

IMAGERY, VISION, SYMBOLISM AND DICTION IN JAYANT MAHAPATRA'S SELECTED POEMS: A READING

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Introduction:

Jayant Mahapatra a well known poet is widely published and read equally in India and abroad belongs to the land of Orissa. He makes use of his experiences throughout his life with many prevalent other sources around, while weaving the cob-web of his poetry. The poet in this context with the issues of his land, discussed in poetry, believes that: "The landscape chooses me, and my poems. I may not have written well-crafted poetry at times, but they are words of anguish, my own" (Mahapatra, *Door...*34). Imagery and symbolism has been a back-bone of Mahapatra's poetry. Inamdar, a scholar of Mahapatra's poetry says, "Mahapatra attempts to express the inexpressible through symbols" (259) is a fact. The Orissan landscape appears lolling out of his words taking shapes of the things related. Let's go through the world of his imagery, vision, symbolism and diction in the contexts used. The poet being often in contemplative and serious mood seems to be complex in the beginning but, incessant reading of his poems unfolds the layers of psychological and mythical images in his poetry and true picture of the land of Orissa appears in totality. Imagery, Diction, Vision and Symbolism are the words explored in connection with the poet and his poetry

Imagery, Vision, Symbolism and Diction in Mahapatra's Poems:

Jayant Mahapatra is famous for alluding the legends, history and myths of his motherland using imagery and symbolism as a major feature of his poetry. The poet relates to the history of Orissa and of India continuously, in context with his enquiry regarding the degradation of socio-cultural morals and values in his time. Besides this, the mythical tradition in his land of birth keeps him haunted, reminding some story, character or mysterious thing insulating his vision about the world he is a part of. Mahapatra uses the historic war of Kalinga, fought by Ashoka the legendary king from ancient India, as a sad source of suffering, for the land and its masses, even now. The lines-

the fallow fields of Dhauli hid the red-smeared voiceless bodies
(*The Lie...*18)

Image of the fallow field invokes into the mood of massacre and deaths of innocent people at the hands of Asoka. The "tortured worms" of the earth representing their dead hunger, add into the gloominess of the air. The poet through this imagery, refers to the natural

process around; a bare truth about life. The post war period is remembered for the change in the life of King Asoka; the poet uses the words to mock at the message of silence and peace given after change in the life of the King in the following lines.

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" (ibid, 18)

The poet intends to reiterate the continuity of grief, till now. The place, 'Dhauli' has been used as a symbol of grief by the poet from historical time.

Family history has always been a part of enquiry while relating to things from the past, having some impact on the life of the poet. The poet, when remembers his ancestral blood ties, after meeting and listening to its whispers in vernacular, turns emotional; at the same time, keeps his conscience regarding his new identity, with his grandfather embracing Christianity. The images of "yellowed diary's notes whisper in vernacular" are a forgotten posture for the poet. The poet refers to the drought that hit Orissa and caused the change in faith of his ancestors, through the images from the natural world:

Dead, empty trees stood by the dragging river,
past your weakened body,
flailing against your sleep (ibid, 23).

The reference of "tamarind leaves rustling in the cold mean nights of belly" exposes the threat that posed by the drought before his grandfather challenging his survival. The poet doubts the intentions of the missionaries and enquires through the words: "How old were you? Hunted you turned coward and ran" (ibidem). His mental convulsions regarding the event in the past bring unrest in his mood and, then he rationally questions the validity of faith in the words: "What did faith matter?" (ibidem). Finally, the poet blames his grandfather for waking them up in some mid order. The poet records his disgust regarding the treatment to minorities in Hindu dominated society having some different faith.

Mahapatra refers to the historical moments and evaluates life; its achievements, losses and vainness. The poet refers to the tragic events from past to awaken people, to safeguard the young lives from the epidemics like Cholera in the present. His visit to the cemetery telling the ended story of the great British Empire, through the images of "the ruins of stone and marble, the crumbling wall of brick, the coma of alienated decay..." (ibid, 26). The broken images open up the story of the faded glory of the vanished empire. The poet is awed by the forgotten dead and walks around the graves. The poet, breaking through the serious pondering, expresses ironically using animal imagery in the words:

Awkward in the silence, a scrawny lizard
watches the drama with its shrewd, hooded gaze.
And a scorpion, its sting drooping,
two eerie arms spread upon the marble, over an alien name.

(ibid)

Perhaps, he intends to underline the superiority of life over death. The poet skilfully makes use of broken imagery, again vividly making a reference of broken epitaphs: “Florence R..., darling wife of captain R...R..., aged nineteen, of cholera... Helen, beloved daughter of Mr. & Mrs. ..., of cholera, aged seventeen, in the year of our Lord, Eighteen hundred...” (ibid).

The imagery suggests the brokenness of the memories and everything that belongs to the past. Finally, he compares the present and past conditions of dying men with the image of “iron rusting in the vanished country” (ibid). The lines: “discarded half-sunk anchor in mud beside the graves...waits like a deity perhaps for the elaborate ceremonial of a coming generation to keep history awake” (ibid), expose his ironic vision. The poet through these words sternly expresses his anger and fear for the administration in his days. The way, life is safeguarded now days left no hope. So, mockingly, the poet speaks of the memories of the past to happen again in our time using the symbol of anchor useful for burial.

Mahapatra through his poems refers to the mythical Hindu faith; at times, questions the validity of the same through the rites, rituals and incessant prayers year after year. The very presence of “foggy temples, Old brassy bells moulded by memories, a recurring prayer, the endless stairs and the peaks of Annapurna and Dhaulagiri” make him believe in them as god though, uncertain at mind. The poet dare not enter the “dark, dank sanctum” of the temple fearing the shifting myth from hand to hand and eye to eye. His exposition of the direct question by the priest regarding his faith in the words: “Are you a Hindu?” (ibid, 53) The question wakes the reader up into the falsifying myth in Hinduism and in its sermons. The poet skilfully uses the articles generally seen in temples in India to portray the mythical atmosphere he deals. His born rich poetry exhibits vivid imagery and thought provoking symbols, when the muse in him advances. Bruce King marks the same in his words:

While Mahapatra’s world is filled with personal pain, guilt, remorse, hunger, desire and moments of renewal, his environment is filled with symbols of belief by the ordinary lives of the people of Cuttack, the temples, the Hindu festivals, the ancient monuments. The poems are varied attempts to bridge an epistemological, phenomenological gap to know, be part of, experience, with the world and the other, whether it be a woman, temple stones, a Hindu priest. The skies, the wind, time and waves are symbols of the world of change and flux and which raise questions of nature and purpose of life as represented by the unchanging, fixed, rooted (stones, trees, the past) but these questions can never be answered by the mind, its perceptions and emotions. (*Modern...*206)

Relationship by Mahapatra is an epitome of creativity in relation with life, going to and fro on time scale. It has been considered as an Epic, having its impetus from the past valleys of Hinduism in the land of Orissa. The poem narrates the myth of human origin referring to the physical, mythical and spiritual landscape of Orissa. The poet uses the animal and bird imagery to represent the human emotions and feelings. While referring to the mythical temple of Konark; its creation by, “the twelve hundred brown flowers” (ibid, 59),

for the men, who offered their sweat only to sacrifice their lives. His continuous reference to the 'peaceful carved edicts on blood-red rock' by Ashoka, reminds the groans and cries of innocents. The poet, while going to and fro, uses psychological images and symbols like the "watery skulls and sound of the waves... of this land from Chilika to Chandipur" (ibid, 60). These images and symbols relate to the past life of the region the poet refers. The poet while referring to the grand past of his land and the course of events opening anxious skies says:

the age-old proud stones
lost their strength and fell, and the waters of Daya
stank with the bodies of my ancestor.
(ibid, 62)

The image of 'door' appears suggesting contextual meanings with reference to life, death and faith. This poem appears as 'a dark cave' with full of mythical and historical references waking the reader into complex spiritual and psychological expressions regarding the reminiscences of the poet for his land.

Mahapatra attacks on false traditions prevalent in our society, for contributing in the grief of people in Indian. He begins often with the archaic symbols, "ganga and jamna"; their piety and sacredness and many conceptions in Hindu religious mythology associating the same with the "red leper group" (*Svayamvara*...18) symbolising the absence of grace and relief from sufferings. The poet when refers to the male domination and exploitation of women in the name of tradition, compares with the "white prayer of demure jasmine that drops dead each morning" (ibid, 19). Exactly in the same way, "good widow is fitted to a male pyre" (ibid). Through these examples, the poet underlines, the ills in the Hindu society. The white colour of jasmine and the widows in white clad symbolise pathos in this context. The male pyre adds into the already pathetic image of pyre.

Mahapatra as earlier mentioned, was not having very good relations with his mother. Still, image of mother with all its tenderness and love occupies his conscience from the mythical sources. He refers once in the lines, "Mother, you have everything to cry about, if your son is dead" (*A Father's*...13) in relation with the death of a twelve year old boy for the proud Konark temple. The other time, same mother, he refers with double standards, treating the girl child in rivalry. The poet says:

A ten-year-old girl
combing her mother's hair,
where crows of rivalries
are quietly nesting.
(*The Lie*...17)

Mahapatra here marks the traditional Indian approach towards the girl child, women, unknowingly snatching the rights of their own gender and favouring the male hegemony traditionally.

Mahapatra often attacks the social evils misleading the masses with the age old foolish things and, unwinds the shackles of traditional hierarchy. The poet attacks on the “Silence named God” when, in secret, hears the “wailing flutes of burnt-out rice fields” (ibid, 86). The poet here blames his Lord Jagannath the incarnation of Lord Krishna, with his symbolic “flute” for doing nothing to save his people from the drought. The quite often used image of “crows”, add into the fitful atmosphere of pain. The psychological gap addressed through the term “empty spaces” suggests the blankness in mind. The mechanical image of “Time losing its hand” (ibid) has been used to show not having control on things in the present. The poet very minutely picks up the ill beliefs from the traditional Hindu society. The image of “Like damp clouds and widows deaden the light of the sun” (ibid) suggests the ill treatment and stigma of being bad omen attached with the widows in our society.

Mahapatra never forgets to safeguard rights of women by taking their plight for discussion continuously. His metaphoric images full of suggestive meaning express his angst against the traditional social forces, often leaving the reader puzzled with meaning. His attribution in the line, “while society draws its fateful circle round you again” (ibid) suggests a lot regarding the life of women in India. The ‘fateful circle’ is symbolic of religious faith and its teaching implied in the scriptures like *Manusmriti*. The images used of “puppets dancing at the doors of temples and men owning women” are conceptual to represent women in their genuine condition in Indian society.

Deaths, Hunger (of belly and loin) with poverty, prostitution, orthodoxy, superstition have been the issues of deep concern for Mahapatra. The poet time and again ensures his concern and plight for these issues being present in our society in abundance. Hunger has been used as a symbol by the poet, representing two things; first the need for food and another, the need for physical desire. Both are biological needs. The poet in his famous poem “Hunger” (ibid, 46) elucidates upon one of his experiences during his visit to the unfortunate place in Orissa. The expressions used by the poet are full of emotions of both kinds: emotions of sexual need and of embarrassment and sympathy.

The poet, when met the fisherman, was “with heavy flesh on his back” (ibid) symbolising desire to have sex. But, when he listens to the offer given by a father to him, feels the plight behind through his movements. The poet puts in the words, “trailing his nets and his nerves” (ibid). The poet observes very seriously, the emotions and sentiments of the man and records his observation through the words, “I saw his white bone thrash his eyes” (ibid). The poor man’s helpless situation has made him stand with this unkind and unpleasant offer born out of hunger. The poet says, “Hope lay perhaps in burning the house I lived in” (ibid) suggests his helplessness in improving the situation and agony. The words expressed by the fisherman, “my daughter, she’s just turned fifteen.... Feel her” (ibid) are having double edges. They pierce through the heart of the sensitive listener and at the same time, give solace though vicarious, to the one, who is eying on feeding his stomach by the end of the day. The poet shocked by the experience and the heinous condition the man was in, metaphorically replies in the words, “The sky fell on me and the father’s exhausted wile” (ibid). Thus, the evil of hunger has ruined the society in our time appears through heart-felt imagery and symbols.

Mahapatra is an excellent craftsman; his choice of words and his skill to transform into phrases, clauses, utterances and sentences with a definite sound, rhythm and rhyme and to form a structure his own is unique. The poet's subtle use of words and the following diction with multiplied meaning is remarkable. The lines,

The fisherman said: will you have her, carelessly
trailing his nets and his nerves
(*The Lie...*46) and
This is history. I would not disturb it: the ruins of stone and marble,
the crumbling wall of brick, the coma of alienated decay
(*ibid*, 26)

Mark the alliteration and appropriateness of words resulting into aesthetic appeal, is praiseworthy. His diction is not only to satisfy the reader but, it intensifies the aesthetic sense. Grammaticality has been the structural feature of postmodern poets; seems to be an integral feature of Mahapatra's poetry. His expressions are flawless and we seldom come across slip in the structure of the sentences and structure of the poem as well. The poet practises free verse, without metre and rhyme is the feature of his being postmodern; but, he compensates the same, through his diction and sound.

His famous poems *Relationship*, "Hunger" and "Dawn at Puri" are the best examples in the same line, as mentioned earlier. The aphoristic and idiomatic expressions used by the poet evoke the mythical stories from Hinduism, mark the lines from *Relationship*: "For now I touch your secret order, / embarrassed *yonis*;... How would I pull you out/ of the centuries of fallen stone? / How would I hold the *linga* in the eye/ until the world is made all over again?" (*The Lie...*71) The myth of *yonis* and *linga* in relation with Lord Shiva and the philosophy attached, shapes his vision of destroyed surrounding due to the curse of the deity.

Conclusion:

Thus, imagery used by the poet is incidental, not often integral to the theme of the poems but, expressing the ideas, the poet wishes to express. Many ideas in his poems have not been expressed openly but through imagery. So, in Mahapatra's poems, Imagery proves to be the theme of the poem suggesting many things. Overall, the poet owes his relationship to many English poets, for the language creating sensuality like Keats, surreal expressions like William Blake and Metaphysical poets and the epic conventions like Milton. His own language with all these added flavours together results into the sublime expressions one witnesses in his poetry. Its buoyant stream displays the imagination and extremely sensitive approach of the poet. The imagery and symbolism displays his relationship with the things from the land of his birth. The life with all its 'grief games', a term used by the poet, appears through his words, often descended from his heart full of emotions and feelings. The poet never uses words from *Odia*, but his English words are none the less in carrying his burden of bones and flesh he shares with his fellow human beings.

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