Jayanta Mahapatra: Poetic Voices of an Experimentalist

[1]**Subhi Kumari,** Research Scholar, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, I.I.T. Roorkee (Uttarakhand), India, email id. subhi_k@hs.iitr.ac.in
[2]**Prof. Binod Mishra,** Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, I.I.T. Roorkee (Uttarakhand), India. Email id. binod.mishra@hs.iitr.ac.in

Abstract

Jayanta Mahapatra is considered among the representative poets without whom the oeuvre of Indian English literature remains incomplete. Drawing pride in his roots and regional identity, Mahapatra's works are also critical of the outdated aspects of the Indian cultural tradition. He takes the material from his local setting and critically addresses the position of the marginalised. His poems blend past and present, memory and desire, to create a realm of unique realist-aesthetic experience. This article seeks to explore the reasons behind the presence of experimental voices in the select poems of Jayant Mahapatra and how those experiments contribute to opening new realms in the tradition of Indian English poetry. Though Mahapatra's poetic corpus is too wide, the present paper, in its ambit, analyses select poems like Dawn at Puri, Hunger, Close the Sky, Ten by Ten, A Rain of Rites, Ash and Relationship from different collections to serve its critical purpose.
Keywords: Experimentalist, Jayant Mahapatra, Memory, Silence, Meaninglessness

Introduction

India, a country of rich literary and linguistic traditions, has seen numerous upheavals owing to the changing socio-political environment. The British came to India around the seventeenth century and started dictating the socio-political sphere while compelling the natives to familiarise themselves with the English tongue. Indians began reading and composing literary pieces in English, as it became a medium of upward mobility. As Vinay Dharwadker points out:

> Literatures and literary cultures are located in history most often at the intersection of multiple, criss-crossing histories but the contextual complexity of Indian Writing in English may be peculiar to it and to the other literatures of its kind. The source of the complexity lies in the double relation of literature to language and language to its users (201).

These circumstances led to the emergence of an Indianised version of English, popularly known as Indian English and writers like H.L.V. Derozio, Toru Dutt, Rabindranath Tagore, and Sri Aurobindo, among others, gave a foundation to Indian English Poetry. This tradition was

carried forward by writers like Nissim Ezekiel, Kamala Das and others, who not only explored the Indian psyche but also expanded the horizon of Indian English poetry to accommodate experiments on different levels. This gave rise to a group of poets, namely Arun Kolatkar, Dilip Chitre, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra and Jayanta Mahapatra, whom Bruce King calls Experimentalists. By the term Experimentalists, King tries to address the poets who have used unconventional ways, where poetry may not be much concerned about moral utilitarianism and ethics of the practical world, and rather it may be concerned with Surrealist and constructivist modes of writing. King writes:

> Experimental poetry foregrounds technique, new concepts, or explores uncommon experiences it usually neglects the common world and environment or treats it in strange unconventional ways…The major Indian poets who have been experimentalists both in form and view of reality are, Arun Kolatkar, Dilip Chitre, Arvind Mehrotra and Jayant Mahapatra. (164)

This article examines the poetry of Jayant Mahapatra to see whether his poems are experimental and, if so, what are the reasons behind those experiments. Moreover, it also tries to explore the extent to which those experimental methods contribute to opening new realms in the tradition of Indian English poetry. To that end, the article is divided into three interconnected sections. The first section deals with the historic-cultural dimensions of the selected poems of Mahapatra. The second section focuses on the reflective tonality of his writings, primarily in the poems concerning women. The last section discusses the aesthetic charm, achieved through an experimental usage of languages.

Historic-Cultural Context and Mahapatra

Jayant Mahapatra, being an Oriya converted Christian and educated in the English language, has always interrogated his sense of identity. For him, culture is different from religion, and this is visible in his poems. Behura rightly points out, "Mahapatra's poetry reflects his Oriya roots and Christian upbringing, allowing him to critically engage with Indian cultural traditions and societal issues" (3). Mahapatra said while receiving the Sahitya Akademi Award:

> To Orissa, to this land in which my roots lie and lies my past, and in which lies my beginning and my end, where the wind keens over the great grief of River Daya and where the waves of the Bay of Bengal fail to reach out today to the twilight soul of Konark, I acknowledge my relationship. (Mahanti 15)

He takes inspiration from the local socio-cultural heritage and modifies it to address the plight of the marginalised. S. Koupri writes, "In each poem, the spiritually, mentally and psychologically fatigued poet returns from the haunting absences and deprivation to the solacing abode of the native landscape, thus constructing a picture of his voice between the juxtaposed subjects" (115). For instance, his poem, Dawn at Puri, while highlighting the grand structure and sacredness of the Jagannath temple, also addresses the plight of widows and the poor through several images like crows and skulls, which challenge the notion of divinity and purity associated with a temple's premise. While he bears no grudge against any religion, he believes in the humanitarian touch that could usher in a new tomorrow.

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Endless crow noises
A skull in the holy sands…
White-clad widowed women…
are waiting to enter the Great Temple (Mahapatra 608)

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The above lines reflect a deep connection to his roots and identity, intertwining personal experiences with broader themes of history, culture, and social issues. According to Ghosh, "What is noteworthy in his poetry is that he doesn't try to create Indianness in the mention of traditional Indian images of tigers, snakes, snake-charmers, jugglers, crocodiles, etc., but he is sensibly Indian" (473). This sensibility provides him with a different perspective, where the rock edicts of Ashoka do not spread peace and Dhamma. For him, the rock edicts are carved on the blood-red rock because Ashoka did that only after the brutal war of Kalinga. Mahapatra writes:

> …forgetting the cruelties
> of ruthless emperors who carved peaceful edicts
> on blood-red rock,
> forgetting our groans and cries… (466-67)

He problematises the history, which is by default the history of the powerful. Mahapatra's poems try to bring those marginalised stories of different sections of society, like women, the poor and many others who are discriminated against on different grounds. For this, he uses silence and pauses as his weapons.

Introspection, Silence, and Women
The silences present in Mahapatra's poems give readers a chance to meditate and explore unexpected feelings, inner spaces, psychology and guilt. Silence exerts an air of mystery in his world. He writes,

> So, for me, a poem is knit together by an inconceivable silence. Silence which is an intangible substance of which words are but manifestations; … silence is simply what the word means, nothing else. No poetic symbol. And I seem to feel it like an armour I sheathe myself in, to protect myself from the outside world. (Door 23)

How silence and introspection are used as tools to show the unconventional relationship between a father and a daughter can be seen in the poem Hunger. In famine-stricken Orissa, a fisherman barters his daughter for food. Conventionally, a father figure is thought of as the one who guards the child against all odds, but here, the father sells the daughter. The absurdity of this situation lies in the fact that the ethical codes are applicable only after the existence, and here, existence itself is uncertain. Mahapatra presents these difficult situations and reflects on how a singular approach to reality is problematic. While reading, one feels an utter sense of anguish, but no one is there to blame. Another important aspect of this poem is that the girl does not utter a single word, but her silence becomes more powerful than the dialogue between the two men. The girl becomes a metaphor for the drought-stricken Orissa, where death and decay are the pervading realities.

> The fisherman said: Will you have her, carelessly…
> I heard him say: My daughter she's just turned fifteen…
> Feel her. I will be back soon, your bus leaves at nine…
> She opened her wormy legs wide… (Mahapatra 619-620)

Women occupy a significant space in Mahapatra's poems. Although they are not given long monologues of rebellion, their silence becomes much more powerful than speech. Alorcious and Balachandran rightly assert:

> Mahapatra explores into the human psyche and simply presents the problems and the

thoughts of women. But he couldn't provide any solutions to them. He feels pain as he is incapable of rescuing the poor souls from this brutal yoke. He's searching for an answer to all his questions but in vain. But as a human, his heart still leaps out to them. (53)

The silence, in this case, is used as a weapon to criticise the society, where women are not given an environment where they can speak. They are censored through rituals and responsibilities, which eventually snatch their freedom. The narrator himself is describing the condition of the girl rather than giving her a chance to speak for herself. This can be seen as a symbolic representation of the marginalised condition of women in India, who have been denied expression. Aloricous and Balachandran assert, "Jayanta Mahapatra speaks more of women than the women speak in his works. Their actions are keenly observed and interpreted by the poet. The body of his women move very slowly, but the mind travels fast" (52).

Experimental Techniques: Language, Images, Symbols and Motifs
Mahapatra is not a sing-song poet but a composer of varied styles as he creates a melody of thoughts using different devices. For instance, in his first collection Close the Sky, Ten by Ten (1971), almost all the forty-nine poems delineate the theme of loneliness and grief but by experimenting with form, language and image, which is much more noticeable,

<div align="center">

now I close the sky
with a square ten by ten…
at home…
for the blessing of absence
is its essence. (Mahapatra 686-87)

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The above lines demonstrate that the images used here represent the larger theme and are very unusual. The poet uses mathematical and scientific imagery along with abstract ideas like love, absence, blessing, etc. Bruce King aptly observes that in this collection of Mahapatra:

The poems treat loneliness, the impossibility of expressing the meaning, the difficulty of people understanding each other, moments of sexual desire, the pregnancy of silence, the mind's imaginings, the contrast between the private and public world, Indian myth and ritual, dreams and identity (196).

Jayanta Mahapatra does several experiments as he never confines himself to a singular theme. For example, his A Rain of Rites (1976), by its title, may give the impression that Mahapatra is referring to certain rites and rituals associated with rain, but he uses rain as a metaphor to discuss harsh realities. For him, just like any other Indian, rain carries several symbols with it. For instance, in the poem A Rain, rain has different connotations in each stanza. In the first section, it is an exciting adventure in an otherwise monotonous life. In the second section, the rain becomes a medium for providing a clear vision. In the third section, it becomes a noise that tries to break the silence, and lastly, it gets transformed into a game of childhood where there is frankness and innocence.

<div align="center">

Watching behind the wall, I see
it play over people, piled up to their silences.
It creates an impression of vastness.
It quietly opens a door (Mahapatra 595)

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Not only rain, but a range of natural images from rural life always occupied his poems. He was

"deeply disturbed by the interference of the human occupation and its impact on the earth. His ecopoetic vision alarms the reader to become a part of change in cultivating eco-consciousness to preserve the equilibrium" (Ranjit and Rajkumar 61). His Four Rain Poems become a medium for him to revisit his consciousness. The boundary between the sounds made by him and that of the falling raindrops slowly gets blurred, and he finds himself lost in the secret kingdom of memory and mind. He waits for the rain to end because he does not want to revisit those forbidden memories. Eventually, after setting out on the voyage of memories, the poet's mind becomes calm and the rain, like a mother, rubs softly on his mind.

> Thus, I approach the boundary between
> The voices I make and their drooping echoes,
> In that inner kingdom of consciousness
> Which moves each torture of memory into flesh (Mahapatra 604-6)

Jana rightly remarks, "Cultural, familial and historical past always remain the sole haven to the poet... Past remains his peace, bliss and happiness" (40). The title of the collection should not make us think that all the poems are about rain only because these poems successfully put a very unconventional and revolutionary stance regarding the issues prevalent in Indian society. His poems like Dawn (1976), Village (1976), and A Rain of Rites (1976), among many others, are more concerned about the felt experiences during loneliness while simultaneously addressing the larger cause.

Self-exploration is another important aspect of Mahapatra's poems, which include memories, doubts, desires, and anxieties encountered by almost everyone. While trying to unearth what Mahapatra wants to achieve through his poems, one cannot ignore his work Relationship (1980). It has twelve books, moreover, its language, heightened diction, sublime speech, and winding sentences give it a sense of the epic. Following both the Indian and Western traditions of epic writing, Mahapatra gives an introductory announcement and an invocation to the muses. What differentiates it from epic is that it is not a narrative poem, and rather, it is concerned with the relationship of the self with history, culture, and society. It is not possible to group it under lyric because, unlike the lyric's self-expressive approach, Mahapatra's expression becomes a bit distant from his creation. It is a poem about the process of confronting the conflicts of the mind so that the self can be realised eventually. Just like a boat goes along with the stream of a river, the poet's memories also keep flowing in the subconscious mind:

> And the man with many memories
> Doesn't know what to do with them,
> With the river flowing sluggishly through his dark,
> For the boats, he let loose upon the water
> Merely bob up and down going nowhere (Mahapatra 468)

Coming to the second part of the argument, why did Mahapatra choose to experiment with his poetry's form, language and themes? To answer this, one needs to think about the period when Mahapatra was writing. In newly independent India, people had a lot of hopes regarding their future. The romanticised image of free India clashed with the reality of British-free India. Although with the change of rulers, the governance changed, the condition of the marginalised people remained the same. Moreover, some events like riots, Gandhi's assassination, the Bhopal Gas Tragedy, Famine, and War all further disrupted and damaged the socio-political structure and economic condition of the country. The subsequent disillusionment made Mahapatra delve

deeper into the history, legends and stories that shape the psychology of the Indian people. He successfully experimented with the content and form in order to reveal some of the most complex truths of existence through his poems. Later, poets also took inspiration from him and tried new techniques, feeling the pressure of writing in a language originally foreign to them. Mahapatra views poetry as something like a sadhana or meditation with its goal to reveal something unknown, either through images or through words. He expresses his views on Indian poetry:

> So, poetry, poetry that is Indian in essence, does take us beyond ourselves, bringing us face to face with that self on the other side, revealing suddenly the mirror opposite of the idea that has gone to make the poem. (Door 22)

He not only says this but also does the same through his poems. For him, no word should come in the poem unnecessarily. In an interview given to Jayadeep Sarangi, Jayant Mahapatra said, "Physics taught me to write with a consciousness, not to use the unnecessary word in a poem" (188). To him, the final movement towards silence is "no magician's trick. It is not even the shriek of a man falling out of a high window. Not the sound before an ocean wave breaks. Or a wound that refuses to heal" (Mahapatra 177). In a very dexterous manner, and especially through the voids and silences, the poet tries to present some philosophical ideas. Christopher Caudwell rightly illustrates "Poetry is what it is, it exhibits a reality beyond the reality it brings to birth and nominally portrays a reality which though secondary is yet higher and more complex" (20). Even the titles of Mahapatra's poems like Ash, Bone of Time, Another Hour's Bell, and others can be seen as symbols of the harsh truths of life, i.e., death, decay, temporality and meaninglessness. Reflecting the postmodern stance, Mahapatra accepts that the world is fragmented but seldom laments that fragmentation, instead celebrating it through his poems. For instance, in the poem Ash, he juxtaposes the images of life and death to show that creation and destruction always go together. The person who was proud to be capable, successful and powerful all his life, is reduced to a handful of dust in the end.

The substance that stirs in my palm
Could well be a dead man…
The ways of freeing myself:
The glittering flowers, the immensity of rain… (Mahapatra 516)

Mahapatra holds a distinction as he exercises the utmost freedom and does not adhere to any specific ideology. One may find some of the contemporary tendencies in his writings, but they are diverse and sometimes exactly opposite; therefore, it is nearly impossible to put him in any fixed category. For him, poetry was a medium to express his views in an effective manner, where he used different philosophical, scientific, sociological, cultural, and linguistic tools. What gives Mahapatra an upper hand over other experimentalists is that he refused to use any set pattern while creating his poems. Mahapatra's other important aspect is his voice of protest about everything that he finds problematic.

Conclusion

It can be ascertained that as a poet, Mahapatra did experiments with his craft and those experiments contributed to making English more Indian. One can say that what Raja Rao did for the prose, Mahapatra did the same for poetry. For him, Indian poetry brings together the opposites. "Once again, this is a coming together of opposites: like, for instance, good and evil, which can only carry themselves as ideas or exist because one has meaning only in relation to

the other" (DOP 22). One can discern through the above discussion that Mahapatra's poems demonstrate the opposition of faith and tradition that he may have faced, being someone with a dual identity in terms of religion and origin. He never tried to escape the tradition but used it effectively to enrich his poems. The poems discussed in this article highlight his experiments with the techniques that helped him handle a diversity of themes and emotions. Sometimes he explores uncommon experiences, and other times he uses the most common experiences to connote uncommon feelings. He intentionally alienates himself from communal or cultural subject positions to make an unbiased assessment of the realities of his time, in his poetic corpus. Through his experiments in poetry, Mahapatra covers a sojourn from 'understandable to un-understandable.'

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