

Abstract on “Dawn at Puri” by Jayanta Mahapatra

‘Dawn at Puri’ is an imagist poem (a poem consisting of a number of vivid, sharply etched, but not necessarily interrelated images). The Panorama of Puri (in Orissa- a land of ‘forbidding myth), artistically portrayed with vivid images and symbols, becomes evocative. Puri is the name of a famous town in Orissa, which is considered sacred because of the temple dedicated to Lord Jagannath, the presiding deity of Orissa. This temple is said to date that to 318 A.D. It is particularly famous for the chariot festival of Jagannath; an annual ritual conducted for the glory of this deity and is attended by a large number of pilgrims. ‘Endless crow noises’; a reference to the endless cawing of the crows, a visual as well as an auditory image. ‘A skull on the holy sands’: This is a startling imagery created with the juxtaposition of the abstract with the concrete, where the abstract ‘holy’ and the concrete ‘skull’ are grouped together. It is believed that the deity of Puri was carved out of a tree trunk that was washed ashore and this fact is alluded to in his poem ‘Losses’. Hoping for some kind of redemption for this wayward world, the speaker in the poem muses: “Perhaps the piece of driftwood/ washed up on the beach/ heals the sand and the water”. Puri is regarded as a sacred site and it is the wish of every pious Hindu to be cremated there to enable them to attain salvation.

‘It’s empty country towards hunger’: a reference to the poverty to the people of Orissa including the sight of the skull lying on the sea-beach symbolizes the utter destitution of the people. ‘White-clad widowed women’: reference to widows wearing white saris and the phrase that points to their predicament as well as the rigidity of Hindu customs and rituals. ‘Past the centers of their lives’: having spent the middle years of their lives and passing their prime. ‘Their austere eyes stare like those caught in a net’: the misery resulting in utter hopelessness is clearly visible on their faces for there is an expression of solemnity in the eyes of the widows in which no worldly desire is perceptible and are full of desire like the eyes of creatures trapped in a net.

‘Dawn’s shining strands of faith’: A person having a firm belief in religion never losses hope, so in spite of their circumstances, the only thing that sustains the widows is their religious faith and the hope born of it. The reference to dawn is to be noted. It refers to a new beginning in nature and thereby, to a new start in mankind and civilization. The tone of quiet acceptance, with a latent awareness of suffering, perhaps indicates a very Indian sensibility. ‘The frail early light’: the dim light of the dawn is a reference to the title of the poem which must be noted. ‘Leprous’: from leprosy, an infectious disease affecting the skin and nerves and

causing deformities. ‘A mass of crouched faces’: a large number of timid persons standing in a group, having no confidence in themselves, preferably referring to the lepers and widows who are not allowed to move freely in the town. ‘And suddenly breaks out of my hide’: suddenly emerges from beneath my skin.

‘A sullen solitary pyre’: A pile of wood is used for burning a dead body as part of a funeral rite. The sight of this reminds the poet of his mother’s last wish to be cremated here as it is the gateway to Heaven or the ‘Swargadwara’ which is the name of that part of the long sea-beach where the funeral pyres go on burning. Since the temple of Lord Jaganath at Puri ‘points to unending rhythm, dying in this place will take one to silence the ultimate desire of a human being which will enable him to attain Nirvana. ‘Twisting uncertainly like light on the shifting sands’: This is an apt image of the smoke rising from the funeral pyre where the wind from the sea causes the smoke to twist uncertainly. This is an example of Mahapatra’s ‘transcendal mode’ and an example of his attempt to trap elusive meanings. The poetic exploration of this place turns out to be a search for the self. The view thrills the poet and he becomes an integral part of it, observing a morning scene on the sandy sea-beach in the town of Puri. By means of a series of vivid pictures, the atmosphere of dawn has been created. Mahapatra also underlines the importance of the temple town of Puri and what it means to the Hindus in India.

Jayanta Mahapatra’s poem “Hunger”

Jayanta Mahapatra, along with Ezekiel, Ramanujan and Dom Moraes, is a major voice of the first wave of modern Indian English poetry. In my opinion the works of poets like Kolatkar, Agha Shahid Ali stole the luster from the works of these other poets, Mahapatra held his own. If he is not as pervasively known name as someone like Ezekiel, it is due to non-poetic reasons. Mahapatra is one of the most haunting of the Indian English poets with a highly demanding poetic style. He edited a magazine called *Chandrabhaga* for some time. He started writing late in life: he taught Physics in a College in Cuttack and began writing after he was 40. But soon he had a substantial body of writing.

His *Crossing of the Rivers* is a remarkable long poem. An abiding motif in his poems is the tangle between tradition and modernity. The picture that emerges in works like *A Rain of rites* is that Mahapatra tends to position himself on the side of modernity and then rather than challenging or undermining or ironically doubting tradition, he examines modernity itself by evoking the tradition to throw

posers at his modern location. The modernity of the speaker in many of Mahapatra's poems is a burden to bear. But, yet his poems do not cast tradition as the preferred resource. It is the difficulty that this opposition raises that gets foregrounded.

One of his poems that earned a lot of fame is 'Hunger'. This poem impressed Bernard Young, the American poet, so much that he 'quoted' the whole poem in *The Hudson Review*. The poem presents two kinds of hunger – one (physical) leading to the fulfillment of other (sexual). The theme is quite obvious, so let me focus on what I like about this poem.

The poem primarily has two structures of images: flesh related and poverty related; hunger emanating from the flesh and that from poverty. What makes the poem impressive is the way these images entangle one another, some abstract, all building the irony of the two urges. The vividness of the images build a word portrait of the place, graphically relating the manners of the three characters.

The fisherman, the father who pimps his daughter, is careless in his offer of the girl: "as though his words sanctified the purpose with which he faced himself". I think the poet craftily pushes the reader to question the very ideas of sanctity here. The utter hopelessness in the life of the fisherman and his daughter is such that it words like sanctity would be meaningless there. The values have no 'purchase' in so utterly degraded a human plight.

The image of wound is prepared to by such images as 'the bone thrashing in his eyes', 'mind thumping in the flesh's sling', 'burning the house' 'body clawing'. The actions indicated in these image portray the human effort that is rather desperate, fruitless and hurting. The wound image gathers them all together in a place where the combined force of all these previous images together hits the reader hard and jump him/her out of complacency. It must be borne in mind that the tourist searching for sexual gratification implicitly holds the place of the audience as the reader is a voyeur like the tourist.

The soot image, a customary suggestion of sin, alerts us to how the blackness of the predicament of the father pimping his daughter is a condemnation not of the father but of the society where such a tragedy comes to pass. The soot covers the shack of the fisherman, but it is the tourist's mind on which the poem sees the soot. Thus, like Blake who said the presence of a whore in society is a curse of the marriage system, this poem questions the justness in society from which sanctity has disappeared.

I have always felt that it is the reader who has to bear the force of irony of this poem. Notice how the reader in this poem is not allowed to be outside of it. Like the tourist in the poem, the reader is an outsider and a sort of voyeur. So the shame of the plight of the pimping father falls on the reader – not on the individual reader.

A profile

Jayanta Mahapatra, born on 22 October 1923 in Cuttack, belongs to a lower middle-class family. Had his early education (from Kindergarten to Cambridge classes) in English medium at Stewart school, Cuttack. After his Master's Degree in Physics, he joined as a teacher in 1949 and served in different Government college of Orissa. Got his superannuation in 1986 when he was in Ravenshaw College, Cuttack.

Jayanta Mahapatra began writing poems rather late in comparison with his contemporaries. But this late beginning does not in anyway distort his achievement. His poems have appeared in most of the reputed journals of the world. He received the prestigious Jacob Glatstein Memorial Award (Chicago) in 1975. He is the first Indian poet in English to have received the Central Sahitya Akademi Award(1981) for his Relationship . His other volumes include Close the Sky, Ten by Ten, Svayamvara & Other Poems, A Father's Hours, A Rain of Rites, Waiting, The False Start & Life Sings. His translations (from Oriya to English) bear the stamp of his originality too.

His early poems were born of love, of love's selfishness. They celebrate not only passion, the body's spacious business, but consistently evoke a melancholic atmosphere rent with absences, fears, foreboding and sufferings. But slowly and steadily the poet released himself from this lonesome citadel of love, and learnt involving himself with other men, living or dead with many other succulent chambers of living. Fear of ageing, fear of death, and love for life and memory, love for the golden past an inquisitiveness to live amid contraries of life, and a complete absorption in and identification with culture and tradition of Orissa-all these run simultaneously, as it were, the poet is sincerely trying to uphold the lost dimension of blood and the living. Death is a new beginning for the poet, and life a 'telegraph key tapping away in the dark':

Childhood memories occupy a considerable space in his poetry. His commitment to and identification with Orissa becomes complete when he exhorts the dark daughters engraved on the body of the Sun Temple at Konark.

The richness and sophistication of language, the softness and delicacy of the words chosen, systematized orchestration of authenticated experiences through the exact palpability of images, the sincerity of harping on the 'feel' of the experiences rather than on their 'thought', the sweetness of music emerging from a fountain-like flow of the verse-form contribute to the greatness and ingenuity of Mahapatra's poetry.

The Use of Images and Symbols in the poetry of Jayant Mahapatra

Jayant Mahapatra made his debut as an Indian poet writing in English about two decades ago with the publication of his first anthology *Close the Sky, Ten By Ten*, and *Second Svayamwara and Other Poems*, both published in 1971. The third anthology *A Rain of Rites* was published in 1976. His many poems have been universally recognized. He has matured rapidly, and both the quality and quantity of his poetic output indicate that with the passing of time his poetry would come to be recognized as the best in Indian English. In his poetry, we would see that he has maintained a rigid and strict Christian upbringing within the house, but the outside world was a vast stage of religion rites and rituals, myth and images that the people practised. The pull between these two worlds, therefore, was very obvious, and Mahapatra experiences the tension severely as he has expressed in his poem, "Fear of my Guilt, I Bid you Farewell".

When the waves come, following one another,
the science and Noise,
the banished Princess and the Magnolia tree is well,
a song rises from the honeycomb
Latticework of stone
to grip these bones where
a grey water of blood stretches
out to the future.¹

On the one hand, he had to live in a house that was rigidly Christian. On the other, the vast landscape of Hindu rituals and myths encircled him on all sides. How would he feel baffled at the density of images, symbols and the meanings they carried within, be withdrawn and silent because he could not share those structures of meaning ?² Mahapatra's Poem, 'Dawn at Puri' Clears :

Endless crow noises
A skull on the holy sands
tilts it empty country towards hunger.
White- clad widowed women.
Past the centres of their lives
are waiting to enter the Great Temple.³

An ample Indianness is seen at its best in his poems about Orissa, where the local and the regional is raised to the level of the universal. "Orissa Landscape", "Evening in an Orissa village", "The Orissa Poems", "Dawn at Puri", etc. are Oriya first, and therefore, Indian too. K.A. Panikar writes that an examination of the recurring images in Mahapatra's poems reveals that he is Oriya to the core.

Some of Mahapatra's images, though they are not many, assume the shape of symbols in his poetry of such recurring images, mention may be made of human failures, nature, a process of disillusionment, and the majestic height. While discussing the poem "Mountain", we have seen the application of the image of disillusionment, which usually denotes the eternity, facing the process of growth and decay.

The frequently used image of Nature in Mahapatra's poetry denotes the "Subjective response" as distinct from the image of the universal ethos. Mahapatra offers fresh images of mountain, city, sun and factory in his verse. In his "The Mountain", he writes thus :

In the darkness of evening
silence and pressure only,
Multiplying, adding, subtracting,
In the abyssal heart.⁴

The city occupies, a central place in Mahapatra's poetry. Like the image of darkness, the image of city is linked with corruption and industrialization in modern human life (especially as found in metropolitan cities). The city image is predominant in poem like "Snow in Iowa City". The following lines of "Snow in Iowa City" are worth citing in this context :

Here the anguish of the old is hidden
under the gentle slopes of bearded corn fields.
But you can hear it in the footsteps.⁵

Mahapatra occupies a prominent place in contemporary Indian English poetry. Artistically too, he is a highly talented poet who knows well how to handle his poetic tool. His use of images and symbols in poetry speaks volumes of his trained mind and disciplined art. The images he uses acquire the symbolic overtones. Mahapatra's enchanting expression of quite meditateness, slightly tinged with sorrow and nostalgia the ubiquitous religious and cultural ambience of Orissa bestows a distinctive quality upon his verse. He has spread the fragrance of his poetic leaves abroad that spans the entire globe : Iowa City, Adelaide, Sewanee, Hawaii, Sydney, Canberra, Tokyo.

The woman is yet another image in Mahapatra's poetry. As a symbol, she is usually identified with the 'discarded things'. She is often portrayed as a sexually oppressed by the so called patriarchal system and poverty. The image of the woman has been vividly presented here in the poem, "The whorehouse in a Calcutta Street", he writes thus :

Dream Children, dark, superflows;
You miss them in the house's dark
spaces, how can't you?
Even the woman don't wear them –
Like jewels or precious stones at the throat;
the faint feeling deep at a woman's centre
that brings back the discarded things:
the little turning of blood
at the far edge of the rainbow⁶

Here simile and metaphors are beautifully yoked together. The dream children are depicted as a matter of destroying the emotion of human kindness. The same kind of images have been drawn in Ezekiel's poetry in 'The Railway Clerk'. The tension and the pain of being out of tunes is apparent in the poems like "Lost", "The Mountain" and we would feel very fragmentary quality of the images they are discreet entities that explore the reality of the world. In 'Dawn at Puri', Mahapatra depicts with vivid images and symbols of the temple town of Puri with its 'endless crow noises; 'a skull lying on holy sands', he writes thus :

At Puri, the crows
The one wide street
lolls out like a giant tongue
Five faceless lepers move aside
as a Priest passed by . 7

Mahapatra expresses man's loneliness, his search for roots and identity through images and symbols. ' Shattered faith', 'moments of sexual desire', 'the pregnancy of silence', dreams and imaginations are articulated with images and symbols. In 'Sanctuary', Mahapatra suggests the images of sky, shape, home and absence, thus he expresses :

now I close the sky
with a square ten by ten
the roof essential
hides the apocalyptic ideal
the space sings
where I live at home,
to hyperbola to sky- tasted love
for the blessing of absence
is its essence.⁸

To conclude, Mahapatra is a skilled and conscious craftsman who churns out his images and symbols thoughtfully. In such poems he is an Oriyan poet first, but he is Indian too, because by a careful selection of images and symbols, the local becomes symbolic of India as a whole.

R. Parthasarathy observes : " The economy of phrasing and startling images recall the subhasitas (literally, that which is well said) of classical Sanskrit." ⁹ ' Events the exile, ' the moon moments', ' total solar eclipse' are conspicuous for the use of imagery, which is realistic suggestive and symbolic.

The poem “Dawn at Puri”

The poem “Dawn at Puri” narrates by describing the Oriyan landscape, especially the holy city of Puri . Before I begin to discuss the poem ,let me tell you that Mahapatra is deeply rooted in Indian culture and ethos with which he is emotionally attached as a poet . Though the language of expression is English his sensibility is ‘Oriya’. I have repeated this point because in order to appreciate the prescribed poem it is important to understand his sensitive attitude to the native socio cultural practices . Here in the poem under discussion,

Puri is the living protagonist for him .Puri is not only a setting but also a protagonist because he presents a graphic description of Puri as a central character .Here Puri is personified.

At Puri, we find a stretch of beach called Swargadwara or ‘Gateway to heaven’ where the dead are cremated . Many pious Hindus and widows feel that it is possible to attain salvation by dying at Puri . Mahapatra states: “Her last wish to be cremated here/ twisting uncertainly like light/ on the shifting sands.”

Puri is not only famous as a place for the four ‘ dhams ‘or ‘sacred cities’ but also for the ‘math’ or the monastery set up by Shankaracharya . Lord Jagganath is the main deity in Puri who is in the form of Lord Vishnu . The way Mahapatra delineates the events and incidents in the poem shows us that he disapproves of what is going on under the cover of tradition and practices. You will notice how life “lies like a mass of crouched faces without names” and you also can see how people are trapped by faith as expressed in the expression “caught in a net “. The shells on the sand are “ruined” the word , “ leprous” is suggestive of decadence and infirmity . The poem evokes loss of identity , anonymity, death , disease and decadence . As I have mentioned above, most of the Hindus wished to be cremated in the land of Lord Vishnu. The speaker’s mother also had such a last wish, the wish to be cremated in Puri. This is fulfilled by the effort of her son in the blazing funeral pyre which is seen as “sullen” and “solitary” .The poem winds up on an uncertain note like the corpse of his dead mother .

Don’t you think the title evokes many interpretations ? The title of the poem is very suggestive as it does not talk about only one particular dawn which might have been particularly unpleasant because one’s mother is not cremated everyday . But personally one could feel that this dawn could be made more special .The poet is suggesting that all dawns at Puri are more or less similar with dead mothers being cremated everyday and crows’ cawing along with skulls and hunger indicating poverty- ridden India which shows absolute “Indianness“. The poem is about feelings and compassion for the people who suffer . Let me tell you that the poem is really a scathing attack on tradition and traditional practices which are mostly ruthless and biased . The poet bears no sympathy for rituals and hollow traditions. What we notice in the poem is emptiness of tradition , the indifference of society and fossilized Hindu culture.

Abstract on “Summer” by Jayanta Mahapatra

Mahapatra sees the world with detachment, comprehends the reality that he encounters in the world, and portrays it objectively. The force of this poem lies in its peculiar evocation of images and ordering of experience, not in what can be abstracted from it. This poem offers a few pictures which are by no means interconnected, and it reads like a riddle. But the pictures are vivid and realistic. 'Not yet'; the words focus on an event that will come after the current time. One needs to understand the poem to find out what is not yet to take place, or to happen, or to be done. The lines convey the impossibility of unraveling the mystery of life. Mahapatra's poetry is a continual effort to understand the nature of the reality he inhabits and embodies. 'The cold ash of a deserted fire'; the first picture is an evocative image of the dying ashes of a fire lit under a mango tree, which has subsequently gone out. Things, images and the world of phenomena are means by which the unknown may be known. 'Who needs the future?'; a one-line rhetorical and ambiguous question which is not directly answered, where Mahapatra writes a poetry of questioning.

'Crows of rivalries are quietly nestling'; an idea expressed in metaphorical language where the crows are not real but reference is made to the domestic rivalries and jealousies which exist in the mother's head. Crows are symbols of evil, guilt and destruction in his poems. 'The home will never be hers'; the girl's home belong to her brothers, after her marriage she would go to her husband's home. Mahapatra ironically refers to the way the Indian woman is not given a space or voice of her own as an individual in her own right. 'A living green mango drops softly to the earth'; a green mango is unripe and its falling to the ground is premature. In the same way, the expectations in this young girl's heart to be and become an individual without limitation or constriction have come to an end: probably referring to the early marriages in the Indian villages. An important aspect of his diction is the use of humanizing epithets for the non-human and inanimate.