

Chapter Three

JAYANTA MAHAPATRA'S

RELATIONSHIP

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3.1 INTRODUCTION :

This poem is set in Orissa and is 'a personal poem'¹ according to Mahapatra himself. It relates the poet to his personal past memories, his family, dreams, the history and future. He uses myths and legends to express himself. The other purpose behind the poem is his complex search for self identity. The poem in twelve sections numbered as One, Two, ThreeTwelve, explores his relationships one after another.

Mahapatra, a sensitive creative person from Cuttack, marches on to Kanaraka near the sea coast of Orissa, and observes the grandeur and the ruin, the beauty and the broken pieces of the great Sun-Temple. The Sun-Temple had been built in the eleventh century, whereas the poet watches it and receives impressions from it in 70's of 19th century - nearly nine centuries after the great temple was constructed. The poet attempts to connect the Sun Temple with his own poetic self and sensibility pervasively and this endeavor finds a clear and lucid expression in Relationship.

According to V.A.Shahane, "Relationship(1980) must be recognized as a "major" poem by Mahapatra which deals with the poet's relationship with the culture and traditions of India, especially of Orissa, its architectural grandeur and its mythological treasure. His

Muse is, ⁱⁿ part, Wordsworthian and Blakean since it is closely linked with the earth of Orissa and its natural efflorescence and like Blake's Muse, it is also inspired by a spiritual quest and a sense of subtle intuition². In the opinion of Alan Kennedy, Relationship, "is a poem of unrelatedness, in style as in topic. It speaks of the poet's rediscovery of a relatedness with his own ground; it trembles with a hope of a discovery of 'being' and comes close at times to betraying its own spirit."³ But Jayanta Mahapatra himself says, "It is a difficult poem, a personal poem. It wouldn't be wrong to say that Relationship is an Oriya poem, rendered into English ".⁴

3.2 INTERPRETATION :

3.2.1 ONE

While thinking of his life with reference to the past, through the myth, the poet feels it necessary, to 'sit back' and try to understand the mythical references of the past. These references go back to the creativity of the earth in the form of 'the phallus of the enormous stone.' He is afraid of them because there he finds ' the lengthened shadow of a restless vulture' and 'the time of the butterfly' being eaten by a ' forest bear '. Still 'the tensed muscles of rock ' yielding to the virtuous water of Mahanadi attract him to the mystery. The lines,

" the mystery of secret rights that make up destiny;
and to clasp the slow slopes of stone again
that ascend to the realm of the dead,
slopes that stroke the mind
with their quiet faces of sorrow,

like that of old men curling for warmth in the
winter sun,

and of young ochre-clad prophets

laden with silent fulfillment of tomorrow "

takes us to the legend about the temple of Sun in Konaraka. The legend goes as, the crowning slab of the temple could only be fitted into place by a 12 year old boy, the son of the chief architect of the work, after all attempts to do so by the 1200 artisans had failed in 12 long years. Later, the boy jumped to his death from the top of the finished temple to save his father's name and honour in a supreme act of sacrifice,⁵ that ascend to the realm of the dead "and" young ochre clad prophet " refer, here, to that boy who sacrificed his life.

Our existence, the poet further says, is like those seeds of dreams which were pinned down by twelve hundred artisans in the form of the temple. They worked together in "humble brotherhood", forgetting cruelties of the ruthless emperors in the past. The reference is to "the emperor Ashoka who invaded Kalinga and massacred thousands of Oriyas at Dhauli, on the river Daya, in 261 B.C. Crestfallen, when he saw the river turn red in the blood of the vanquished, he suffered from a change of heart and carved his famous rock edicts for posterity."⁶

With the boat of time, the poet goes to the "meritime ancestors" who sacrificed their lives for the peace and the prosperity of Orissa land and who still are giving their message of peace to the present generation. Time is a mute reporter of events for he " has no mouth "

so, the poet, like "a solitary traveller " narrates the story and tries to grasp " the brilliant colors of the past/ in the ocean's strange and bitter deeps".

The poet, "caught in the currents of time", hears the voices of the past and realizes that his existence lies in the stones and it takes him back to the infinite distances through dense jungles where exists " the grotesque dawn of wilderness wood " . The sacred deity of Jagannath at Puri is fashioned from wood of a "neem " tree chosen from the dense Orissa jungles, every twelve years.

The poet walks back and forth to know, " where the earth/would let(him) me find finally its mouth". He knows that he is basically related to the earth which is "waiting as mother or goddess or witch " as he is living on her, on the empty dugs of sorcerous thought.

This Section One, of the poem, explores the relationship between the poet and the earth, the basic relationship on which all the further relationships are based. Man's roots are deep in his past history. The poet's attachment to the land of Orissa is the inevitable consequence.

3.2.2. TWO

The Section Two describes the relationship of the poet with his family, childhood and his village. The poet enters in to the land of memories when he watches his mother's grave through the window. His childhood flashes before him and vanishes in the air as, he, " a member of some magician's audience/watches a white rabbit/flash out of the excited applause/and vanish in the air". The whole

atmosphere unfurls before him and " the unidentifiable dead shadows' strip the skin off his face. Uncovering his mask of happiness, his memory takes the road of loneliness and hurt. He describes their life at that time as "wounded pools of our living ". One after another, memories crawl like Orion in his mind and he gets confused because

'the man with many memories
doesn't know what to do with them.'

The memories come and pass away from his mind but he feels that his memories are the voices of another world pretending to pour out from his throat and the suffering of the world returns to him. The next six lines describe his fast-aging father who, perhaps, has some curse. The last lines of the section, passing through his past memories of his old village, gentle daughter and the stones of Konaraka, end with the beautiful description of moonbeams carrying the moon down from the tranquil hills in the light rain. In Indian mythology, "moon" or " Soma" is the god of peace and the messenger of happiness. All the dark memories are forgotten by the poet when he sees before his mind's eye the picture of his village in the light rain, in the moonlit night.

This section brings out the poet's relationship with his father, mother, daughter and village. It seems that he is not satisfied with his childhood memories.

3.2.3. THREE

The first part of the third section again goes to the history, the legend of the war of Kalinga when the waters of Daya river stank with the bodies of his

ancestors. The tapestry of the years first rain reminds him of this war and makes him close his eyes with fear. This inner pain becomes so overwhelming for the poet that he addresses his Divine Father who has created this world. He knows that Divine Father knows everything that takes place in this world. He also knows that the pride of man makes him crush the other gods under his feet. And still, He sends happiness, good feelings and good wishes through the moonbeams. Again the " moon" is regarded as the messenger of peace and good to this world.

The poet now contrasts the God- conceived world to the present world. Men in the present world are weak and cowardly, easily swept away by the fierce winds of the summer dust. The ideals in the epics remain unnoticed in the jabbers of gigolos, pimps and tramps (bums). Against such a background, when the poet reexamines his friends, he finds himself in exile. The true friendship is changed to :

"..... a pool of water
where shadows move about and dance,
and winds of doubt cloud some of the
drifting faces,
the sun of envy sucks the others away."

The intensity of the sun and the dust open out his timid inner self. So, when he looks into the eyes of the hunter, death haunts his mind and he yearns for the rain bringing the new and happy life and the message of god.

Further, the poet sees the violence around him and expresses his helplessness to fight against it, for his " hands are weak for the violent life ". The blessings of

his mother support his dream of peace, and silence, for he sees the "sky full of fallen birds."

The poet says that the world does not want him to write his poem because it speaks of malice, blood and the vices in society. He wants to keep his words in his mind, providing them only narrow openings and waits for

"... the age-old grass of my (his) death

beyond its contemplation and its withering."

Although, the poet is incapable physically of fighting against the vices and the cruelties of the world, he fights with his words.

Thus the poet has brought out his relationship with the dark realities of the Society with which he wants to fight.

3.2.4 FOUR

Section Four exposes the poet's timid nature and the pretense of sleep. One tries to sleep to be safe through smoldering burning ground of his granite eyes or through the birds alighting tamely on the warm indigo waters of the tropics referring to the annual migration of large flocks of birds from as far north as Siberia to the warm waters of lake Chilika on Orissa's Southern shores.

That sleep, colorless and dreamless, which is like the light without leaves, is unable to reveal the truth of darkness which conceals the screams of cruel persons (hynaes) and the snarls of bears in it. These screams and snarls startle the smile of man and poet watches it through the "thousand windows of my (his) sorrowful heart". He also watches them wandering in the eternal half light of rain.

Today's spoilt social morals make the poet restless and this restlessness is increased by his incapability to struggle. But, he cannot let himself calm down by using 'drug drops'. His face does not allow him to receive anyone's help, so he feels to be strong enough in shedding the blood. He tells God that the ultimate goal of his life, now has become the peace of the World.

" Burden of your peace, Father
Theme Song of my life that burns my tongue
Voices of children always wronged.

He becomes the mediator of God and his children by being mouth-piece of God, preaching his message of peace and complaining as the representative of the men who always wronged. He, then, turns to his ancient love of peace, beauty and greatness of

"rains and endless skies and morning mists
of wind beaten evenings of owl calls and of
rice harvests in December.

My love of gold nose rings and laughing earrings
of towering ruins of stone panting in the dark
of loyal lions guarding the diamond navels of shrines
of amber breasts and secret armpits,
of cries and the soft steel of thighs"

and, he sadly adds;

".....of the old emptiness of my own destiny"

The loneliness has become part of his life and also he cannot live setting apart the altar of his origins. The hollow horns of his origins come to him from the moon light.

His aging sentence and chance calmly try to pray
the 'solitudes lingering in the open talk of men'. He ends
his prayers lying on the naked beach, burned to charcoal
and littered with picnic papers and empty bottles in the
brassy October afternoon, which was started in the happy
atmosphere. This prayer is meant to draw him out from the
past and reflect earth's lost amplitudes:

" The bridal footprints of fantastic peacock dancing
in the rain
and the warm palms of gathering dusk
where crimson heart lines float longingly
in the unknown sunlight of the earth
like soft cirrus crossing space above"

Being weary of the moaning of the world, and echoes of the
goodbye of tasteless ash, the poet turns to nature.

The keen observations of nature scattered all over this
section and particularly in the last stanza, confirm the
poet's close relationship with nature. While praying to God
for the well-being of the world around, he alienates
himself from it and recapitulates to nature.

3.2.5 FIVE

To alienate himself from the world, the poet seeks
help from the sleep habit of the golden deer which tempts
the minds. This sleep can be the self-concentration by
which self-analysis is possible. Poet wants to enter this
dreamland, for he might see

"outlined

against the vast forests of the heart
the miracle of living"

Others may pity his dreaming habit, but his dream would not end, in which he would see the fabulous marriage procession of power like Siva's, contrasting it with the present marriages of 'lies and betrayals'.

The Poet further says that sleep was needed for showing the blood-throbs in the dreams, where he finds the magical regions of boyhood and dignity of reforming the fallen Konaraka which binds the sun by desire and multiplied mute echoes of another fire on stone by the figures. He continues his dreaming, for he knows that centuries have passed by like a mist towards the land of visions.

According to the Poet, sleep, acting as a naked wall searches blindly through wind and rain and answers them mutely. She keeps us away from the destructions and behaving with us as a swamp grass, protects us from the savage storms. Then the poet asks three questions to which the answer is 'sleep'. The questions are as follows:

What sea leads your blazing rivers
headlong into it? Were you worked up
by the gold quarries in that twilight place
where the phantom darkness
glowed red like blood? Were you guided
by the premature deaths of those frightened virgins
who fought the light of the stars
in their underground caves only to fall

at the darts of fretting virtue?

The 'sea' in the first question is the sleep which allows the rivers of our thoughts enter in it. 'The twilight place' with gold quarries is again the sleep which excites the human mind by its fantasy. The third question contains the image of modernity, for the 'premature frightened virgins' are broken dreams and 'their underground cave' is sleep.

Lastly, he concludes that,

" This sleep is a song

that is heard from all sides continuously"

It is a coarse cage holding a larger life, a time which spreads beauty in the mind and makes heart clear, a hiding place in which we can enter anytime, from anywhere. It is also a large circle that goes beyond the angles of man's consciousness and a blind eye which creates the special vision of our penetrating significance.

While treating sleep from different points of view the poet relates himself to his inner world, dream world. It takes him away from the dark realities of life.

3.2.6. SIX

In Section Five, the poet states his relationship with his dream world and Section Six further argues how these dreams are heavy to carry for him. He says, the room for the sleep carrying these dreams must be strong enough like the wind carrying a lioness's roar. His dreams are unfathomable like the clouds and powerful like the storm, in which the poet himself gets frightened. He feels that

these dreams are scattered throughout our lives 'like leaves, filthy and veined with blood' and further he thinks that perhaps, only miracle can save us. Then Time moves on recapitulating the nightmares of the Ganga Kings, who, having experienced their bloody battles and ravages of wars, now seem to be watching the ruins of their private grief.

This section confirms his relationship with dream world, but at the same time expresses the poet's fear about it.

3.2.7. SEVEN

The relationship with 'self' or the search for self-identity is illustrated in this section. Being trapped in his dream-world, it takes much time for him to be aware of the person [himself]:

"..... who is standing there,
alone by himself in the witness-box
of shackled pink muscle?"

And he, meditating in the sleepless nights, realizes that martyrdom is not given to those who live and work in deserted lands where the self-consciousness, desires get hurt. It is given in finding out our five sensory organs, eyes, ears, nose, skin and tongue. They would help them to motivate their cold blood. They also have to destroy the six blind men, 'shadripu' in Sanskrit as Kama, Krodha, Mada, Lobha, Moha and Matsara i.e. lust, anger, pride, greed, temptation and envy. Martyrdom is found in analysing the self in which one finds one's arrogance and also the sorrow in past and present in the form of

"the rules of our song
that can only move back and forth
like a galvanometers needle
between the zero and the hundred of gloom".

The gloom can move in life from the lowest to the highest frequency.

He, then, wishes to be alone, for, conquering his self can provide him with a proper path like "the brilliant and unforgettable sight' of red crabs crawling on the shores at Chandipur and Paradeep⁷," the thoughts crawl in his mind spoiling the 'skeleton of a sleep'. In his loneliness, he lets his enemies enter in his insomnia. He knows, they tremble in the 'deserted ashes of (his) my heart' which is enfeebled and marked by the centuries-old memories and still claim his relationship with their greatness.

The Poets search for 'five shadows' and 'six blind men' in himself expresses his self-assessment which finally takes him to the deep-rooted loneliness and sadness.

3.2.8. EIGHT

The poet's self-assessment makes him identify himself with the temple of Konaraka. Through this relationship with the temple, the poet traces the creative power behind his creation. The lines:

'It is my own life
that has concerned me beneath the stones'

begin the Section. Being one with it, he feels that like him, the temple is also waiting for someone's return to

life. When he watches its stones, he enters into the past.
The past becomes alive to him. The temple,

'the gleaming skin of the three kingdoms,
the mineral, vegetable and animal,'

acts as the door to the past. It does not remain a mere temple, for, meaning goes far beyond the existence, the plane of loneliness. The wheels of the chariot seem to him, to be entering in our lives. But against the reality of the sun, the sky and the sea, the images of 'gandharvas' and demons remain mere imitations of gods, without spirit. This imitation creates the feeling of inability in him to fly beyond the hills of his guilt. He realizes the blood relationship of light and human beings, he says,

"aren't these mere imitations we have made
not having had enough of the sun's flight
across the purple hills of our guilt,
and the haunting dawn whose convex arcs of light
correspond to the dark abyss
of an absent dimension of the blood?"

His inability to overcome his guilty feeling leads him forward to the revelation of his real body. He gains the knowledge that our real body is like the uncontrollable elephant and

"thus it is that it can hardly contain ourselves"

This revelation further turns into the quest for the creation. And as one cannot keep oneself away from the awareness of one's creation, the poet also goes to the period of his creation and of the temple, where he sees the gloomy years. There, he touches the power of creation, i.e.

'Yoni'. The poet describes that experience as follows :

"For now, I touch your secret order,
embarrassed 'yoni',
before me lie the sulking years of dreams,
the stricken purposes of the muscles,
the violent splashes of sunsets
in the fibres of the being".

The poet cannot take it out, because it is rooted in the long past. Its nature is so inexplicable that he cannot hold it in the eyes of the modern world. There is a vast cultural gap between the modern civilization and the ancient culture. The poet alone, can reach that point but modernity cannot understand it. The poet suffers because of his relations to both these worlds.

This section explores the relationship of poet with the ruined temple of Konaraka. When he goes to the long past to find out the power of creation behind it, he also searches for his own roots in it.

3.2.9. NINE

Section Nine defines the myth of happiness. The disordered flowers, the bones of butterflies and 'the cry of the wounded sun' made silent in the ruined temple of Konaraka, have left, the myth of happiness behind them. They have buried themselves and their miseries deep in their hearts, for

"those who survive the myth
have slipped past their lives and cannot define
their reason".

This myth is survived by those, who do not know the purposes of their lives. They live for others without knowing why they do so. The trees scatter themselves and wear new leaves, the clouds dwindle into the colder air and get new birth and the ancestral fires leave the tender feelings behind. For them purposes are lost in the silences of corners of life, where

"only ideas, like brooms,
wait oddly on their unstable heads".

and so, the myth of happiness, says the poet, is based on the foundation of the myth of death and sadness.

These myths recollect the various memories in his mind. He goes back in his past life where he finds the dead body of his grandfather floating in the sea of buried things, 'wings ablaze with a silver fire: He also meets his friends who have been walking on the roads of their destiny, unstained by guilt and belief, as if their satisfaction was stained 'green' by the greenness of the world around and turned 'strangely cold by their own mistrust of the inextinguishable ash'.

Coming across the myth of sleep and action, the poet tries to satisfy himself and others. He searches for the deep nature of all things and perfection. He gains there honesty and love of man for his fellowmen. This creates the feeling in a mother to give her breast to her neighbour's bawling children. Further, as Vasant A. Shahane explains, "He recalls the scene of bamboos near the village-pool where naked children sleep and where a dark woman leaves her house in absolute silence, unconscious of

time and place, where mysteries lurk under the green leaves joining the waters of the Mahanadi River,"⁵

The myth of the colossal temple, crumbled in the unknown past, haunts him. He feels that the myth was perhaps a journey in which he might lose his self, or the flow of time to the unknown shore.

In this myth, he 'wears' many of momentary shadows of memories like his grandfather's disappearing smile, the excitement of prostitutes, the faces of friends with eyes black and bitter with malice and newspapers. Sadness fills his mind when he finds that relations are broken by the daggers and shameless fevers in modern life.

This section confirms the relationship of the poet with various myths like those of happiness, death, sleep, action and the colossal temple. The final impression left on his mind is of sadness.

3.2.10 TEN

In this section, the poet recalls the moments when he had stumbled out of door to see "the sage of troubled mien/sitting under the peepul tree, all alone." It had made him accept the silence, he feared. That silence seemed to him to be a flow of time, for it flows into the past without purpose, scattering the replicas of temples disposing the unfathomable, deep forests of their existence. The bees coming out of the forests seemed to be the witnesses of the storms in the past. He had thought that he could conquer the past memories through sleep, freeing the darkness of his life, the volcanoes of his

flesh.

Beyond those moments of the past, he finds a sacred place, the town of Cuttack where he was born. It was known for its giant speechless trees above the hills, its lanes scarred by ruts, by the clay of which the shapes of gods and goddesses were created, to be offered into the Bay in the end, each year and the women waiting, 'their heads covered with devotion'. He is perplexed by his relations with this

'mysterious inheritance
in which roots stick out here and there from
the dung
of broken empires and of vanquished dynasties
and of 'ahimsa's' whimpers;'

He says:

'for before I go to sleep
or go into the unknown in me
this house of blind windows built inside,
doesn't the fear it provides accelerates
our happiness?'

The 'ahimsa's' whimpers again refer to King Ashoka, his dreadful war, Kalinga kingdom and his resentment by accepting Buddhism.

Sometimes the house of the past memories provides him with happiness also. It assures him that man is delivered by the myth which takes off his sleep and peace of mind. He becomes the puppet in her hands. He is ruled by her like the dutiful monuments celebrating the victories of the darkness over them. This feeling of defeat caused

by his ruined birthplace stops him from going ahead to set his feet on the top of the massive stone. It is a hiding place which makes him bend in the flow of life defying the progress of his race like the slime of the lotus-root bending in the current of the river,

"to give way to the river silence
of aging timber lining the morose banks."

Captured by the past memories, the poet feels that his ruin has also begun and he is left alone away by his friends. He further thinks that he is writing poems, being degraded in the society and is living with old lazy folk, suffering from arthritis and neglected like the cupboard getting ruined.

Getting captured by the myth of the past memories creates the feeling of defeat and guilt. The relationship between the poet and past is inseparable.

3.2.11. ELEVEN

Section Eleven introduces a sudden change, a turning point to the theme. Upto Section Ten, the poem refers to the ruins of the temple, the myths of past the feelings of fear and guilt, and also to his end, for he says in Section Ten:

"Now I stand among these ruins,
waiting for the cry of a night bird
from the river's far side
to drift through my weariness."

But, he gets resurrected from this grave of ruins and returns to the life of the present. He finds his way to

3.2.12 TWELVE

In the last Section Twelve, the poet seeks relationship with the unknown future. For it, he bids farewell to his fear of guilt. When the waves coming one after another, silent and noisy, the banished princess in the form of magnolia tree and the song rising from the honeycomb latticework of stone, try to grip his bones, 'a gray water of blood' stretches him out to the future. The future to which he is confronted seems to him to be beyond his reach. The temple is beyond the traces of time. It is the witness of the past, the present and will continue to be in the future. And so, the poet asks the 'dark daughters', the women carved in the stone, for their names. He requests them to hold him in their timeless spaces. In their dance, unaware of time, he finds him 'elusive birth', sleep, hope and sadness. He also finds his 'spiritless soul of memory' wavering in between their dances.

This "memory" is finely interpreted by Vasant A. Shahane. He says, "Memory becomes a pervasive mode of comprehending relationship - between personal self and society, the creative self and the arts, sculpture and architecture, which in turn embody the meeting point between life giving impulses and the poet's quest for comprehending different levels of relationship between art and life."³

In the light of the opinions of critics Relationship becomes the finest poem. As Gary Corseri observes "It is a long contemplation on the meanings of the stones of a crumbling, once glorious Orissa temple, and

will thematically remind the reader of Eliot's Waste Land, but cast in the mode of John Ashbery's tangential, convoluted rhythms"¹⁰. The epic elements in Relationship are pointed out by Bruce King: "Although Relationship has many epiclike characteristics, including a raised or 'sublime' manner of speech, expressed through heightened diction and long, winding sentences, an introductory announcement of its theme, an invocation of the muse, and is divided, like most epics, into twelve books, it is a modern long poem concerned with the self's relationship to the kinds of historical materials which have in the past been the basis and culture of the epic, rather than, like the epic, a narrative of great legendary event of national history."¹¹

But in the interview taken by Norman Simms, Mahapatra explains his view, "When your question leads me to a sort of self analysis, I ask: is this one of the reasons I write free lines, as I did in Relationship, without bothering whether I was right poetically or wrong, and I simply let myself go"¹².

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