

INTRODUCTION

Highly serious and sincere, persevering and prolific, Jayanta Mahapatra is undoubtedly one of the few gifted contemporary Indian English poets. A college teacher of Physics, Mahapatra began to write poetry around the age of forty, in 1967 and, as if to make up for the late start, has published twelve books of verse in the space of twenty years. Mahapatra has spent all his life in Cuttack, Orissa which he likes to call a Rural place. This poet, who had never been abroad until the age of forty-seven has published more regularly in some of the best journals in the West viz: Critical Quarterly (England), edited by Prof. C.B. Cox, Meanjin Quarterly (Melbourne), Kenyan Review, Hudson Review, Poetry (Chicago). In India, the critical attention was paid to his works when he won the Sahitya Akademi Award of 1981 for his long poem, Relationship and earlier the Jacob Glatstein memorial Award of 1975 for his poems published in Poetry a distinguished Journal of Chicago. He got the international fame first and then received the critical attention at home.

His first verse collection Close the Sky, Ten by Ten was published in 1971; and the second Svayamvara and Other Poems, too, in the same year. Till 1980, he produced seven volumes besides a number

of poems. His Rain of Rites (1976), Relationship (1980), Life Signs (1983), Dispossessed Nests (1986) have been appreciated widely and have placed Mahapatra in the canon of Indian Writing in English. He is ranked with the names in the field - Ezekiel, Ramanujan, Kamala Das, R. Parthasarthy. Till 1992, Mahapatra produced 12 verse collections and this has an immense importance in his poetic career and his greatness as a poet. K.A. Panikar observes:

His work has registered such a fast improvement in its intrinsic quality that today he is easily regarded as one of the top-ranking writers of Indian poetry in English. It is no exaggeration to say that he is one of the few poets in India, writing in English in whose case we don't have to over-emphasize the foreignness of the medium to secure a sympathetic or concessional hearing for the work itself.¹

Mahapatra has brought Oriyan land alive in his poems. They are full of the details of local nature and people. Oriyan culture, tradition, myths and history unfolding therein is worth considering. He presents the macrocosmic India through the microcosm of Orissa.

Mahapatra, like many other Indian poets writing in English, is bilingual. Before taking to writing in English, he had been writing in Oriya, his mother

tongue, and his Oriya poetry also ranks very high. He has also translated the works of a number of noted Oriya poets into English. R. Parthsarthy rightly points out,

*The true poets among Indo-Anglians seem to be those who write in English as well as in their own language. They are poets in their own right who have something significant to say, and know how to say it, both in English and in their native tongue. They are not out to 'sell' their poetry through a skilful manipulation of words and the employment of sophisticated techniques. Mahapatra belongs to this small group of genuine poets. He, too, is a bilingual writer, the secret of whose success lies in his not disowning his Indian inheritance, and not falling a prey to what has been called a feeling of alienation and the result is an unmistakable authenticity of tone and treatment.*²

After 1980, critics turned to evaluate the poetry of Mahapatra. The foreigners as well as Indian critics praised the poetry of Mahapatra and studied some aspects of it. Some still remain to be paid attention to. Although some reviews and pieces of criticism throw light on specific features of his poetry, they are mostly in the form of stray articles. They do not focus

attention on the entire corpus but take up an aspect or two for critical inquiry. These articles mostly deal with such details as his use of Indian landscape, his roots, use of signs, image of women, some universal themes, imagery, symbols, Indianness, vision and style and can be of some help in tracing what has been done on Mahapatra. But it is hard to locate any comprehensive critical work on his poetry in general, and on some collections in particular.

Mahapatra's oneness with the Cuttack landscape is brought to notice by S.N. Prasad in his article in which he explains the roots of his poems to be found in the very 'existential milieu of Cuttack'.³ His poetry has milieu on a wider basis used for the presentation of his vision of life. The undercurrent of life with its local details comes vibrantly alive in his poetry. He is disturbed by the 'physical and moral decay of man, stark poverty, deadness of human soul and ruin of temples'.⁴ Prasad says Mahapatra breathes his life's breath through the Cuttack milieu but he underlines certain aspects only in his criticism and thus limits the scope of his subject.

The critic E.V. Ramkrishanan has focussed a close attention on the use of Indian landscape and scene by Mahapatra in his poetry. He thinks of Indian landscape in Mahapatra 'with an assurance of an insider'

and opines that the Indian landscape is the very 'destiny of Indians'⁵ and also the soul of Mahapatra's poetry. It is not that Mahapatra's poetic world is totally confined only to this landscape. His response to the landscape indicates the 'destiny of Indians'. The Cuttack landscape acts as an ever-rotating wooden-horse around the fixed pole of existence.

Madhusadan Prasad has studied the image of woman in Mahapatra's poetry. The woman is referred to as an impersonal third person and is not granted any personal name. He records that woman appears as a vehicle of truth, a city woman of Western fascination, an image of whore, image of victim, sex object, a sweeper girl, a woman pedlar, workers, etc. in his poetry.

M.K. Naik has studied the imagery in the poetry of Mahapatra. While calculating the importance of image in his poetry he writes that the "image for Mahapatra is almost his characteristic way of reacting to experience, ordering it and recording it".⁷ It is in his work, 'a single language'.⁸ He draws images from nature, body and inanimate things. While scrutinising the images of Mahapatra, Naik makes it a vital point to relate it to two worlds, 'the world of phenomenal reality and the surrealistic world and the way these two worlds are related'.

F.A. Inamdar has studied the use of symbols

in Mahapatra. He says Mahapatra's poetic imagination is not basically symbolic in the way T.S. Eliot's is. He uses symbols to express his 'inexpressible'.⁹ The symbols are set in the context of vision. His symbols could be classified as follows: silence, sunlight and dawn, water, sky, moon, rain, the temple, the beggar, the priest, the fisherman, the crow etc.. These symbols are used to explain the area of experience and to present human predicament effectively. Images and symbols are constant attendants of Mahapatra's poetry. But the thematic study does not get its threads through images and symbols alone.

K. Ayyappa Panikar records the tragic consciousness that operates in the poetry of Mahapatra. While analysing the corpus of Mahapatra's poetry he says, 'the dominant concern is the vision of grief, loss, dejection and rejection'¹⁰ in the poetry of Mahapatra. But it must be remembered that vision will not guide all the time to define themes.

So far, no critic is keen on tracing the thematic development. Niranjan Mohanty has studied some themes such as 'love, death, growing sense of old age, nostalgia about past etc..¹¹ Mohanty's thematic study is a partial one.

After studying the reviews of criticism we become aware that the thematic study of Mahapatra's

poetry needs much more exploration and concentration. It is true that Mahapatra's poems pose a number of challenges with regard to their accurate interpretations and defining themes emerging from them but an attempt towards it must be made and the present dissertation aims at studying the themes of his selected verse collections viz: Relationship (1980), Life Signs (1983) and Dispossessed Nests (1986)

These three verse collections are selected for detailed thematic study because Mahapatra's vision of life is clearly reflected therein. Mahapatra's very realisation of life is convinced here. These three are worth studying because of the themes like one's roots, sense of alienation, echoes of suffering humanity and reactions to contemporary socio-political scene.

I have limited myself to the three verse collections only because these are representative collections of Mahapatra. Moreover, Mahapatra as a mature poet in his direct approach to social reality that makes him to underline human condition emerges here. These poems are more about 'man and his suffering'.

In Chapter-II of this dissertation Mahapatra's literary life development and his image as a top ranking poet in Indian Writing in English is traced here. In Chapter-III, the twelve-part epic poem Relationship is studied as poet's exploration of Orissa's rich culture,

myth and history. The theme of the past is the major concern of the poem and in relation with it one's roots, alienation, sense of ageing, sense of loneliness, guilt are underlined. The ^{fourth}~~third~~ chapter is on Life Signs. 'Suffering man' is the major subject in the poems and consequently 'Sad music of humanity' is heard in every poem. The suffering of man on various planes is studied critically. In Chapter-~~III~~,^V, the poems in Dispossessed Nests are studied as the document of contemporary socio-political scene and the human suffering behind it. In the first part of the poems, the idea of disintegration is focussed and in the second part the social threat of Multi-National companies is recorded.

In the concluding part of this dissertation, an attempt is made to place Mahapatra in the canon of the Indian Writing in English. Some striking ideas about his poetry, its form, structure, imagery and symbolism are discussed with a view to obtaining clearer vision of life and suffering reflected therein.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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