



# Poeming Odisha: Revisiting Jayanta Mahapatra

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**Abstract**— *The relationship between Odia Poetry in English and Jayanta Mahapatra is the relationship between architecture and its architect, between sculpture and its sculptor. In other words, the origin of Odia Poetry in English lies in Jayanta Mahapatra's poetic oeuvre. It is Mahapatra who indeed has given birth to the domain. It is again he who has nurtured it all through to its maturity. If a single figure who has been existentially linked to the Odia Poetry in English right since its very inception and has been moreover, an eyewitness to its entire history, it is none other than Jayanta Mahapatra. Then who is Jayanta Mahapatra and what is the identity of this patriarch of Odia Poetry in English? If any singular label that is most ubiquitously applied to Jayanta Mahapatra is his being an Odia poet writing in English. Besides this monism of identity, he is nowhere to be assumed as a poet of some specific theme or concern. To ascribe particularities concerning his content is perhaps to narrow his poetic output. Though Odisha appears recurrently in his poetry, it would not perhaps be sensible to declare Mahapatra as a poet whose canvas solely permits anything quintessentially Odia. Besides, he has dealt with multiple themes, issues, concerns, commitments, etc. His is a vignette or a spectrum of plenty. In Mahapatra, more interestingly, the form is foreign but the content and the thought are incontestably his own. Such an obvious discrepancy is so skillfully managed by Mahapatra that the readers relish the beauty of the borrowed and the savior of the indigenous. This paper looks at how Mahapatra poems Odisha, his microcosm for the world, with special reference to a few of his poems wherein Odisha emerges as a major trope.*



**Keywords**—Odia poetry in English; Poeming Odisha; Microcosm; Trope

## I. INTRODUCTION

Locating Odisha and Odishan elements in Odia poetry in English is the central concern of this paper. Mother and motherland have always and invariably remained the first love of a person. The first sights the eyes catch, the first chores the ears resonate with, the water and air of a land a man first appropriates into his being do always leave an indelible imprint in the mind and psyche of one's being. The poet with his origin and upbringing in the soil of Odisha cannot but be inextricably hinged to Odishan culture, legends, myths, to its socio-political ethos, historical monuments and geographical scenario. In the eyes of R. W. Emerson, the father of American literature, 'America is a poem.' American literature as a whole constitutes a secondary text with its origin in the mother

text America. The province of Odia poetry in English does have a similar existential link with Odisha. The most prominent figure that fills the measure of Odia-English poetry, Jayanta Mahapatra, has grown in the close vicinity of Odisha's scenic, serene and sublime ambience. The makings of his being and sensibility have been tempered with Odishan ethos. A look at the poetic output of Mahapatra reveals Odisha to be a strong presence amid a myriad of autobiographical as well as extra-autobiographical themes that he deals with. The poetic terrain of the state of Odisha poses either as a politico-cultural background or a canvas of central constitutive force or even the both. It appears to be both the ground and the background of the poet's poetic sense and sensibility. It appears simultaneously to be the echo and the essence.

To begin with, Jayanta Mahapatra undoubtedly happens to be the most stubborn, seasoned and patriarchal figure in the realm of Odia poetry in English. He has definitely made Odisha more visible on the international arena as the most vibrant landscape rich in myth and culture. In “Dhauli” from the collection entitled *One: The Sad Green of Bamboo Groves* Mahapatra invokes the legends of Odisha. Odisha is the land of histories, myths, legends, tales, etc. It is a land which carries God’s plenty. Ashoka, the legendary king, realized in victory the nausea of achievement. The meaning of war was seen in the fertility of the soil of Kalinga. The voiceless decomposing dead bodies melted into the consuming self of the soil in Dhauli. The bank of the river Daya along which once enemies locked in a brutal war does not seem to have forgotten the cries of the maimed soldiers. The weather-beaten rock edict, the relic of time, is the only evidence of that decisive historical event. Now it appears to be just a piece of insignificant rock, time’s negligent witness, “Years later, the evening wind,/ trembling the glazed waters of the River Daya,/ keens in the rock edicts the vain word,/ shuttered silence, an air:”. Neither the cry of the dying war veterans nor the lament of the king is heard from the decaying stone, “... the measure of Asoka’s suffering/ does not appear enough.”

In “Village Evening” Mahapatra invokes a typical village scene – the bats hanging from the rain-wait deodar and wind’s romance with the little gods under the banyan tree. Besides these beautiful views of the village there is a narrative of poverty that goes parallel. He presents a micro-narrative of Ahalya, a widow with a seven year old son, who dreams of a different dawn by caressing the one rupee coin which her son has earned from his day-long labour. Her life seems to have taken a curve after years of blank solitude. A hope of a different life with the hands of her little son indulges her in some fancies of the future. She does not need to visit houses to procure food for her child. The stale rotten food she receives as a charity from the so called generous people or some coins she gets from a night’s stay with the known strangers has tired her completely. Her son’s little income though insufficient engages her in the imagination of a distant happiness, “In the dark air of her hut,/ Ahalya, the widow, caresses the rupee/ her seven-year-old son/ has brought home from his day-long labours,/ dreaming of daybreak.” Mahapatra successfully demonstrates the fact that at the background of the idealized lies poverty, darkness, inhumanity, decayed dreams and hopeless hopes.

In “The Abandoned British Cemetery at Balesore” captures the silence of the cemetery and the corresponding thought and the image that it engenders in the poet. History turns silent in the cemetery of its own creation.

Time has silenced history at the outskirts of civilization. The poet’s presence among the community of the dead hardly affects the monotony of the departed. Only the names remain as the visible reminder of their lives they once lived. The weather-beaten epitaphs are the surviving imprints of their achievements. The people of power lay buried so powerless. The uncompromising ego of the British sleeps flat under the earth with the decomposing ugly-looking worms. If they have left anything it is only the epitaphs. They lay buried in the fringe of some nondescript place obscure in the map. Cholera, a nemesis to the colonial ego, came as an instrument of control to the self-declared masters of the world. The vanity of conquest and domination turns into dust. Now they are a part of the catalogue of time which equalizes the king and the pauper by putting them on the same page. There is no exit from the labyrinth of time. The dead lay silent among the deserted wild creepers and cobwebs.

The poem entitled “Dawn at Puri” is possibly about the poet’s mother’s last wish to be cremated at Puri, the land of Lord Jagannath and the land that makes you get ‘mingled’. Saul Bellow’s line in his book *To Jerusalem and Back* – “Elsewhere you die and disintegrate. Here you die and mingle.” – is most apposite here. What does this word ‘mingle’ precisely mean? It certainly implies spiritual significance but history more importantly remains in undertones. Jerusalem is the land where the Jews belong and they seek their identity from. They experienced centuries of exile and expulsion but they finally returned to their ‘chosen land’. Outside Jerusalem Jews have no cultural and historical existence. Jagannath is also the central cultural force that immortalizes history. Here culture decides history. This is of course a contra-Marx stance. Marx’s reversion is just a hypothesis or his understanding on the concept of history. And that has been made a paradigm. It is not a paradigm by itself. His notion of history is also conditioned by the circumstances of his time. To implant it on a different temporality is proved to be just a graft not a synthesis. It is a clash, not a consensus. On the contrary, Jagannath as the cultural epicenter of the Odias integrates people historically. It is both the source and the sequence. The historical temporality is consecutive to the cultural one. Here history dwindles into unimportance without the aid of the culture. Here the terror of history is mitigated by the consolation of permanent mingling. Here death is a wish, a gift and a preparation. Here the magnificent Marx is a dull monotone. Here history is culture’s footnote. Despite visible sites of poverty and starvation Puri remains quintessentially the land which fulfills, connects and completes. The funeral fire not only burns but also consumes in order to ‘mingle’-

“... her last wish was to be cremated here/ twisting uncertainly like light/ on the shifting sands”.

On the other hand, in “A Hint of Grief” Mahapatra celebrates the beauty of Odisha in a rainy season. He juxtaposes both nature, which is the realm of repetition, and history, the domain of difference. History, the book of the dead, is inseparable and therefore the source of torment. The spectre of history stifles our ability to enjoy and appreciate the beauty of nature. Those ‘weathered stones’ of history survives in nature in order to make alive the dots of dead temporality.

In “Hunger” Mahapatra integrates the erotic and the pathos on the same canvas showing the life of the fisherman’s daughter. On the same page we see the images of ‘the fish slithering, turning inside’ and ‘wormy legs wide’. The poem “Hunger” is on a fisherman who sells the body of his daughter to procure food for the two dying skeletons. Mahapatra almost invokes the Dickensian world in verse. She is just fifteen and does not know how to prepare those partly formed parts of sex. Her father becomes the pimp. His obvious wiles and the clichéd and crude semantics of transaction keep morality in back burner. Morality does not feed. Morality is not food one eats. Morality is always subservient to survival. She opens her wormy unexcited legs for just that act to be done as fast as possible so that she can fill her belly. Hunger is so apparent on her thighs and things, “Long and lean, her ears were cold as rubber./ She opened her wormy legs wide. I felt the hunger there,/ the other one, the fish slithering, turning inside.” Mahapatra has been very successful with his words to express that act of sex without being reduced to indelicacy and obscene. With the employment of an apt image ‘fish slithering’ he could avoid all probabilities of being too obvious.

In “A Country” Mahapatra portrays a character that almost resembles Maud Gonne, Yeats’ love. Unlike Yeats’ lady who was a nationalist, Mahapatra’s girl is a Naxal and therefore, a derelict and reprobate. But what hurts the poet most is the way she combine grace with grossness. Indoctrinated by the norms of Naxalism she has neglected the beauty she has been gifted with. She holds knife in those delicate hands. The knife in her hand makes a sharp contrast with the beauty that she possesses, “Why am I hurt still by the look/ in the hands of that graceful Naxal girl/ who appeared out of nowhere that winter,/ holding a knife as old as history.” The expression ‘holding a knife as old as history’ implies the history of exploitation, injustice and poverty. The indifference of the state mechanism to address the problems of the people at the margin seems to have forced many of the innocents to hold weapons. Odisha being a state where the germ of Naxalism exists

might have inspired Mahapatra to compose this poem. Without being judgemental Mahapatra expresses what troubles him most in so far as Naxalism is concerned. It is the malignant cells of Naxalism which corrupts the innocents. The slogan of exploitation and unemployment has influenced many to mingle in the flow and current of protest and vandalism.

His poem “Grandfather” is the most touching one among others. What makes it so remarkable is the history of Odisha in 1866. This year Odisha underwent the cataclysmic spell of the terrible famine. This famine forced the poet’s grandfather to change his faith. In order to survive he embraced Christianity. He bartered his soul to the machines of the missionaries for a few bagful of rice. The force of hunger dwindled the faith to which he primordially belonged. The poet finds from his grandfather’s ‘yellowed diary’ the notes which whisper in vernacular the ‘cramped cry’. His superego hacked him every minute until the end of his life. It was not an easy job to relinquish the one whose perpetuity was his only purpose of his life. In *Arogya Niketan* Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay writes, “Belief is not emotion”. It is always contra-emotion. Emotion implies motion and speed, therefore short-lived. Belief is more fundamental, grounded, and formidable. The torture of dying compelled him to compromise with the uncompromisable. Such compromise was not without a consequence. The interminable agony followed like an interminable shadow after the event until the complete erasure of the object that caused the shadow. The empty sky, ‘the cracked fallow earth’, ‘empty trees’, ‘dragging river’, ‘the jackals’, ‘the cold mean nights of the belly’ and the horror of the certitude of death stooped him to folly. If it was a choice without judgment in order to save life from the hem of death, it was indeed a legitimate choice. But it was not a mere choice. This choice involved an irrecompensable loss – the loss of faith. It was another death, not ‘another life’. The instinct buried the ethical. The acquired faith did not blur the visibility of the deserted. The specter of the deserted reminded him of the indignity and the pain of conversion, “The separate life let you survive, while perhaps/ the one you left wept in the blur of your heart”.

In “Possessions” Mahapatra repeats the refrain of W. H. Auden who writes in his poem “In Memory of W. B. Yeats”, “For poetry make nothing happen”. A poet witnesses and writes the events of history but, never acts. His voice is his writing. He does not exist outside his work, “In pain perhaps/ they stand inside, but cannot/ yet slam the door of their voice.” They reflect on the idea of pain, but hardly mitigate anyone’s pain. Therefore, Plato is perhaps not incorrect when writes in *The Republic* that art is twice removed from reality. Friedrich Nietzsche, the

most radical voice of the German romantic cult, is often celebrated and quoted for one of his famous statements in the *The Gay Science* (1882), “The secret of reaping the greatest fruitfulness and the greatest enjoyment from life is to live dangerously.” Such a statement certainly creates an impression that the writer must have been a most courageous man but on the contrary Nietzsche fainted when he saw the wounded soldiers bathed in blood admitted to the Red Cross centres during the First World War. It is easy to write about courage but to have courage is different. The energy of his language may inspire someone else to act not certainly the writer. Mahapatra writes that the artists and poets are incapable of any action, so do the politicians. They are reduced to mere promises and hopes which they conveniently overstep after the election, “The elections over, villages filling with shadows.” Here he expresses a bit of Odisha’s political reality. He indicates here the poet’s helplessness to remove the shadows with light. The empty rhetoric of the politicians leads people nowhere. The stinking piles of yellow papers at the corners of the office and the rigorous planning without implementation never alleviate poverty, “... sixty thousand children will go hungry again.”

## II. CONCLUSION

From the above exposition of Mahapatra’s poems it can be gauged that no singularity of theme, thought, concern and commitment defines the poet. Multiple voices coalesce in him and myriad monologues make his poems clusters of plenty. What defines him the most is the mosaic which his poetry inarguably leads to and his openness towards the horizon which blends the possible and the prevalent on the same canvas. Therefore, any specificity to be imposed on his art would be reductionist. However, Mahapatra’s corpus being a keen mirror of the Odia topography, people, politics and their conditions, it also constantly engages with the concepts of time, history, silence, memory, loneliness, death, violence etc. In Mahapatra the polyphony of concepts, conjectures and conditions combine into a coherent whole. The thematic heterogeneity does not result in producing pastiche, but contradictorily there is an immanent symmetry against the background of apparent horizons of differences and concerns. That is what makes his poetry so different and so characteristic of him –dialogic monism.

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