

CHAPTER III

PHASE I

Imagery in Jayanta Mahapatra's Poetry

The Experimental Stage

a word the wind
pushing across the free fetch of notion
turns it into a world of changing boundaries
that become mere names / numbers
and hard metal signs.

(Mahapatra, *Close the Sky*, Ten by Ten ;38)

Mahapatra's work, says Bruce King, "has no clear demarcation of contrasting opinions, new kinds of material or radical departures in organization." (King2004:206) Many of Mahapatra's poetry approach the same theme from a different angle or from the same angle with different arrangement of words. His poems thus appear to be a continuous rumination on themes like silence, guilt, loneliness and relation of the self to others. The images found in *Father's Hours* (1976), like those of religion, silence, stone, wind, sky, river, also recur in his other volumes. Many poems share the same or similar titles. *Svayamvara and other Poems* (1971) has two poems titled *Poems*; one distinguished from the other by its dedication to R.M.(Runu Mahapatra). The volume has a poem titled

Morning which it shares with two poems of similar title appearing in *Waiting* (1979), these again are set apart as *Morning (I)* and *Morning (II)*. *Waiting* is his fifth volume having a title poem that it shares with a poem in *Burden of Waves and Fruit* (1988). *False Start* (1980), *Shadow Space* (1997) *A Whiteness of Bone* (1992) *Random Descent* (2005) all have poems titled *Shadows*. Both *Rain of Rites* (1976) and *Bare Face* (2000) have poems titled *Silence*. Some words appear repeatedly in his titles, like, while his first volume has *Love*, the second volume has *A Kind of Love*. *Rain of Rites* has two poems appearing one after the other titled *The Face* and *The Faces*. The images are also closely woven in the poems appearing throughout his published fifteen volumes. It therefore becomes difficult to divide the corpus of his work into several distinct periods for study.

The gamut of his poems can, however, be distinguished into two clear stages, the experimental stage when he was experimenting with his medium of expression, and the later experiential stage when he emerged as a poet sure of himself. It is apparent that phase (ii), thematically and stylistically speaking, grows naturally out of the former.

This chapter, dealing with the first of the two phases, deals with his early volumes, namely, *Close the Sky*, *Ten by Ten* and

Svayamvara and Other Poems, both published in 1971. The poems that appear in these two early volumes deal with similar images that emanate from the personal and turn around the private world, and are impassive to his native backdrop and its inhabitants --a trait that stamps many of Mahapatra's later works as regional. In this phase he displays a fascination for experimenting with form and syntax. The images in these two early volumes are alike. The poet searches for an abode that will serve as a shelter, both for him and his visions that at times turn surrealistic, but simultaneously expresses his dissatisfaction for the limitations imposed by his habitual existence that keeps him, and all that he aspires to, within constrained margins.

Jayanta Mahapatra, extensively in print today, entered the literary scene in a way that had amazed all. He taught Physics at Ravenshaw College in Orissa and took up his pen at forty, when most of the poets reach the crest of their career. In a desperate urge to express himself, Mahapatra had tried his hand at a sentimental novel based on his own life, a novel that 'reeks of Hemingway' observed Runu Mahapatra the poet's wife and perhaps the only reader of his unfinished novel. (Mahapatra: 144)

Mahapatra also wrote a number of short stories and sent them to the *Illustrated Weekly of India* only to be rejected. Disappointment made him disinterested in writing: "My poetry came to me at an age when most poets would have been basking in the warm glow of success: I was forty ", writes the poet in *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series*. (144)

Mahapatra began with his poetic career with two thin volumes; *Close the Sky Ten by Ten* and *Svayamvara and Other Poems*. In the poems of these volumes he displays a restive and a probing impulse to revise his style in accord with his innovation. These two volumes show his desperate attempt to grapple with the medium of expression he had finally chosen.

Typological arrangement of words is an important element in poetry for conveying the intended effect as the conventional elements as words, rhythm and rhyme.

Mahapatra does not reduce words to their elements or letters as does E.E. Cummings to convey a dropping leaf or structure up an *Altar* like Herbert or skyscrapers and phallic symbols like Arvind Kumar Mehrotra does in his *Pomes/Poemes/ Poemas*, but many of his poems in these early volumes show Mahapatra's experimentation with typological arrangement of words.

i feel the walls

for reasons

every spider
 has its own
 looking
 like a star

(The Purpose)

or ,

i am lonely
 to call loins sacred
 crumpled against
 my body's geometry

(Traditions)

Here the meaning the poet wants to convey depends much on the typographical arrangement of words. For in *Farewell* he admits:

The form is the thing,
 Always.

In many of the poems this preoccupation with 'form' is evident as in *Three Poems of a City*, *The Peace Negotiators*, *The Performance*, *If I am Wrong*, and *Instant*. In *The Movement*, Mahapatra states:

As if to avoid a fall, leaning
 A word first in one direction
 And then the other, the white frame

Of thought proceeds with a balanced skill.

Mahapatra writes poetry in an effort to articulate his private world and tribulations concerning the relationship between the self and reality. Bruce King refers to an essay published in the *Literary Criterion* (xv) where Mahapatra speaks of the poet's mental landscape, the inner world that he specifically creates, a world adhering to his private system of references. (King :86)

My hunger of words covered me with

Walking into the village of my mind.

(Shadow Space:69)

Mahapatra who was much influenced by surrealist poetry characteristically closes the sky, early in *Close the Sky, Ten by Ten* with a concrete image of a roof that must hide his 'apocalyptic ideal' and at the same time retains the wish to fall 'through the space' knowing that space 'sings'. (Sanctuary)

F.A. Inamdar points out that the title of Mahapatra's first collection of poems, *Close the Sky, Ten by Ten* is symbolic of claustrophobia, "We impose on ourselves self-willed imprisonment. We miss oneness with others." (Inamdar 2001:85) Mahapatra is haunted by this sense of imprisonment as is evident in the image of 'cage' that recurs in many of his later poems. The image of the confined or ensnared birds and animals to show that

imprisonment of the self prevents it from realizing its potential. Men are shown to be trapped by dreams, memories or words. In the present context the images of imprisonment reveal that we lack the desired candidness. We live in a closed existence that results in a severance with the others around us. The captivity of the soul is represented in these two early volumes by the images of house building, the material restrictions and tangible limitations that enclose space. In *An Ordinary Day*:

the walls join themselves
 to two chairs
 a tumbler beside the bed
 dry and hard from the dark
 commencing the slow leak of day

(Close the Sky Ten by Ten:23)

In the enclosed space trickling in of the day is measured. It is the predicament of *Some People* in *Close the Sky Ten by Ten*, to hide under 'the waves of thought in doomed/ living rooms.' For they are trapped in space like the image of green parrots in a poem pertinently titled *Inertia*.

Sometimes the walls 'join themselves'; sometimes there are Vails beyond'. The poet comes home, from walking 'through these walls'. Existence is necessarily within the walls where:

your mouth is a room

holding different views.

(The Purpose)

In *Looking at Instants* home is a space that 'Blankets' the poet's mind To Isolation'. It is a confined existence and the poet cries, 'living moss makes me catch my breath'. (Going Out)

The poet is segregated into a closed self in a private world that is part of our predicament but the escape that the poet seeks has no intonation of any Utopia. While what confines him is definite, what he seeks to escape into is unclear and carries no ethical tenor. His room prevents the entry of the birds who bring in passion, earthseed and rain. (The Birds)

Closely linked up with 'Close the sky' is the image of 'close the circle'. In *A Kind of Love in Svayamvara and Other Poems* the poet handles such images. The circle representing our enclosed self therefore becomes a significant symbol for Mahapatra. Lakshman's (although the footnote says that it is Rama's) magical circle on the ground and his advice to Sita not to step beyond it becomes symbolic of our fear that keeps us in our cocooned existence:

With each quiet breath he draws his circle still

(The Circle).

Since Mahapatra has expressed the closed existence by the images of closed circle and edifice of walls, some kind of vent becomes crucial and we come across images of windows. Windows are significant for they are receptive as well as they help to expose emotions:

the silent windows of my body open

(Absence: Close the Sky)

and one with a lonely heart' stands by the window as in *The Marriage Portrait*.

The space that the poet inhabits is sometimes paradoxically depicted as a vast infinite space within the enclosed space, such as in *Day Thought*:

All the world and I

The room overdone,

When the walls 'come apart/Without cause ' and the poet is released from his humdrum existence into the larger vision as in *Apartment*, the experiences are surreal.

Poetry reveals the process of the poet's mind. When the Confessional poetry paved the way for Surrealism in America in nineteen sixties, the readers witnessed a new kind of ambiguity that were not yet familiar with. The poet's employed private symbols and images of which the readers often had no clue at all,

and the poems were left entirely to the mercy of the readers for their own interpretation of the images. Mahapatra confesses in *Face to face with the Contemporary Poem* that this applies to many of the poetry he has written:

If contemporary life is *no* longer what it was, say, twenty-five years back, can one expect the same

content, the same form, the same substance from contemporary poems? (King 2004:86)

American confessional poet John Berryman had successfully created what Lowell calls a 'Vaking hallucination,' the form which unites conscious design and unconscious drift. This fusion of the conscious and the unconscious is, time and again, found in Mahapatra's poetry as in *An Ordinary Day*. In the poem 'the walls join themselves' and the poet carries his body after love-making with a wave into the black streets. Surrealism fuses the peripheral world with the inner world of the poet but there seems no final escape for there in the black streets the poet grows into walls.

When Mahapatra declares that he has been 'groping' from poem to poem he unconsciously refers to the image of blindness.(King:86) This blindness that he refers to becomes a significant image in his early volumes.

In *Close the Sky*, *Ten by Ten*, '*The Indian Eye*' is 'wild, covered with hungry decomposition'. Looking eyes are shut for fear of contamination. We hear of 'Svining retinas' and of Braille. The wind that blows in through the windows stumbles. The blindness that Mahapatra depicts is like that of Gloucester, in King Lear:

I have no way, and therefore want no eyes;

I stumbled when I saw :

(King Lear : IV i)

Images of blindness recur in *Svyamvara and Other Poems*. In *Blind this World*, the poet's fettle is that of the unsighted : 'Now there are things I do not see'.

Blindness appears in *A Kind Of Love*. The blindness that estranges the beggar from the society and leaves him alone, unites the poet with him in *Blind Beggar*. The Blind Beggar stands in a crowded and lighted market place. He is lonely.

Loneliness that surfaces from his personal life emerges as one of the major themes in Mahapatra's poetry. He is also alienated from the rites and rituals around him, that form the core of the ethos of Orissa. For him, life itself sometimes takes up a meaning of loneliness:

Life is a lonely leaning memory. (If I am Wrong)

Images of alienation haunt his poetic psyche and by their recurrence become motifs. It forms one of the major images that connect this phase with the later one. These motifs help in giving unity to individual poems and the volumes of poetry separated by many years so that they appear to be a continuous meditations on his favorite themes.

Loneliness, the first poem of his first published collection remains invasive in Mahapatra's poetic universe. In the poem he measures his 'loneliness' against time and space and attempts to express it through a series of unusual images. Loneliness is not only seen against 'where' and 'when', it is also of 'now', of his hidden psyche:

Loneliness is a face alive

labelled from my other selves

(Close the Sky, Ten by Ten:1)

In *Snakes* the poet inquires

How do we release

ourselves? In the stretched, dropped

scales of loneliness?

(Close the Sky, Ten by Ten:20)

Loneliness in his first poem, 'is of a winner/ turned loser, traitor and beggar'. If loneliness is the condition that establishes the familiarity between the poet and the beggar in *Blind Beggar*, the beggar in *Blind Singer in a Train* is juxtaposed against the

academic cultured embarrassment of our 'bone's blind beggary'. Beggars, who become an essential element of the landscape in Mahapatra's later poems on Puri, do not emerge as strong elements in these two early volumes. *The Indian Eye* gives us a faithful picture of the beggar who showers blessings on those who offer alms and curses all those who do not.

The beggars are not the only characters depicted as lonely. Loneliness engulfs all the characters in *Close the Sky, Ten by Ten* and *Svayamvara and Other Poems*. Mahatma Gandhi, the peace negotiators, the nuns, and men and women in love relations, father and son, all are lonely.

Gandhi, appearing early, emerges as an icon in the later phase. Gandhi is here depicted as an abandoned leader and our attitude to him is indecisive:

We are on his side, perhaps

We hate him

We do not know it

(Close the Sky, Ten by Ten: 12)

Gandhi unites with the Winner turned loser' image of *Loneliness*.

The peace negotiators, the old men who talk of peace 'under the gaze of war' have been deserted. The Nun is lonely with her 'isolate honour' and 'isolation of skin'. The sun in the nun's world

suffers from 'iciness' and ironically *The Peace Negotiators*, who have been forsaken:

Most of them

Are rich old men with dogs:

(Close the Sky, Ten by Ten: 18)

City Night 2 AM is another poem in his first volume that records loneliness. The buses and trams are no longer plying. The doors are all closed. A city tree, representing man, begins bleeding in the neon light.

His quest for love includes the personal, and the protagonist is in most cases identified with the poet. The quest either relapses into physical love or leaves the lovers lonely. *The Anniversary* in his first volume rings no note of rejoice. It is rather clouded with cynicism:

Nothing happens. It only seems a pity

We have the need to tell each other

Of this painful nothingness.

(Close the Sky, Ten by Ten:31)

The Performance brings out the tedium of love- making:

Again tonight

As before

Without

the need :

(Close the Sky, Ten by Ten:37)

The last poem of Svyamvara, *Poem for R.M.*, depicts loneliness as existing within personal relationships. It celebrates the intimate moments of connubial life but the moonlight distorts the features and the bedroom mirror is veiled. Through silence and words what emerges is 'plain sadness', an utter loneliness of existence. The situation brings to mind Mrs. Moore's contemplation on analogous subject in *A Passage to India*::

She felt increasingly (vision or nightmare?) that though people are important the relation between them are not, and that in particular too much fuss has been made over marriage; centuries of carnal embracement yet man is no nearer to understanding man.(E.M.Forster 1996:134)

Mahapatra's images of physical union leaves us contemplating similar thought. In *The Bride* the newly married girl's lonely wait for her husband after 'many a virgin night' is with no aura of love, but for

Artificial dell of joy
from a stranger's anonymous care.

(Svyamvara and Other Poems : 17)

Finally, when her husband comes in like a 'mammoth' her experience of love is likened to that of a common harlot. In

Mahapatra' s universe love fails. The man-woman relationship establishes no communication. In *Love's Caress* in *Svayamvara and Other Poems* the poet does not hear the voice of flowers and his night remains without love's caress. In *Bells* he cries:

Can love talk in odd and secret voices?

Every poem cries in gloom;

(Svayamvara and Other Poems :16)

In *Intimacy*:

Whatever joined my lips to yours

Was not intimacy,

(Svayamvara and Other Poems :16)

In *The Poster*, in early volume, the poet's affectionate tone of love ends in a ruthless irony:

a pity we will

not learn to deceive

each other

from the very first time.

(Svayamvara and Other Poems :31)

It is perhaps ironical that the volume *Svayamvara and Other Poems* dedicated to Mahapatra's wife with eloquent "these poems for R.M." contains poems that deal with loneliness in personal relationship. The volume *Close the Sky, Ten by Ten* dedicated to his father with a quotation from Nissim Ezekiel

"My father, sceptic, rationalist,
trying every curse and blessing
powder mixture, herb and hybrid."

includes the poems that deal with loneliness in the filial relationships. Two poems in this volume deal with father, *To My Father* and *The Report Card*, that won him the Poetry Award for 1970. The two poems are allied to each other by the image of loneliness. In *To My Father*, the father depicted has withdrawn himself into seclusion with age and a wall separates him from his son. The son too in *The Report Card* is as lonely:

Unknown is the seed of loneliness
which seeks to make the boy's pocket
its dark and poisoned home

(Close the Sky, Ten by Ten: 45)

This 'green isolation of our skins' (Betrayal) is embedded in silence. Silence is another theme that emerges as one of the major themes in Mahapatra's later volumes. Images of silence help the poet to bring out the deep inner silence of a conscious being. Silence of inevitability "could be more eloquent, more meaningful to the writer of words", says Mahapatra. "It is easy to find instances in our own century of writers who chose not to write after being completely successful in the one or two books

they published." He gives the example of J.D. Salinger and believes that the silence of Salinger is his own making, "a silence that served his needs of life and which his words were unable to fulfill." (Shormistha Panja 2001:19)

That Mahapatra takes words to be an inadequate means of expressions, although, paradoxically, he as a poet depends most on words to express himself is evident in many of his poems. In his later volumes there are many instances of juxtaposition of silence against words. For Mahapatra, silence is sometimes that of the skin, like in *The Birds* or in *Betrayal*, for

After a while
the word
is no longer a gift'

(Svyamvara and Other Poems : 10)

In *Marriage Portrait* silence becomes a necessity. Widows lips 'assume' silence (*Bells*). In *Intimacy* the poet is cynical about the durability of togetherness of the poet and his lover but what shall actually remain of their relationship is 'indifferent silence'. Silence is also a ritual. The silence of the lovers sitting together is described as a ritual in *Ritual* but it is never the unconditional silence the poet looks for and therefore brings no consolation to the poet:

the quietness is no solace to our shoulders

hunched over the distant stars

even this holds the promise of noise

Inamder in *The Symbolic Mode in Poetry—A Critique of Jayanta Mahapatra* points out that: " For Mahapatra's lovers speech is distasteful. Since, their love has died, it serves as a ghastly reminder of hypocrisy which loveless communication entails."

(Manmohan K.Bhatnagar 2001:85)

In Mahapatra's early volumes, closing the world into a poet's inner world that distances him from the reality around is a recurring theme. In *Morning* the poet returns to the image again:

the morning seems distant

as I climb into words

(Svyamvara and Other Poems:21)

The process of composing poetry that in effect distances the poet from the reality sometimes merges into experience of sexual love as in *The Wave*:

feel each particle of the mind

how it rises to an attitude

before sliding down its own lift

back where the old trembling was

and you realize what has passed

is not the mad rush of a sentiment

nor the steep pulse of a vein.

(Close the Sky,Ten by Ten: 38)

Speaking of the analogy that the poet attempts between love making and writing poetry R.K. Swain points out that Mahapatra strikes such a parallel since both the acts are spontaneous and conscious acts. Mahapatra, Swain says,

tries to strike a balance between the heart and the mind in the body of his poetry; he wants his love as well as his poem to be "in a medium /cut to size" conscious as he is that "is doing /something new/ to words", he is also aware that the creative experience is eventually inexpressible and opaque.

(R.K.Swain 2000 :29)

These analogies are not, however, achieved by passion but rather by astuteness:

Mahapatra seems to have evolved his poetry largely on his own as an intellectual act. Many of the poems in his first book, *Close the sky, Ten by Ten*, are curious experiments and read more as if willed by intellect than produced by emotion. (King 2004:196).

Mahapatra neither had the training nor a penchant for poetry like the other contemporary poets such as Shiv Kumar, Nissim Ezekiel, P.Lai, R.Parthasarathy, Adil Jessuwalla, Gauri Deshpande, Arvind Krishna Mahrotra, Agha Sahid Ali, Darius Cooper, Meena Alexander or Bibhu Padhi all of whom taught English nor was like

Ramanujan who was a Professor of Linguistics. The poet admits in an interview:

I had no idea of what earlier poets in India had done. Nor was I aware of the poetry being written outside my country. I was teaching physics, true, but my interests lay always in novels and stories, mainly in English. I was doing a lot of reading and was acquainted with the fiction being written and published abroad. Of course I wasn't into poetry .

(Contemporary Poetry Review: April,2004)

In the first two successive volumes the poet remains fretful with form and language. In both *Close the Sky Ten by Ten*, and *Svayamvara and Other Poems*, the poet is preoccupied with the imagery of building materials and its necessary components like doors, windows, walls and roof.

The visual images call for no display of colours. We rather hear of darkness. The window is 'dark', the sun is icy and the 'noonday sun' is covered with darkness. The mountains are 'black', the hours 'black'. Amidst this darkness the lone tree bleeds, as does Gandhi. The tree at night is not green, the parrots are, but they are only impressions on a plate. Greenness is the colour not of innocence or natural world, but of isolation. When a flower is seen to bloom in yellow light' the poet distances himself. Occasionally

we come across the silver star or the 'silver of the sun'. The poet depicts a world where men wait for colour.

Everyday

We drag our bodies

Into the sky ,

Waiting for the colour.

(Where Does Night Begin?)

Auditory images are inconsequential, especially in these two volumes, for silence emerges as a significant image.

The poems strike us for their unusual and highly stylised verbal constructions. Many of Mahapatra's early lines carry a conscious juxtaposition of contrary or contradictory words and ideas. We come across lines like ' the defense /of a smooth defenselessness'. The wind is in place and 'still' while we learn to 'move'. In *Instant* we have :

the instant

will -born

dying...

(Close the Sky, Ten by Ten: 15)

Similar juxtapositions are found in *Svayamvara and Other Poems*.

In *Morning* for instance we come across:

climb into words

shrinking from lotus.

There occur oxymorons like 'blind man stares' , 'looking, eyes shut', 'sun's iciness', or 'crowded silence'.

Most of the poems in these two volumes are short where only *Traditions*, *Intimacy*, *If I am Wrong*, and *Henry the Robot / A Theme of Love* stand out as exceptions. John Berryman's *Dream Songs* has Henry as a character appearing sometimes as a sulking man, at other times as an indifferent man. He appears in so many different contexts that it becomes impossible to pinpoint who he is. Mahapatra's Henry is clearly not all robotic. He is a body 'pinned with consciousness'. He has his private images and associations but understands nothing of the conditioning the hard pressed world forces on him. While Henry remains impenetrable with his private associations the poet is 'afraid / in the big joke to be understood.'

Many of Mahapatra's early poems revolve around this private world with a 'secret progression of thought emotion and dream' that Henry speaks of. The stanzas are irregular, the lines are short, sometimes one word forms a line, and sometimes one line is a stanza with no punctuation marks. At times this brevity is achieved by discarding verbs or articles. In this early phase Mahapatra comes out as a novice preparing himself for the next volumes to come.

CHAPTER III

PHASE II

The Experiential Stage

Life:

the silt left behind by the year's flood
a telegraph key tapping away in the dark
In its years is the smoke of our fires
which didn't burn out all we wanted to end.

(The False Start:37) •

Jayanta Mahapatra's third volume, *A Father's Hours* (1976) declares the end of his experimental stage. By his third volume Mahapatra emerges as a poet sure of himself pouring out volume after volume of all that lay deep within him seeking expression.

In the first two volumes Mahapatra shows an urgency to grip his medium of expression. He had used form and syntax like a poet unsure of himself:

My first two books of verse were .mainly experimental;
it was the language again I wanted to exploit, because
I felt I would mould it like clay, and I suppose Adil
Jussawala was right in his own way when he said in a
review that I was a poem-maker. (N.Raghavan:60)

By the third volume we find that his syntax becomes relaxed. Words deliberately unconventional are no longer yoked together but their flow seems more natural as do the epithets. The poet has finally gripped his medium of expression and his obsession with words and forms are on the decline. However, the poet's love for unusual epithets persists in his later volumes calling for his uniqueness in expression. This phase has the poet, now sure of himself, pouring out themes beyond the private and the personal to encompass the landscape, myth and history, rites and rituals of his region and later his canvas encompasses his country and

beyond. Although he still draws on images from his private life and personal associations, they are now presented in clearer terms. The images of this phase are diverse including religion, landscape, animals, human, and more abstract ones like silence, guilt, and loneliness. His later volumes have images of decrepitude and death, his contemplations on life, along with the other major images of the experiential stage.

One of the major themes haunting the poetic psyche is religion, the Hindu rituals and practices that he sees around him, but from which he himself has been estranged by his grandfather's conversion into Christianity.

Consequently, we have a profusion of religious imagery in Mahapatra. He seeks the truth behind the pious practices that the men and women around him so faithfully follow: 'Does the praying fakir know from where the questions come?' asks the poet. (A Father's Hours :28) He tries to find out 'Svhat is there in ceremony, in a ritual's deeply hidden meaning?' (A Rain of Rites: 15) Religion is a probable expiation of guilt:

The great Indian sun in its millionth run

Opens its memory doors. There within sits a man

With a lifetime of half-understood guilt

Shuffling like beads through his unseeing fingers.

(A Father's Hours: 33)

Whatever Mahapatra's formal commitments to Christianity might have been, his religious images stem from Hindu beliefs and rituals. Scattered throughout his volumes are temples, temple bells, priests, sacred thread (Waiting: 16) and offerings to gods such as coconuts, charred coconuts of the festival (32), {lowers,

milk , vermilion , 'balls of cooked rice to appease the dead'.(4 1).He refers to the Jagganath temple, Lingaraja temple, Hanuman temple. He speaks of the throng outside the temples; the long waits for worship, the fasting, the ringing of the temple bells and the offering of fruits and flowers. Mahapatra's images capture the beliefs and practices that form the essence of Indian tradition:

An old woman prostrates herself to the days last sun.

(Waiting : 42)

Mahapatra is not content only by giving us a faithful picture of the rituals and practices. His attitude to religion is not as simple as it appears. His manner is not that of resignation to god for a solution to all the problems around. Early in his third volume man's blindness to faith is exposed: 'Faith is a blind child holding on to man's hands.' (A Father's Hours :33)

The volume containing poems dealing with mysterious religious symbols of people who settle down peacefully into a deep-rooted tradition of their ancestors is aptly titled *A Rain of Rites*. *Listening to a Prayer* beautifully brings out the helpless dependence of men on god as a reliever of all pains:

A bell trembles

Touched by the pain

Of countless people.

(A Rain of Rites: 29)

The wind that blows across the temple square settles on the poet's shoulders. But the poet is unable to give any answer or alternate

solution. It therefore has nowhere to go with neither a silence nor an answer.

Although priests are bathed in the religious aura Mahapatra never speaks of them with veneration. He is rather skeptical in his treatment of them. Priests are 'crafty'. Although they look handsome and mysterious, the associative 'glow of light' is 'counterfeit'. (A Father's Hours :19)

When the Puri priest stands in the sun, the sunshine is described as 'indulgent' (Waiting: 14).The Brahmin priest is 'proud' (Waiting: 15), and shown as waiting haughtily by the 'temple door'.(A Rain of Rites:8)

The images of abandoned temples suggest lost faith.

When he refers to Christianity it always associates a feeling of alienation. As in *Brothers*, or in *Requiem XV* : 'I look into the white sea of sunlight/ Flooding the sixth century before Christ. / There were no walls then.' Later god became a 'terrible mental silence'. (Bare Face: 71).

Mahapatra seems fascinated by the stone representation of shiva, the lingam. They are phallic representations that symbolize the moment of generation itself. Steeped in Hindu system of beliefs he speaks of 'primitive purity of afterlife' (Waiting :45).The poet, however, remains a detached observer of this faith, the customs and practices from which he has been separated by the early

conversion in his family. His attempt to enter the temple where 'myth shifts' from hand to hand, eye to eye results into confrontation: 'Are you a Hindoo?' (A Rain of Rites:22)

By his ninth volume (1986) the poet displays a gradual disillusionment :

a temple drifts away

From vague stretched -out hands. (Dispossessed Nests: 15)

A thirteen-year-old girl who was religious, meticulously fasted every festival-day and followed a strictly vegetarian diet on Mondays and Saturdays, who visited the temple and smeared god's vermilion, dies of tetanus. The poet's voice is that of contempt:

You would think our gods are as the winds, reaching away

In fairness everywhere;

(Burden of Waves and Fruit: 29)

In *Bare Face* although the religious images continue ' god hides in the dark like an alien' and the poet tries to grow out of these practices by not wearing ashes on the forehead. (35) In an interview with Sumanyu Satpathy the poet says:

I grew up in Cuttack, close to a temple. There were two rivers close by. The ways of life there were different. I was into religion. My poems today don't have those old images. I have taken temple out of my system, (Panja 2001:31)

Religion is so intertwined with every aspect of the Indian life and its cultural expressions, music, art, dance, painting, sculpture, or

architecture, that the poet's delineation of religion becomes a characteristic representation of India. Later the suffering country is likened to

The decapitated old temple by the river

Its mouth open, and staring

All its bewildering hunger born into sorrow.

(A Whiteness of Bone:7)

"It is absurd to wince at being called a romantic poet. Unless one is that, one is not a poet at all", says Wallace Stevens in *Opus Posthumous*. Nature imagery that the romantic poets abounded in continued into poems of the later age. Marianne Moore draws lessons from seagulls or fishes. Richard Wilbur has composed a modern *Beastuary*. Robert Frost images forth truth about man and nature from birches or butterflies or cows. The poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra emotively leads to a landscape that is characteristic of Orissa.

Mahapatra's nature images carry forward the theme of his poetry, the strain of which is generally more solemn than the mere fascination of nature. Mahapatra is not a romantic in the sense Wordsworth or Keats was. In using the term Nature imagery for Mahapatra we should not be guided by the ideological framework of what the Romantic poets stood for. He never turns to nature for the mere enchantment of it, missing its serene radiance like Yeats' 'I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;' (Inisfree)

nor is he a pantheist ,trying to
 see a World in a Grain of Sand
 And Heaven in a Wild Flower,

(Blake: Auguries of Innocence)

Mahapatra is a modern both in terms of his sensibility and expression.

Among the chief natural linages employed are: flower, sky, wind, rain, stone.

In human history, every age is found to have copiously used flower imagery in art and poetry. In almost every culture be it East or West, we find flowers woven into fabric, carved into architecture, painted along borders of text and glazed onto porcelain or used profusely in poetry and songs. Flower has generally been associated in poetry with beauty, tenderness and brevity. The burden of a Shakespearean sonnet is that if the cruel time destroys everything

How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea,

Whose action is no stronger than a flower? (Sonnet :65)

Of the flowers rose held a special place as a symbol of love and beauty:

There's sweetness in an apple tree,

And profit in the corn;

But lady of all beauty

Is a rose upon a thorn.

(Christina RossettkThe Rose)

Mahapatra never chooses the rose as of a symbol either of beauty or frailty or lost love. The most frequent flower to occur in Mahapatra is the jasmine, 'the frail white flower' with an intense smell. 'Jasmine is sweet, and has many loves', wrote Thomas Hood in *Flowers*, but himself had finally preferred the rose.

Flower is an important image in Mahapatra's religious scenes.

Flower for most part associates the custom of worship:

...a frail white flower of worship

pays for my sins and watches. (Waiting: 14)

A man bathes at sunrise plucks some holy flowers and sits down to worship. (A Rain of Rites: 42) While worship is holy, the flowers, an inevitable part of worship, become holy themselves. The 'holy flower' includes marigold along with the white flower. Thus flowers themselves become symbolic of the rites and rituals of worship. 'Flowers, dried and sacrificed, smile at the poet.' (22) The temple rituals embodying the image of sacrificial flowers smiling at the poet bring in suggestions of Devdasis, the dancers at the temples, who sacrificed their lives to the service of god. Flower images associate girls as in *To a Young Girl, Waiting for Summer of 1994*. The whiteness of jasmines serves as a reminder of stained purity. Mahapatra's jasmine images hold associations with life in *Twilight*.

There is a sound of crying in there

Of an evening jasmine being born

The sounds of satisfaction after love's been made

Who cares why a frail flower raises its head

And smiles? (Life Signs: 13)

When the unrest in Punjab fills the country with blood and death

the jasmine's arms stretch out

ਘੋਲ-ਘੋਲੀਂ ਏਪਿਉ ਰੰਗੁ ਚੁੱਲ੍ਹੇਰੁ ਮੁਕੇਰੁਲਾ ਓ ਗੁੰਬੁ ਓ ਫੁੱਲੀਂ ਫੁੱਲੀਂ ।

(Dispossessed Nests :37)

In *Waiting for Summer 1994* the stories of summer that 'smelled of god and was a flower' denotes the poet's search for happiness and life after rioting in India. (Shadow Space:50)

Sometimes it is the flower in general that is a chronicle of the life lived: 'In her eyes the dim flower of her days glows' (Waiting:43).

Sometimes they are minutely visual images involving unexpected similes. In *The Return* the gulmohars 'glowed red like bureaucrat's eyes/ in the midday sun' and bougainvilleas 'Burst through like victory banners' (Bare Face: 21), or, in lines like 'the tight grey knots of days on the horizon' open 'like a flower in slow motion' (A Father's Hours: 15)

Hyacinth, the Christian symbol of prudence, peace of mind, and the desire for heaven that came from the legend of Apollo's accidental killing of Hyacinthus is associated in Mahapatra with death and reawakening.

In *Temple*, as the river 'brooded over the burning corpses', Chelammal found herself waking up within her own shadow 'to

the mauve tissues of hyacinth' (17). Sometimes flowers associate the conventional romanticism as in *Harvest*, or serve as reminders of lost loves:

..the flowers dangling over the silence,
trying desperately to look like friends I knew once.

(A Father's Hours: 13)

Thus we find that the flowers in Mahapatra are not constrained to a particular meaning. Their connotation is diverse, perhaps best seen in the lines of *Father's Hours* where the poet says, This kingdom/ or flower or sentence/which remains simply an ambition, / perhaps one that would be understood by a parable.'

Later in the same poem flower is used as a synonym to 'idea' since idea too 'flowers' like a plant does. (A Father's Hours: 10) In 'Ash' the flowers along with the rain are part of the ways of liberation.

(51)The flower is not only a means of redemption. The poet asks whether the flower he 'perceives' pulls him down to 'despair'. (11)

The unusual treatment of the poet of the flower image lies in his repealing the weakness and brevity that are associated with the flowers.

the wind
tearing the white flowers apart
without causing harm to its myth of strength.

(A Father's Hours:! 1)

"For T.S. Eliot the sky is a universal symbol of god, so too it is for Mahapatra", says Inamdar. (Bhatnagar 86:2001). The sky exists in the poet's consciousness, as the vast undeniable space. This indifferent vastness stands as a contrast to the trivial things that occur on the earth that share undue importance. In *Main Temple Street, Puri*, the poet depicts scenes like children laughing at cripples and mongrels mating. The focus then shifts to the sky, which exists irrefutable in its vast presence:

And the sky there

Claimed by inviolable authority

Hanging on to its crutches of silence.

(A Rain of Rites: 16)

The firmament that covers the earth remains indifferent to all human affairs. The 'sky's face' is expressionless. Sickness, hunger and losses are 'vain to the sun and the sky'. When the thirteen-year-old Lakshmi dies, her tragedy is broken by celebrating voices and laughter 'before it rolled over and faced the blue sky.' (Dispossessed Nests: 53).

In *The Lost Children of America*:

the emptiness of skies luminous bowl

fills their eyes with a single hue

the colour of the Third Eye, the oblique, the great.

(Life Signs:25)

The sky's stillness is no verdict. Man's hatred is as meaningless as the silence of the sky. (A Whiteness of Bone: 62) When the poet

carps of his country's politics as in *Possessions*, The sky's indefiniteness is stressed to convey the country's deferred policies. This indefiniteness, this inactivity also works on the personal level:

Was the earth and sky
 Taking a last chance
 To exercise its power over *me*?
 To find me with that impotence
 Which had so often
 Overcome me in the past?

(Shadow Space:28)

In *Dispossessed Nests* (1984) the poet is concerned with 'mad unrest' of Punjab that throws the country into chaos. The first part of the volume *Bewildered Wheatfields* concentrates on the communal violence that took place under the cap of insurgency. Like the confused wheat fields of Punjab, other natural images are employed and shown to respond to this human carnage. The riverbed dries up, the rainbow chokes and the moonlight is pale. Only the grasses of the dead grow fast. The sky here is presented the space that keeps the seeds of every incident to be unfolded in time. The idea that the sky is the space connected to distance, to time, to the occurrence of the sequence of things past and future occurs early in *A Rain of Rites*:

In limbo of things that accept the past
 the blood grows softer, glossier, in the shadows.
 Here the string goes lax

that holds the sky ,fluxes of the will ,the vague far places.

The distance opens and closes the palms of my hands. (4)

Elsewhere the sky is a refuge, the protection of the earth. When the poet feels discarded by his friends, Chinu, Bibhu and Ranju, he feels insecure, like the dawn under a rain tree , ' seeking its sky'. (A Fathers Hours: 15)

Sky is also the mental ambience. It comes down to the mind when the poet walks alone. (Waiting:69) Sometimes the 'Sky grows lonely'. (Life Signs:36) in '*Hunger*' when the hunt for food makes the father oblivious to morals and conventions of society and offers his daughter to the poet for enjoyment, 'the sky falls' on the poet suggesting the eventual crumple of ethical values. In *One Clear Night* when 'the end of a love comes near' the sky referred to is 'cold' and 'stony'. The Svet sky' is 'no meagre comfort' (Bare Face : 18).The child close to nature who plays in sun and ram like Wordsworth's *Lucy* has a face 'clear as the sky' that 'mirrored the purity of her soul.' (Bare Face:55). In *Days* the poet observes how the days come and go, in an endless reiteration, so endless that the days do not seem to go way at all nor do they stand in his way. Pondering thus, the poet reflects that he is 'one with the sky'. Here the emphasis is *on* the unchanging aspect of the sky. For all, the poet realizes his limits of expression and laments that the vastness of the sky 'is not my freedom of speech'. (Shadow Space: 17)

Rain the reliever of the scorching summer heat, a welcome break to the tedium of regular schedule has always occupied a major segment in the Indian poetic consciousness. The cursed Yaksha in Kalidasa's *Meghdootum* separated from his beloved likens the gathering clouds in the month of Asadha to a mature elephant playfully knocking against the river bank and notes that even the mind of a happy person is excited at the sight of a cloud. (Part I) Poet after poet poured out songs addressing the rain. The tumultuous thundershowers; the merging of forest, field, river and sky into a single continuum of watery mass; the gathering of the rain clouds played upon Tagore's imagination. He wrote several poems on rain. The approaching rain made the poet's heart dance 'like a peacock' (New Rain). Sometimes rain brought in an association of loneliness;

clouds rumbling in the sky .teeming rain

I sit on the river bank sad and alone. (The Golden Boat)

Rain knocks on Mahapatra's imagination and he has a number of poems on rain. *Rain Sense, A Rain, A Rain of Rites, Four Rain Poems, Again the Rain Falls, Rains in Orissa* are some of them. Rain is captured in many moods, sometimes it comes slowly across the sky, (A Rain of Rites: 10) In *Unreal Country* when everything merges in the darkness of gloom and there is defeat in

the poet's eye ,'Rain grates in the silence'. Here is also the concrete image of rain hanging from the branches. *The Wound* that portrays the decayed world begins with darkness and cold, has rain slashing the streets. (Life Signs: 3). When the country is in turmoil due to communal violence, the rain 'falls heavy hard as stone' (Dispossessed Nests:20). *June Rain* tries hard to give 'darkness and light an organic unity'. The air smells of raped woman as well as of henna. Rain's trapping against the door is sometimes so persistent that it is mistaken for the dead themselves are trying to come in. (Shadow Space: 14). When the familiar rain that the poet has trampled on is thrown like some seaweed on the beach, it associates guilt,

like some shape of conscience I cannot look at

A malignant purpose in a nun's eye. (A Rain of Rites : 10)

Sometimes it is not guilt, but an embarrassment that rises as the rain 'stinks of mould and wet dog's skin' in a country stricken with suffering and poverty. (Life Signs: 13) Rain is attributed with 'clear wise eyes' when he relates it to the game one played in childhood in *A Rain. Word* and 'rain' co-exist in the poem as a means of profuse expression that will reveal the poet.

While rain is profusion of expression, water is a refuge, a means of hiding. When 'The water's dying' in *Letter* the poet's concern is 'What will I keep secret to myself when nothing is unseen any

more?' (A Whiteness of Bone: 49) In *A Rain of Rites*, the sky shakes itself from long burning rains' and

the year's

newly resurrected gods

move out of their sleep (A Rain of Rites:8)

Autumn that celebrates the festivals like Durga puja, the festivals relating harvesting of new rice, restore the gods back to life once more as though they all reawaken after sleep. Rain as a means of regeneration is seen in *The Fifteenth Of August*. The poet's concern with the country's future merges into monsoon rain. Where the rain fails to wet the earth the desired regeneration fails. A rain that, cannot wet the earth, therefore ' has lost its purpose'. (Life Signs: 13)

Rain again works as something opposed to revitalization, related to an insipid living when the men returning from a cremation defiant to memory, succumb to rain once more and the waters of thought moves into an 'even sleep of blood' (23). Here rain stands for docile existence disparate from reawakening. In *Tonight I Hear the Water Flowing*, the poet's hearing 'the water' instead of the blood in his veins emphasizes once more the passivity and meekness of existence.

The 'voiceless rain' associates memory. (A Rain of Rites:24) as it does consistently in *Life Signs* (Life Signs: 12), in *Unreal Country* (A Whiteness of Bone:4), or in *Poem for Angela Elston* where the 'soft

rain' brings in memory(A Rain of Rites: 18).This alliance of water and memory is made explicit in poems like *A Morning Walk in Bhopal*, *A Rain Poem*, *Hands*, *River*, *Afternoon*.To sink under water is a trait of a poet or a lover that is impulsively linked to cynicism. The poet's father who keeps faith even unto his last days 'cannot drown himself in water' and is, therefore, neither a poet nor a lover (A Whiteness of Bone:2).

Rain images bring in multiple levels of meaning and evocations. Rain associates physical yearning in *The Rain Falling*. For rain is 'Capacious, like the body of a women.'(Burden of Waves and Fruit: 13) It knows that 'Rain is her mother /a fitful time of sweat and tears.' (Bare Face: 28)

Like Wordsworth's 'I wandered lonely as a cloud' the poet's identification with the natural order is complete in: 'I move on like rain, to its flaunting flight.' (Waiting:50) He aspires to obliterate the exhaustion of the spirit, flying over cruel hearts and alleys to the river. Realization is the cloud, which rains pains of awareness. (A Whiteness of Bone: 50) Rain and pain are linked again in *The Hollow Mouth*.

Like rain and water river images recur in Mahapatra, sometimes taking up similar connotations. An aspiration for self-realization is expressed in terms of the river's desire to merge into the sea. When the self cannot be realized due to the corporeal desires it is

like a 'river swallowed up by deserts / before it reaches the sea.'

(Life Signs:31.)The water that by its very nature seeps into the earth, also seeps through the poet, and suggests a progression towards realizing a vision of life's immense potential

absently I stare towards the east,

towards which a river flows, deep in the hills

of my blood ;I remember

it is summer's end and far out ,a storm is about to begin

crying from the lonely places of the sea. (Life Signs:33)

In *The Life*, the poet draws an analogy between life and river. Life and its philosophy are brought forward in the images of river and water. Life is a 'river' that flows helplessly forward and even a thousand monstrous winds cannot rework its direction. In the end it is again the 'river's mouth' from whence the red first 'current' had emerged. While everything floats in this river somewhere the belief of that ideal refuge, a respite from the being ceaselessly carried forward, exists in the human imagination. The 'giant wave' of time cannot hold the instant between present and future. We have not much option than to surrender to this surge. Since Life does not teach happiness, What harm is there if the water carries away /your ailing mind?' (Burden of Waves and Fruit :43)

Mahapatra's wind, of all his nature images, most actively responds to human agony. In *Winds of Spring*, 1983, written on

the brutal massacre of women and children in the paddy fields at Nellie, Assam, nature is shown as actively responding to the carnage. The winds grow 'wilder' and the moon shudders and drops when the women are slashed. The winds can lift the body of spring over the abyss and travel to 'find death' in the trodden paddy fields. It can partake of the slayer's delight, 'bear the pleasure' of the slicing of the tender flesh. Wind is shown as partaking in human action. In *Another Hour's Bell* where 'pain is the scent of earth' the poet inquires, 'how far away have the wounded winds gone?' (*A Whiteness of Bone*: 56) When something dies underneath the grass, there is the 'Svind's low whine'. (*The False Start*: 13) The wind also bears the 'excited beat of lines of marchers' protesting against a corrupt government (*Dispossessed Nests*: 24) The human mind too is responsive of the wind's behaviour. In *A Dark Wind* the woman answers to the "wind's dark pull". Wind sometimes brings in dreams, sometimes 'a prayer to one's lips' (*A Whiteness of Bone*:27), sometimes it is just the cool air, and after storm when the fury of the wind is spent 'It opens the knotted bit of mind', and gives it harmony. (42)

Macbeth has the image of the wind, 'sightless couriers of the air', as the vehicle on which pity shall ride to blow the horrid deed of murder to every eye. Mahapatra's wind functions as a courier of news of death and destruction. When the poet's mind turns on the miseries of the world, to someone who a revenges upon himself for

his broken life, or to a girl dying in her mother's arms, the wind eloquently carries her scream. (Bare Face: 16) The wind as the news bearer is present in many poems of Mahapatra. In *Shapes by Daya*, which turns on the slaughtering of the Oriyas by Ashoka's army, 'the wind blows everywhere and words dance/like the ghastly remains of long -dead men.' (Burden of Waves and Fruit: 21) In *The Wind* it carries ash, smoke and odour of a funeral. It twists and turns and rises like flowers of fierce colours. Wind functions not only as bearer but. also as revealer of truth. In *The Twentyjifth Anniversary of a Republic: 1975*, the occasion is celebrated with the launching of new postage stamp that brings 'faint' colour to the otherwise dull weeks is like 'a sudden wind that slips under the door and stirs'(J), but neither the poet nor the wind stops at that. The occasion has new statues put up on crossroads, but the wind

continues to search for dead boughs

soot and litter and dust ,the ruins of dead skies (III).

The wind here reveals the dire aspect of the town underneath its glitter as it does in *The Wind*. Sometimes the revelations are simple (The False Start: 51), sometimes by 'the early wind's, unease', a whole world of manifestation is laid bare (42).

A sullen wind stalks out

even the restful dead in this country.

(A Whiteness of Bone:57)

In *A Time*, a suggestive 'naked wind' blows from the river where Lakshmi was raped the night before. Although the wind 'pushes' the poet into contemplating the past calamity, the wind does not bear any hint of the scent of trampled grass from the foregone night. (Burden of Waves and Fruit: 17) The wind, the mighty force of exposing the truth is sometimes shown as feeble. When city is in plight of misdeeds, 'a lustful fire' smolders in green grass, and the trees are charred *in* the poisoned air, The once proud winds are without the strength to blow.'⁽⁷²⁾ Here we have the powerlessness of wind. The same manner of suggestion is continued in *May*. In a country' where 'dust thickens on the trees', a country which makes the poet mortified, the wind continues to blow over the 'unexpected walls' and the 'stiff statues', powerless to bring change. (32)

The imagery of stone helps the poet to look into the traditions and beliefs of his people, and contemplate on the metaphysical and personal arguments that arise in him. The stone as a slab is worshipped as god, it exists as a part of a temple that shelters age-old traditions and beliefs, stones exist in ruins as on-lookers of the historic past. The stone that tolerates, that retains its comprehensiveness in its ruins, by its very subsistence is a witness to the art-form that lives beyond the temporal as in *Ikons* or *The Ruins*. The enduring quality of stone is also representative

of the continuity of ideals and values. The scabbed stone characterizes the Hindu home as does the cow and the sacred plant. The father's touching the linga with his forehead asserts his belief in the traditions. (A Rain of Rites: 40)

'Stone is the theme,' says the poet early in *Bhubaneswar* (Waiting 8)

Stone, the witness of the ages, linking up the mythic and the historical past with the present is seen in poems like *Stone*, *Orissa*, *Song of the River*. In *Konaraka* stone chronicles the legend of the crowning slab of the sun temple. The legend goes that the top wedge of this thirteenth century temple structure could only be fitted into place by twelve year old boy, the son of chief architect, after all attempts of the twelve hundred artisans failed. Later the boy jumped to his death from the temple top to save his father's name and honour. Here are also allusions to the inhuman toil undergone by the artisans, the ancestors of Mahapatra, under tyrannical kings. The poet's own standing 'close to the stone, /trying to smear it with blood /to give it life' is a measure of apology for his apathy to that wounded past that he shares with his race. The poet is unfaltering in his responsibility to bear his tradition and says, 'I must carry the stone I found.'

The stones are also a testimony to the killing of the ancestors of Mahapatra by Ashoka's army beside river Daya:

Rock, altar of my ancestors,

teach those who rule my impoverished land today

to stand in your valley of the tortures of the dead
and feel the shudder that runs down your granite back,

(Bare Face:22)

The stone that exists as a raconteur, chronicling 'a stony epic of loneliness and desire'(Waiting :56) is also worshipped in the form of a slab. One of the significant associations of stone is with god Shiva the ultimate witness, the forbearing creator, and the destroyer. Shiva linga is the Vermillion smeared whored stone' (A Rain of Rites:3).On the block of a 'common stone/ The blue shadows of worship rest'. (38)

Among the other nature images that occur in Maha.pa.tra, though not as frequently as the major natural images are sun, moon, stars, trees, dawn.

Sunlight appears in *A Father's Hours* as indeterminate reality against which the men bound in hard old traditions, like the silversmith, the green grocer, the schoolteacher and Kamala, the whore who reappears in Mahapatra, are juxtaposed. The movement of the sun is a measure of the time as in Donne. It 'makes lotuses age'. (31) The 'frail early light' that breaks with the rising sun also associates hard reality. The image of dawn recurs in poems like *Morning, Dawn. Dusk* is the time that 'melts into future'. In *Bhopal Dawn* the daybreak is likened to a white open

page. The moon on the other hand associates death, decay, old age.

The moon's babble grows incoherent
like a dying man's, hour to hour.

(Burden Of Waves and Fruit: 16)

F. A. Inamdar points out that:

The antithetical symbol of the sun is the moon. It evokes the situation of a man whose dreams fall to pieces. Therefore the moon symbolizes our broken dreams ... in *Moon Moments* sometimes we get a powerful symbol of the moon representing death of our dreams. (Bhatnagar 2001 :87)

Stars associate the memory of the dead, as in *A Father's Hours* and *Ann*. It refers to the belief that the dead become stars. The poet also reinforces the idea that, the heavenly bodies are bound by laws that they are compelled to observe. The evening star returns to the sky. 'Night is where slavish stars move.' (*A Whiteness of Bone*: 44)

The sun 'pushes on' suffering in the loneliness of compulsion. (*Shadow Space*: 67)

The rainbow often associates emptiness, the mountain's loneliness, or the dawn travelling alone is symbolic of the alienation of man. The abundance of nature images in *Mahapatra* makes John Oliver Perry in *World Literature Today* anoint *Mahapatra* as a Wordsworth 'operating in the Orissa landscape' .

The Orissa landscape, its culture and history, rites and rituals constitute an important theme in Mahapatra. He never let's us forget that on the banks of River Daya the Ashokan army had slaughtered the Oriyas, that twelve hundred artisans toiled under a tyrannical king to construct the sun temple and that the chief artisan's son had jumped off from the temple top after placing its crowning slab. Poems alluding to ancient culture and history include Orissa poems, Orissa landscape and Konaraka among his many others. Relationship is a volume that combines myth and history of Orissa. Many of his poems bring out the characteristic atmosphere of Orissa, such as Dawn at Puri, Taste for Tomorrow, Slum and Evening Landscape by the River.

A Kind of Grief explicitly states the poet's love for his state:

From somewhere

One calls back the love

Of what one hungers to be touched by

So I can call you by your name---Orissa.

(Shadow Space: 13)

The Orissa temples, its men and women, beggars, cripples, lepers, priests and prostitutes everything appears as a part of the place. Images of fishermen that appear in some of his poems serve to enhance the ambience of Orissa. Orissa is shown in its festivals,

in its sufferings such as hunger and poverty, bound in its rites and rituals.

Intertwined with Orissa are the images of hunger, poverty and cripples. It is a town that celebrates its festivals in the "whine" of cripples and lepers. (Waiting :27)

Many of Mahapatra's images are derived from his childhood memory. T.S. Eliot in *The use of Poetry and the use of criticism* has said that only a part of an author's imagery comes from his reading. It comes from the whole of his sensitive life since early childhood. Mahapatra's father, mother, grandfather and his conversion to Christianity, his own strained relationship with his mother, his study in 'Stewart European, with the ecclesiastics', his lonely childhood, all appear in his poetry. He could never leave his childhood behind, and asks in *In a Time of Winter Rain* :

Does childhood spread out. all its way

From the hills of innocence to horizon of the sea ?

(Bare Face: 18)

In *Collaboration* he speaks of the corridors of his childhood he hasn't left behind. Children serve as a means of identification with the place. Since the childhood he depicts is characteristic of his native land it brings in associations of poverty, disease and negligence. *Hands, On the Banks of the Ganges, Five Indian Songs, An Old Country, A Twilight Poem, Learning to Flow Free in the Chariot Festival at Puri, Main Temple Street, Puri* foster images of childhood.

Among the other major imagery at work in Mahapatra's poetry is the animal imagery. Mahapatra does not have a wide variety of animals recurring as images in his poetry. He rather turns within a few selected species among which are jackal, cow, bull, water buffalo, and the goat. The birds are more varied, have a wider range and implication than the animals. These birds are no longer the 'sadeyed birds' of his first volume, who dare not enter the poet's room but take up a variety of functions. The most frequent animal and bird to occur are the jackal and the crow, both the typical trickster figures, associated with trickery, intelligence, cynicism, and both are scavengers.

Jackals are associated with a physical union without love. When the familiar old whore with her tired breasts trails the poet in *The False Start*, jackal's find rotting carcass.'(29) Sometimes when the poet's mate's presence becomes 'body's presence' and the poet is simply not seeking perfection in the desired interactions, the jackal 'flashes its sudden obscene smile.' (Bare Face: 48) This genital instinct associated with the jackal characterizes the animals in general:

The young are excited by mysterious graffiti

On walls and monuments

And crouch like animals

At the edge of this breathless jungle. (Dispossessed Nests :47)

This association often extends to include the jungle, the home of animals. In *A Father's Hours*, 'the jungles have become gentle' and the pretty neighbour, sparkling on golden stage of life with a divorce and a Ph.D. hides 'jungles' in her purse. (27)

The crow is an important image in Mahapatra. The crow, a fine synthesis of many folktales of different parts of the world, also associates selfishness, greed and aggressive mischief along with the qualities that characterize the jackal. A sharer of many common qualities, the crow brings to the poet's mind, similar kind of associations.

When one is fearful of acknowledging past adventures he is also frightened of 'raucous cries of crows' (*The False Start*:74).The poet's mate wakes up in a different place, hearing the 'Orion-call' but the recognition 'Of love's bare hour of absence and drift' begin a 'flight of crows in the blood'.(*Burden of Fruit and Waves*:33)

Crows appear in *A Summer Night* with associations of general degeneration, but, they are, for the most part associated with social and political manipulators.

In *The Twentyfifth Anniversary of a Republic, 1975*, the celebration that begins with the launching of 'new postage stamps' has new statues placed on crossroads. But on the statues of these exemplary dead men sits the 'coarse crow'. They are compared early to the 'crafty priests'. (*A Father's Hours*: 19). Indicating that the country's history is at hazard 'crowd of crows swoop down

over the statues of the great dead men'. (36) But these crows, the crafty priests, who are an important part of our country's guidelines, do not aim merely at the dead:

I thought I saw crows aiming at the leafy places of the soul, scavengers crawling along the tracks of stagnant shores of existence (37)

The world that the scavengers crawl into is a sunless world, where marigolds flower in the 'wrong way'. For all their wish to crowd into the delicate essential places of existence, the leaves are so conditioned by now that they 'are weary and can feel no more' (37).

The crows also bring in associations of individual contention:

A ten- year old girl
combs her mother's hair
where crows of rivalry
are quietly nesting.(A Rain of Rites: 14)

The voice of a crow has no music. It caws in a hoarse voice and in a gross language. The crows are neither beautiful nor have sweet voice but draw our attention by their 'noises', which are not songs.

Their call brings in unpleasant effects.

Endless crow noises.

A skull on the holy sands

Tilts its empty country towards hunger. (A Rain of Rites:28).

Even the sacred crows of Puri have 'clumsy sardonic persistence'

and sink away 'the progress of rain's logic' (Waiting :45).

In *Evening*, the evening's spirit offers a solace that makes the poet forget the causes of his as well as other's sufferings. Yet it cannot obliterate 'all that is to happen' and the poet remains apprehensive:

Like the smell that lingers of a dead cow's entail

The day's crows have dragged up to the skies.

(A Rain of Rites : 37)

The crow's scattering of debris and smell, serve to add up to the list of their wrongdoing. Its reference is coupled not only with the socially and politically significant but sometimes associates the tedium of regularity, like in 'the dawn crows flying back at sunset' (Waiting: 18) or the tired man.

Mahapatra turns to scavengers, be it the crow or the vulture when he is skeptic:

a lifeless story

chewed on by the vultures of a country's leaders.

(Dispossessed Nests: 30)

As the political leaders tell convincing lies the birds in the trees are dreaming and hungry.(Bare Face: 23)

The significant are not only crows. The social worker Rama Devi is compared to a victorious snake which has just shed its skin' (A Fathers Hours: 32). What coils around our errors are the same venomous creatures, as in *Assassins*. The hawk on the other hand carries the image of isolation and of melancholy.

And I know I am alone.

Tonight I can remember the lost mornings.

A hawk cries in gloom: (A Rain of Rites:32).

A surrealistic proclivity is evident in the poet's fascination for sinking under the surface, implying a going beyond the obvious. The water buffalo goes into water, crocodiles move into deeper waters (A Rain of Rites: 35), and, 'elsewhere a hawk stoops to its deep existence of hope.' (15) In *Another Day in Rain* the pariah kite is 'of another world and light'. (Burden of Waves and Fruit:8)

Pigeons are symbols of indolence:

Two gray wood pigeons as though half awake
Grove around like new ashramites in Rishikesh.

(Wating: 33)

In *Dispossessed Nests* they take on a different meaning. Pigeons, the symbols of peace are necessary for rectifying the harm done by the crow's. The pigeons must perch on the bronze statues, on which the crows had alighted :

pigeons of my town
must fly and perch on the unspoken sadness
of the bronze statue
decapitated once in sudden redness. (35)

Later, they are again the indolent, creatures.

Mahapatra uses animal imagery sometimes as a natural part of a landscape. The small patient birds that sing in summer twilights (A Rain of Rites:50) are as much a part of the Indian scenario as the Shiva linga .The dog that 'scratches itself and lies down again'

is a natural part of *A Day*. (The False Start:31) The cow is kept with reverence in the Hindu home.

In *Total Solar Eclipse* there is a group of animals. Their responses show the effects of the eclipse on the animal world. It is noteworthy that both the crow and the crocodile are compared to the priests. While the crows are 'crafty priests', layers of sleep protect the crocodile. In *Another Day in Rain*, Mahapatra uses a number of animals and shows their behavioural pattern in rain. (Burden of Waves and Fruit: 8)

But for most parts, the animal images are employed with a purpose of carrying forward his theme. A cow and a bull mating in the marketplace and the consequent, embarrassment, caused is 'part growing up, part sacred, most part lust.' (A Rain of Rites: 30) Some animal images are suggestive of life as the monkeys in *Ceremony*, or the oriole in *Story At the Start Of 1978*. In *Temple* glit-winged orioles challenge the sun as Chelammal goes through the unpleasant memories (47)

While the Oriole preserves the sequence of the season in its throat. some birds, like the Swans are essentially voiceless. Mallarme in his famous sonnet *La Virge* depicts the poet's failure of imagination through the remote but lovely symbolic image of an earthbound swan trapped in ice. Mahapatra who repeatedly displays a concern for the act of composition has his swans sink wordlessly into the carpet. The gulls cry. Swans remain indoors

while the gulls are in the open green but when the swans accompany the gulls, they too fold their 'cold throats'. (A Rain of Rites:41) This voice of the swans, now the voice of slumber, is what the poet must carry:

I must carry its voice, the swans
Of slumber, with me. It's delicate ivory, I know,
shall destroy me while I live.(53).

When the paddy is ready for reaping 'the throats/ of mynah break with tunes of hope:' (Burden of Waves and Fruit:31)

Sometimes birds with voices desert the poet as in *June* leaving the active poet inactive and mute. The parakeets circle for a time 'before their cries are lost' (Burden of Waves and Fruit:24). The flutter of birds may quieten at night but the poet confesses that his knowledge and time 'Fail to quiet the night.' (Bare Face: 16)

A Rain of Rites introduces the sparrow. Sparrow is associated with softness: 'The sun beats slowly like an exhausted sparrow'. (9)

Or again,

how that time
blew away softly with her, like sparrows in a gust of wind
but perhaps I am embarrassed ;I stand back
and find another world, the music of peacocks
frozen in rain.' (Burden of Waves and Fruit:29).

Peacock associates multihued beauty as in *Temple*. (19). The analytical mind questions the way of life as the peacock wonders, 'What made him dance to the rain'. (The Praise Start: 33)

Fanaticism in religion brings the peacock back in *Dispossessed Nests* whose bends now blazes with hatred and the pale rain of monsoons shrivel like the skin (28).

Fireflies signify a blazing up after bearings of life's events early in *Bare Face* (19), they become the glimmer of compassion as the Hindus and the Muslims seek union (67), later they are like the precedent beauty:

The past becomes beautiful because it faces us.

Like old fireflies against the cold banyan.

(Burden of Waves and Fruit :59)

What the wise owl stares at is 'our narrow world' (*Waiting* :41). The poet who is not blind to the social scenario has his longing seated 'Like a gray owl on a branch of my breath/Eyes wide open in another dumb, dirty trick.' (*Burden of Waves and Fruit*: 53)

Goats, the dumb creatures that are butchered haunts Mahapatra as a cruelty towards the innocent.

Brother

Late at night, as you come home

There will be goat's heads

Staring at you with glaucous eyes

From the wooden blocks of butcher's shop. (*Life Signs*: 18).

Vegetarianism is rooted in Indian culture and religion as a part of the doctrine of ahimsa. Gandhi, who becomes an icon with Mahapatra preached the power of peace. A story goes that

Gandhi's childhood friend Sheik Mehtab succeeded in convincing Gandhi to eat meat and he eventually ate goatmeat secretly. Gandhi writes in his autobiography that he had a very bad night afterwards. Everytime he dozed off to sleep he felt that a goat was bleating inside him and he woke up with repentance. The butchering of the goat placed with Gandhi is significant since he preached the gospel of peace but, was assassinated incongruously. *30th January 1982:A Story*, the day of Gandhi's assassination in 1948, begins with: 'Another day. Like any other'. In no way different from any previous one, it has the dumb goat on the butcher's block taking its last breath and staring with wide eyes while the butcher thinks that his knife is losing sharpness, is juxtaposed against Gandhi's 'once-favourite hymn'. (Burden of Waves and Fruit:26) When the goat occurs again in *Bare Face* it recalls Gandhi again. In *Sometimes* man is shown as divided against man. The statue of Gandhi's chest in the city square speaks the truth. It calls to mind the goat again.

Sadder like the bleat

The slaughtered goat gives out

From the dinner plate. (*Bare Face*: 29)

Gandhi is universally associated with truth and non-violence. He is the national leader, who, with Mahatma becomes the emblem of peace and of all the unrealised dreams of the country. There are Gandhi's head on coins in the children's pockets, the spinning

wheel whirrs on. *Dispossessed Nests* that speaks of violence and death has the 'redeeming monument of Gandhi'. In *Bare Face* we hear of compassion, the whirring of the spinning wheel and the dying man's last words: 'He Ram'. Even the headless torso of Gandhi speaks the truth. (Bare Face: 29) He is the leader of the heart, his head being superfluous. In *Dare Face* that speaks of India as a little girl, Gandhi is shown as spinning sorrow and turning them into threads of love. (63)

The images of the trapped bird or the caged animal that occur in his early volumes recur in his later ones as well. They bring out the idea of the confinement of the self in the material world. The poet himself is suffocated and asks for an open window so that, he can 'breathe'. His reminiscences are like a fierce animal ensnared. (A Whiteness of Bone: 31)

Sometimes the self is restrained by the earthbound duties that one has to perform. In *Rising* it is the hidden nest that stops the bird from flying. The trapped birds and animals are next related to words in poems which are trapped within define forms and expressions. The poet expresses discontentment caused by the gap between thought and expression. Words are poor means of expression. A poem is compared to a trapped bird in *The Lines Of My Poem*:

Today a line of this poem

Has lost the use of its healthy legs,
 Trapped like a sparrow
 Which has strayed inside,
 Beating its wings against
 The bars of world's conscience.

Myth and legends provide the poets with countless stories from which they can draw their images and allusions. When the subject is myth, the story has been established over generations and the readers are well aware of allusions. Mahapatra often alludes to Indian myths and legends and many of his images are drawn from the Ramayana and Mahabharat. In *A Father's Hours* he relates the images from the game of dice in Mahabharat to the legend of the sun temple. Here the 'brooding dots on six deathly pale faces' bring to mind the death of the twelve-year-old artisan. The ruins hold the 'interiors of myth' (Waiting:2) Radha from the legend of Radha - Krishna symbolizes the Indian women in search of true love with its accompanying pain and desire. Mahapatra alludes to the myth of Ahalya from Ramayana in a poem significantly titled *Appearances* for the myth of Ahalya turns on the woman's mistaking appearance for reality. Ahalya myth is reinterpreted in *The Women Who Wanted To Be Loved* where a woman whose passions are dried up turns into a stone. In *Bare Face* he seeks the truth like a karmayogi, like Parvati undergoing penance for

union with shiva. The word 'myth' appears many times throughout his volumes. The poet speaks of old myth in the clouds (Life Signs; 12), the 'myth of sun and rain' (A Whiteness of Bone:65), of the dumb order of myth in *The False Start*.(52)The poet's use of the myth allows him to escape from the transitory and the fragmented. The myth of the land, racial consciousness and personal experience are intertwined In *Relationship*. He refers to the legend of Dharama, to Ashoka's killing of the Oriyas in 260 BC. He turns to the Putana myth from Mahabharat, to myth of the golden deer from Ramayana. For Mahapatra the 'laksman rekha' puts an individual into isolation more than it offers security.

Death imagery mainly appears in *Burden of Waves and Fruit* published in 1988 when the poet is nearly sixty. It shows the poet's gradual awareness of age and decrepit body that is not present in the earlier volumes. In *Summer Afternoons* he speaks of his physical decrepitude. The grass that is the symbol of youth and vitality is now only a memory. His presence today 'hardens the trees and their **fruit**'. **The poet** has **aged** now and a touch simple as desire 'stretches' him out and he suffers penance.

In *Waiting* the poet shuts his tired eyes, he thinks back but doesn't remember when his beard had begun to grow. His shoulders are now 'bare and contrite'. That the poet is now but a

'poet's poise, a soiled shirt as though it were empty of its body' (50) calls to mind Yeats' image of 'a tattered coat upon a stick' in *Sailing to Byzantium*. Mahapatra does not sentimentalise with death, nor is he half in love with its easefulness. What worries him is the 'suffering the only thing that's hard to bear.' But there is hope of re-establishing all that has been lost :

And I sit all alone

Waiting for my joys to come back. (Harvest)

Contemplation on death in *Cloak of White* ends up in weighing the opposites of life namely pain and joy, light of suns and distance, and ends in an inconclusive 'cloak of white'. In *Last Night the Poem* ends with the poet's picking up tomorrow and seeing his body lying still in the middle of it. There is no further elucidation of what happens later. In *The Season Of Old Rain* the poet's dwelling on death reveals 'neither sorrow nor hope nor loss'. The poet seems more affected by the unnatural and premature deaths that happen around him. In *Fragments* he speaks on the death of his father. In *March* he turns to murder and rape and concludes that death is provisional.

His attitude to life is equally pragmatic. There is no romantic aura, or lyrical moralizing about life. Life is an endless flux. It 'does not give us a day off '. (A Whiteness of Bone: 42) In *Today*, although this present day is only a small knot, 'can one ignore it?'

the poet asks. *Something Spreading Itself* makes his outlook explicit:

Life is not a precious corner, lyrically hidden,
 Dreams bobbing up and down on the water line of sleep.
 It is the potato -peel the teeth won't let go
 After the core has gone.

Ash images associate death in Mahapatra The south wind startles 'the ashes of the dead' (Life Signs:21). With another death 'A little pile of ash/Uncurls' (Dispossessed Nests: 17). Since all bodies are burnt and finally reduced to ashes, and 'Even the long fame of someone like Christ eventually turns to ashes',(Shadow Space:54) ash stands for the ultimate truth. 'Emptiness echoes from the ashes of the truth.' (Life Signs:6)

Another image that the poet attends to is the mirror image. The mirror does not stand for an inert reflection of an image for Mahapatra. In *Shadow Space* memory is a mirror held from a distance. It is a moment of introspection, it drive 'uncertainties' in his heart. (The False Start:46) It provides the poet with a moment of realization. When introspection is lacking, the mirror grows so small that it is incapable of showing any image. (Life Signs:34) Its reflection is not limited to the peripheral but it captures the internal truth.

In my familiar mirror
 The eyes peer through a mask
 That approves of my act
 A scrutiny we cruelly practice. (Bare Face:76)

Darkness sets early in *A Father's Hours*. (26) Darkness associates ignorance, decay and death. In *Shadow Space* the ruins are darkened by the darkness of our own shadows. Darkness as death appears in *Through the Stone*, *A Certain Refrain*. In *Death* the image of death is compared to 'A handcart you push,/Through a day full of moonlight, of sadness you can't trust.' (The False Start: 78).

In *Dispossessed Nests* Mahapatra exposes horror by using colour imagery. Eyes of 'bright yellow sunflowers' disclose terror, bunches of yellow flowers peep out'. The volume is besmeared with 'blood', 'scarlet colours'. Vermillion of woman's forehead ripples in the dark.' (21) There are orange coloured masks on the faces of the 'possessed fire dancers'. In the eyes of the masks are a tremulous purple. There is 'golden smoke'. The rainbow with its spectrum of colours chokes, and overall a darkness pervades.

Bruce King says:

The use of recurring motifs and images is a means of giving unity to the volume of poems and bringing the individual lyrics into closer relations so that they seem

continuous meditation on such themes as loneliness and personal relationship. (King 2004: 196.)

Certain images link up the early experimental stage with this later one giving the impression of a unified corpus of work. Such images are the images of house with its associative doors and windows and rooms, images of silence, loneliness, and his concern with poetry.

The house that stood *for* tangible limitations *on* the self in the experimental stage of Mahapatra appears again in *The False Start*. In *The House* the door is a symbol of promise of life The house is a place of acceptance and security 'that someone somewhere is always waiting for his dream.' As one grows up the ideal changes and the door assumes a 'false look of tranquility' (*The False Start*:58). House is the place of his growth like his land, a place of refuge that the poet looks for:

In house I figure the possibilities
of life :could I
hide again as a child, someplace here?

(A Whiteness of Bone:22)

The 'grey walls of room' (*Life Signs*:4) suggest the periphery of existence. The wall that works as a barrier that separates the past from the present crumples where the memory co-exists with the present. The old brick walls of his house 'goes down into shadows' (*A Whiteness of Bones*:39) as he recalls the past. The door when closed, provides a place of hiding, and when open, brings to view

all that is lay hidden within the confined human existence. In *The Sentence*, 'behind locked door you wait for things' and when the door is opened there remains 'no word to hide in'. In *The Day After My Friends became Godly and Great*, the door is 'like history through which they have gone'. Doors as a link of hours is also present in *In Another Hour's Bell. Tonight I Hear The Water Flowing* that deals with the poet's personal experiences in the tangible as well as the imaginary world, speaks of open doors. (The False Start: 62).

Mahapatra's quest for silence was evident enough in his early volumes. Silence, as we have seen, was the ultimate refuge of Mahapatra's lovers who come together merely in a physical love in a world where no communication is established. Despite all his yearning for silence we have seen that it could bring no relief to the poet. He picks up the thread again in *A Father's Hours* and asks: 'Has silence lost its importance?' The silence that sets in early in the volume includes the natural world, like the 'vine' that 'climbs silently' (Moving), the human world, where old men wait in their silence, and god, whose eyes are silent. 'Silence has gripped my sleeves,' he Mahapatra in *A Rain of Rites*. In *Bare Face* the days meekly graze in the land of their silence. (73)

In many of his poems silence is juxtaposed against words, as in the *Poem For Angela Elson*:

you said: hold me just once, tonight,

before you leave this land.

But then, these were words again,

Pieces of silence people merely tell

Words that communicate nothing are but silence. Similar juxtapositions of words and silence are found in *Voice, The Rain Falling, 1992, Dispossessed Nests*. In *Dawn of a New Year* voices drift in silence about his tired bed. Silence is the outcome of loneliness, of the lonely existence of man. In poems such as *Silence, Last Night the Poem* silence associates loneliness. 'I am afraid of loneliness', Mahapatra says in *Waiting* (55). Loneliness is frozen around his childhood images. In *June* the poet watches his loneliness 'come from the tamarind's shade'. Loneliness engulfs personal relationship: We take precautions not to grow apart .Yet we are alone'. (A Father's Hours:22)

The contemplation on end of life has the image of loneliness again:

Sometime somewhere,

perhaps on the shore of some sea,

we shall feel as much alone in the world

as the others who have won their victories. (The False Start :20)

The words are often related to the words in his poetry, the expression he seeks, and silence is the absence of such words. This kind of association is seen in poems like *The Time Afterwards, Last Night the Poem*.

Silence is a word that is repeated so many times in Mahapatra that Inamdar comments that it gets sanctified in Mahapatra.

Mahapatra's concern for poetry and poetic composition remains throughout his poetic career. A poet's concern with the act of composition is a common theme, but Mahapatra deals with it in a personal way, with a desperation that seemed almost an obsession in the early phase. In this experiential stage he is more concerned with the value of poetry than with its construction. The successful poet now counts his youthful experiences by his publication. An 'old poem' now brings in reminiscences of his wild youth. (Life Signs:46) Personally, it is poet's hunger for words that led him to explore the hidden corners of his mind:

My hunger of words covered me with

Walking into the village of my mind. (Shadow Space:69)

Mahapatra sees poetry as a separate living organism that he once found 'at the outskirts of a country' (Bare Face:64), sometimes, 'in the summers of a country'. (74) In *Not In Defense Of A Poem* a poem is personified as a woman standing with folded arms with an expression that the poet has cheated her. Mahapatra does not look at poetry as a means of immortality that we find in Shakespeare, who attempts to immortalize his love in black ink, nor is his the assured imagination of Tagore and Yeats who address a reader hundred years hence. He rather speaks of failure of poetry in today's world. In *Will a Poem of Mine be the Only*

Answer he speaks of its failure at the personal level. His very physical responses betray the philosophy his 'poems seemed to profess.' The poet here is 'defeated' by his 'own tactics' that is poetry. Although he tries to believe that as a poet there is something between him and the world (1992), a relationship and a responsibility that makes his mouth turn dry with deaths that should not have affected him because they are not his (*Shadow Space*: 41), he is ultimately powerless to bring any change. Yet he tries to access the power of poetry:

you have to check whether poetry
really becomes a cry for protecting man.

(*Bare Face*:46)

He turns to the contemporary situation tracing the predicament of frail human lot. The poet has walked to the remote truths 'Poems were supposed to hold', (*Shadow Space*:69) but 'for poetry the world lives far away'. In *The Woman Who Wanted To Be Loved* the dark days of the woman 'cannot be braided into a poem'.

The poets for all their hue and cry are powerless to change the world:

Children will go hungry again
Poet's will sip their tea in stupid looking cafes,

Our poems look to the right and to the left ,
Then turn to torment in meek expectation.

And always the waiting; a hundred years hence

The poems will still be luxuries, hiding their impotent hatred for the world's unresurrected life.

(Shadow Space:25)

In a final tone of capitulation the value of poetry is assessed:

The world plots on

Poetry stumbles and falls. (Shadow Space:59)

Mahapatra like most of the Indian English poets, writes in free verse. Although the tone is conversational the images are intricate and the voice that speaks through them can generally be identified with the poet. Mahapatra's world as revealed by his images turns around his own personal self and its problems of loneliness, guilt, his childhood and its associative memories, love and poetry. His concern with the contemporary situation makes the poet focus on the somber aspects of the present day world. He evokes the contemporary situation of India by the images of lepers, beggars, prostitutes, hunger, poverty and violence. His treatment of these images are neither ironical nor satiric and by the sincere voice of concern that we hear through the dismal contemporary representations, the poet comes out as a social critic.