

PREFACE

You said poetry contains us both.
So it appears logical
I should search for poetry.

(Mahapatra, Shadow Spacc:f>9)

It might seem surprising that I have not chosen Shelley, Keats or even Eliot for my dissertation as might be expected of a student of English literature, these poets forming a major part of my syllabus when I did my M.A. in English. To reason out, if poets are supposed to reflect our sentiments and emotions, an Indian poet could do mine better than any overseas poet.

India is a multilingual, multi-religious nation where the culture of one state varies widely from another. To excerpt Niharranjan Kay's welcome address at the seminar at the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, Simla :

It has been said that though written in different languages Indian literature is *one*, that is, in whatever is written in India and even outside by Indian authors there is something which is specifically Indian, the analogy perhaps being that even in a very cosmopolitan crowd consisting of men and women from all nationalities and large ethnic groups, one,

having the minimum knowledge and experience of ethnic and behavioral characteristics of Indians, can easily find out who the Indians are. (A.Poddar 1972.5)

This perception of unity of the Indians has incited our poets and seers to create a territory more stable than any political boundary, despite all its regional diversities. This Indian terrain has always been a part of the Indian psyche. Indian literature is an expression of this Indian psyche. It is this 'Indianness' that an Indian reader immediately recognizes and cherishes.

Creative writing in English forms an integral part of the literary traditions of South Asia. According to K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar, "Indian writing in English is but one of the voices in which India speaks. " (Srinivasa Iyengar 2004:3) From the volumes of English fiction and poetry being published in India, it is clear, that much of imaginative writing is now concentrated on the Indian English novel, the short story and Indian English poetry. The Indian novelists and poets have already gained much international attention and awards. Arundhuti Roy, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Jhumpa Lahiri, Pankaj Mishra, A.K.Ramanujan, Nissim Ezekiel, Jayanta Mahapatra and many others have given the readers and publishers enough excitement.

Jayanta Mahapatra interests me because he as a contemporary poet, is keenly conscious of the existential questions that glare at the face of modern man. Although history and myth find their way

into his poetry, he is seldom lost in their imaginary glorious past. He is sentient of the present circumstances that burden the modern man. Mahapatra's poetry accentuates a keen consciousness of cultural and sociological traditions of his native locale. It is interesting to note how his vision gradually surpasses the regional periphery to embrace the social and political questions of the country and sometimes traverses further across to attain a universal implication. He is never impervious to the incidents around us that bring out the essence of nature of man and society.

This dissertation aims at exploring the pattern of imagery in Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry. My maiden correspondence with the poet had initially flared my passion for his poems. After I began reading the volumes, which the poet himself had sent me, I was amazed by the range of images that have tinted not only his imagination but have also served as an outlet for his poetic sensibility. I was led to this belief that without a proper study of images Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry cannot be properly evaluated.

Jayanta Mahapatra (b.1928), a senior academic, started writing late but not without results. His powerful and visionary work won him the Jacob Glatstein Memorial Award (Chicago 1975), Sahitya Academy Award (1981), Gangadhar Meher National Award for Poetry (1995) and Ramkrishna Jaidayal Harmony Award,(1994.) His volumes begin with *Close the Sky, Ten by Ten* (1971), and end with *Random Descent* (2005).He has been a member of the

University of Iowa's International Writing Program. "Jayanta is a close observer of men and things," says Iyengar and ensues :

The lyric notes are sharp, they sting-yet somehow satisfy .The cripples at Puri who are taken for granted, the white -clad widows: Truth seems twisted sometimes, yet pitiless. (Iyengar 2002: 713)

A search reveals that none of the existing critical surveys is devoted entirely to the imagery of Jayanta Mahapatra. R. Shankar in his book, *The Poet: Quest for Identity*, has established Mahapatra as a postmodernist. *The Poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra* by Bijay Kumar Das deals with the thematic study and technical accomplishments of the poet. He seeks to evaluate the poet as a modernist, and later as a post -modernist poet.

After enumerating the national and international journals where Mahapatra's poems were published and the various awards that he has won C.L.L. Jayaprada in *Indian Literature Today* writes:

His [Mahapatra's] is the case of a writer who is first recognized abroad before getting deserved attention at home. Even now one could say that critical output on Mahapatra is not appropriate to his own work.

(Jayapradal994:86)

Arun Kolatkar is of a similar opinion. He holds that although published in several important anthologies, including *The Poetry*

Anthology (1912—1977) edited by Daryl Hine and Joseph Parisi, Mahapatra's poetry has not got the attention it deserves in India.

It is definite that this poet needs further exploration. I have chosen Jayanta Mahapatra's images as my area of study because it seems to me that a systematic study of the imagery will facilitate to reveal his poetic persona. Moreover, my dissertation will facade the poet's vision of life embedded in his myriad images.

The Oxford Dictionary explains the word 'pattern' as a 'decorative design', 'a regular form or order in which a series of things occur'. (Indian Edition:2001) The study of the pattern of imagery is a study of the series of images that recur in Mahapatra's poetry.

In the *first chapter* of my dissertation, *Imagery: Concept and Function*, I have attempted to explain the concept of imagery, its various meanings and definitions in the broad sense, as we understand them. Imagery, which moves us towards a perception of concreteness, refers to all objects and qualities of sense perception, visual, acoustic, tactile, thermal, olfactory, gustatory or kinesthetic, referred to in a work of literature. This may be either by literal description or by allusion. The other looser and more complicated meaning that has been attached to imagery is, any outcome aggravated by literary language metaphors and similes that pertains to senses. New critical poetics that regards the entire poem as image encourages analyses of poems as nearly concrete objects. It must however be noted that a study of imagery is not a verbal analyses of literary work.

My *second chapter, Mapping Mahapatra*, locates the poet against the cultural and social milieu of Orissa. I have placed him against the literary outpourings of nineteen sixties and seventies seeking to measure the influences, personal and literary, that went into the making of the poetic psyche. Mahapatra insists that he ought to be studied as an Oriya poet who writes in English. I have, therefore, given a brief account of the Oriya poetic tradition in order to bring out how much he has, as he claims, inherited its tradition. No culture exists in a close cocoon without being affected by the overall progress around. Every culture is a social and a shared phenomenon. The influences of other poets, influences of literary theories and literary aesthetics, literary ideologies and movements work on a poet depending on his exposure to them. I have shown how the various literary influences have gone a long way in the making of Mahapatra (sometimes overtly).

The *third chapter* titled *Pattern of Imagery*, which is the crux of this thesis, examines the imagery in Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry. To facilitate this study I have divided his career into two phases. In the early phase of his career as a poet,(as Mahapatra himself would reflect today) he was rather immature in handling his theme and language. He displays a desperation for grappling his medium of expression. By the third volume, *A Father's Hours*, published in 1976, he overcomes this desperation and emerges as a confident poet sure of himself. From the third volume onwards, the sensitive

and value-oriented poet that he is, he deals with the similar kind of images to express his concern over the incidents affecting the nation and man. I, therefore, find it judicious to divide his career into two phases:

- i) The Experimental Stage
- ii) The Experiential Stage.

Phase (i) deals with his early phase when he was experimenting with his medium of creative expression, that is, poetry, and, Phase (ii) shows him the established self-assured poet. Many of his images elicit the disillusionment of the poet with society, its conventions, idealism, love and human compassion. To carry forward his theme the images he employs are drawn from nature, animals, memories, and the incidents occurring around. He is acutely conscious of his cultural past its myth and history.

In the *fourth chapter* titled *The Poet As A Social Critic*, I have attempted to analyze the images in Mahapatra that turn our attention to the bleak reality around. As a sensitive poet, he seldom remains impervious to the incidents of disaster and violence that affect the country and its populace. His images bring out the truth in human relationship, in the customs and traditions that man imbues from society and the victim that he is of poverty and hunger. The images falling under this category are those of hunger, poverty, disease, lepers, beggars, prostitutes, the suffering women and children and the images of his country.

Writers usually tend to make certain words or images typically their own and individual poems often become a part of that larger corpus by which they are recognized and understood. Some images survive with the poet through the years giving his work a unified vision. No ivory tower confines a poet in isolation. If it does poetry disparages into insignificance. Authors customarily share something of their contemporary's concern and those concerns and modes of expression shape their own writing. I have placed Jayanta Mahapatra amongst the other leading Indian-English poets in my *fifth chapter, Jayanta Mahapatra Vis-d-vis His Contemporaries*, for the final evaluation.

My thesis concludes with a brief *Conclusion*, a *Bibliography* and an *Appendix*.

For notes and references, works cited and the bibliography, I have strictly adhered to the instructions given in the MLA handbook.

Very few indeed have the privilege of working on a poet living and active. Jayanta Mahapatra has rendered valuable help to me and I must record my thankfulness to this Muse of Orissa. After I had read a few of Mahapatra's poems and had decided on further reading, he promptly sent me his volumes along with photocopies of his personal volumes. When *Random Descent* was published in 2005, he sent me a copy with his best wishes. He has answered my queries from time to time and I greatly enjoyed corresponding with him as much as I enjoyed reading his works.

I am especially indebted to my supervisor Prof. Binoy Kumar Banerjee for his persistent guidance and for the stimulating discussions that unfolded before me new ways of looking at poetry. Professor Niranjan Mohanty of Viswabharati University has been a constant guide revealing before me the uniqueness of Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry. He never failed to give me quick solutions whenever I turned to him in confusion. His advice has gone a long way in shaping this dissertation.

I am also thankful to Dr. R.K. Swain, a Mahapatra scholar and a poet, for his constant guidance and help. He has been a steady friend giving me information on the different web pages concerned with poetry. He has briefed me on Oriya Literature and patiently discussed with me whether Oriya literature, as the poet claims, has influenced him at all.

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