every village
half-starved cows are sinking into sleep.
Men have returned from the fields.
their faces shadows
drifting in a wind that has nowhere to go.
("A Rain Poem" 13)

At times, Mahapatra describes the helpless people of his immediate surroundings: an old father being 'hounded by his only son' (41) or 'an old woman' looking at her 'empty teacup'. 'Their silent world floats beside' (51) him. The burden of these helpless people 'drops on his shoulder'. Their sufferings move the poet deeply. His 'thought looks up/dumbly at the toes of words' (9). Sometimes, he only exposes the reader to certain painful incidents happening around him. "Events" is an example. Here, when in the first stanza a moonlit dusty street is described, in the second, 'a distant whistle' blows saddening 'the jungle of the night'. Some other events' criticizing' the society are also juxtaposed with these:

Smoke lurks in the distance
on the river bank,
Where a lone funeral pyre
breathes quietly in the pipals.
In the second-floor conference room of the YMCA
a Rotarian demands to be heard...
On the street of allegiances
and hard labor,
a rickshaw puller footsteps
at his feet.
Soon moonlight lies everywhere,
the town, reaches for its late-edition newspaper-1.
A rape penetrates the periphery of the jungle.
("Events" 9)

The 'social criticism' found in these lines is still more poignant in *Temple* (1988). Taking up the newspaper reports on the suicide of an aged couple, and a minor girl being gangraped and killed, Mahapatra weaves what he calls a 'dream narrative'. The suffering of the woman, Chelammal, is the central theme of the poem. She commits suicide because of her poverty and loneliness. The plight of Chelammal is projected as the plight of all Indian Women. 'There is no woman', the poet writes, 'who is not alone, no woman who is sure/she has found her way' (30).

Mahapatra is obsessed with the 'plights' of the people in his society. He sincerely wishes to fight and defeat the evil forces oppressing his fellowmen. But as has been pointed out earlier, he is unable to go beyond 'a week and passive sort of protest'. He is overwhelmed by his helplessness in the matter:

... struggling to push them away
I seem to have no strength left.
Perhaps I shall follow quietly after them
the room seems awfully small and pain of defeat
playing mercilessly about my shoulders.
("Of this Evening," *Burden of Waves and Fruit* 53)

The 'heavy, infectious smell of blood / and the cry of the years in the night' (*A Whiteness of Bone* 3) compel him to stand 'blank and undone'. 'It is obvious that it cannot prevent all that is to happen' ("Evening," *A Rain qfRites* 37).

Mahapatra is not able to reconcile with the harsh realities of life around him. Nor is he able to fight them out.

He feels that his 'thought' does not succeed in 'pushing the darkness, evil, and ugliness' out of his life ("Old Palace," A Rain of Rites 5). 'Each day, / falling to pieces,' he remains 'impotently' 'shackled to the earth' (41). So underneath to 'reconstruct to accept the world as if is, he attempts to 'reconstruct' 'another reality' of his own; wants to form a 'new kind of society' out of the 'ruins of hate' ("The Mountain," The False Start 41). He realizes that, here, 'love' is the redeeming principle through the practice of which the pain and suffering of the world can be overcome. It is through love that Mahapatra gets acquainted with 'a larger life'. It is love that can transcend the 'angles of man's consciousness':

Then can present be recognized, what one endures
and one will continue to endure, a kind of world
that comes up of all the love he has known,
the beauty soar into the sky ... (Relationship 36)

With this larger concern, Mahapatra looks at 'the quiet faces of sorrow' (1) and responds to the moral needs of the 'sad-eyed widows in worship', of 'naked children sleeping' forever, among the green coils of water lily with the beggars, ha[less widows poor rickshaw-pullers, and the victims of terrorism. Lata, his servant-girl; Chelamma, the barren woman and Kamala. The three-rupee whore a l l are now seen as deserving his compassion:

I am a man of the mind
lonely, dumb, despairing,
a rain hanging from the branches.
Most of the time I believed
I could share in another's unhappiness,
wanting to sit down in the park
beside the old
man of my neighborhood
whose face I was familiar with,
but the sunlight of the day
always seemed to laugh
across the dark valley of the night.
("Exclusive of Human Race", The Indian Literary
Review 55)

"Karuna," he says, "as an ideal holds me most; I am touched by the very commonplace of things, I fell incompetent sometimes, at being able to help those who need it". [sic] (A letter to the author, Nov. 18, 1992, appended to this paper). Of course, it is not 'stand to share love with others', yet he does not his poems 'a leper's mutilated hands flow /his love without a trace of horror...(Burden of Waves and Fruit 29).

This vision is not a dogmatic or elaborate system of rites, rules, or prayers but a way of life. It can be spoken as the poetic faith of a poet; his philosophy and his religion. However, it hopes for a new, unified and transformed order of things. Its objective is a revolutionary culture and a new social order.

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