

CHAPTER-III

RELATIONSHIP: A DIALOGUE WITH THE PAST

In this long poem of 12 sections, a thematic development is on various planes. We find Mahapatra's Relationship with his rich culture, religion, rituals, traditions and myths of Orissa. All this is achieved through his dialogue with Konarka temple which is now in ruinous state. The Konarka serves as a backdrop to Relationship and helps the poet to travel from the past, through the present to future. Relationship precisely does the work of 'exploring into the past'. Mahapatra's Orissa is in the walls of Konarka that pictures her sufferings, her glories. Mahapatra meditates on the problem of self, overwhelmed by time. The poet's principle aim is to convey the integrity of this multifarious experience, the underlying aesthetic unity implicit in that variegated feel of life of the past and the present.

In the first line of the opening section, the poet brings to one's notice the lost glory of a ruined tradition and culture and has the sincerity to revitalize them.

Once again one must sit back and bury the face
in this earth of the forbidding myth
the phallus of the enormous stone¹

This may be a tacit reference to the sanctum of the

Lingaraja temple and its enormous lingam of black stone in Bhubaneshwar. Thus he identifies himself with the past tradition and culture. The poet tries to locate his ultimate metaphysical roots firmly in the primeval stones, out of which has evolved the topsoil of modern Orissa with all kinds of organic life on it.

Through the ruined condition of temples and their stones, Mahapatra dreams the past civilization. When he sees the 'Slow slopes of stone' his mind gets struck with the 'Quiet faces of sorrow' hidden behind each stone. This painful awareness disturbs him and thus a guilt-ridden sense of isolation. Mahapatra recreates in his mind the scene of the building of the Sun-Temple in the eleventh century A.D. when about twelve hundred artisans and sculptors began work on that massive artistically designed and beautiful structure. These artisans of stone were dreamers of dreams and torchbearers of tradition, lovers of legends and seekers of souls in stones. They are like 'brown flowers in passion' and the aerial roots of any ancient banyan tree which tell the story of their sacred land of the cruelties and the massacres which were perpetrated on her people - the great Kalings War of 261 B.C. when king Ashok won a victory after a war full of bloodshed and large scale killings before he turned to the ways of peace. He then carved 'peaceful edicts on Blood-red rock'.² All this is trapped in the course of

time. Only memories are alive. A sense of alienation pervades his mind. He is disturbed by the savageous past.

Further he recalls his famous 'maritime ancestor' and the ships which made Kalinga a maritime power. But this maritime power is vanished in the 'Black Bay without a trace'. Again a sense of alienation haunts his mind. Thus the past is sealed off.

A sense of Time haunts the mind of Mahapatra. We find his anguished need to define a self out of the bottomless flow of time. His wish is to cut identity out of the 'Sky's eternal vault'. He seeks 'a prayer to draw my body out of thousand years'. Yet the poet must still preserve, search 'Times Mouth' till finally the realization dawns on him.

But time has no mouth
and the black labyrinth of casuarinas
along the edges of the sea
closes the sky's eternal vault.³

The poet, conscious of this tradition and his relationship to it, poetically narrates the story and he, like a solitary traveller on the Orissa coast, tries to grasp the brilliant 'colours of the past/in the ocean's strange and bitter deeps'.⁴ Here the sense of dispossession, guilt-ridden senses of isolation haunts his mind. The past is thus sealed off from the narrator.

Though he is torn by the sense of dispossession,

isolation, he cannot deny the past tradition. Though the past is guilt-ridden, he apprehends his own origin through it. The recognition of his existence in and his relationship with this tradition gets keener.

and yet my existence lies in the stones
which carry my footsteps from one day into another
down to the infinite distance⁵

Yet, this awareness of his origin alone does not suffice, his questioning journey continues, back and forth, to know 'whether the earth would let him find finally its mouth'⁶ to know the spiritual reality of Orissa and its treasures because he is conscious that the 'stones were (are) my very own' and they embody within them the spirit of mother or goddess or witch and that he desires to know their deep meaning, their essence and truth. This is a type of re-apprehending one's origin. Here he realizes the vatsala rasa.

The second section of Relationship begins with familiar world. He is haunted by childhood memories. Mahapatra watches through the widow - his mother's grave which evokes the memories of the white terraces of his childhood. The poet becomes part of a kind of magician's audience matching the tricks of a white rabbit on the stage. His memory walks down on indistinct lane of loneliness and haunts in his effort to respond to the past and evoke the experiences of childhood. A sense of

isolation overshadows these experiences. When he recalls his childhood many memories gather in his mind. Many shadows are lurking in his mind. The past haunts his mind and there feeling of loneliness and isolation. He declares:

The unidentifiable dead shadows
strip the skin off my face.⁷

These personal reminiscences are also mixed with the memories of history, war and peace. When he recalls historical events, he points out how alienation is caused by the feebleness and fragility of historical memories. He observes it as:

The swords of forgotten kings
rust slowly in the museums of our guilt⁸

Memories dominate this section inasmuch as they seem to be 'Just voice of another world' and the poet finds himself as a 'man with many memories doesn't know what to do with them'. All these memories create the sense of alienation. He underlines it as:

the grass of history glistens merely
for a movement with night dew
nearly that⁹

He further realizes that these though the past historical memories are guilt-ridden, they extend our living. Our life is marooned on the stones of the past. He accepts

past memories as:

wounded pools of our living¹⁰

Returning to the source of his own life, the traveller-poet contemplates his old father, his old village, his daughter and finally the rain, the purifier of men and earth. He expresses it as:

I forget easily
my old village's pelt, glistening with rain
and the stillness of my gentle daughter's skin
forget the desire
oozing out of the hewn stones of Konarka¹¹

This derives a deeper sense of his isolation and loneliness. Just like a trail of smoke these memories scatter on his mind but he is helpless to cope with it. He forgets the present. This aching sense of forgetfulness is something isolating from the past. The poet is unable to be rid of the overwhelming 'Memories' of the guilt-ridden past. He emphasizes the 'suffering' human lot juxtaposing the vain atrocities of the kings in the past with the drifting lot of the younger generations that 'bob up and down, going nowhere'.¹²

The third section reveals another cause of the Narrator's isolation from the past. The section begins with a description of Ashoka's massacre of Oriyas whose blood dyed the river Daya red and when he saw

this awful scene, his heart was filled with remorse. He then renounced war and violence, and began to preach the gospel of peace and to carve the famous rock edicts for posterity to learn the lessons of peace and the message of non-violence. This is the kind of event which supplies the stuff of the savage past. The past is bloody and brutal and before it the narrator shuts his eyes in fear. 'His hands are weak for violent life'. He and others like him are, on the sother hand filled 'with the feeling of good'. The narrator's squeamish shrinking from the sight of blood and vomit betrays a core of weakness which makes it difficult for him to look the past in the face. Mahapatra cannot escape the thought of the invaders who scattered the stones and the magnificent temple for the bloody victories. Mahapatra says that 'it is hard to tell'

How the age old proud stones
lost their strength and fall
and how the waters of Daya
stank with the bodies of my ancestors¹³

A sense of isolation from the past is created in his mind.

Further the dialogue extends between the poet and others - his friends. Only when he reminisces about his friendship a sense of alienation grows acute in

his heart. The poet remembers his rather few friends and the shifting sands of their affection, relationships which are sometimes affected by doubt, and even envy. Friendship seems to him 'like a pool of water' where shadows move up and down. It creates an errie atmosphere. He considers himself as an object of envy as 'envy sucks the other away'.¹⁴

Section 4 has a memorable hymn to Konarka temple or the civilization frozen on its stone. We find his 'ancient love' of gold nose-rings of the figures in the towering ruins of stone, of regal lions, of their breasts and arm-pits. But all this constitutes a sombre vision. He is left with a sense of loneliness, bitterness and sorrowfulness. He is finally up against the 'emptiness of his destiny'.¹⁵ This disfigured world is painful to Mahapatra. He tries to define himself in it. But he finds brutal past. A sense of isolation haunts his mind again.

Further the sense of isolation makes him aware that these crumbled and cracked stones are the real essence of his origin. Mahapatra says that his existence is inseparable from the roots in the past. He agrees that his life force is shaped by culture, tradition, myths and symbols of past. He re-apprehends his relationship with the past. Though the past is sorrowful and

bitter, he declares:

I know I can never come alive
If I refuse to consecrate at the altar of my origins¹⁶

The land of his origin is a land of silence with its message of the 'miracle of living' stored in the age old hewn stones. His oneness with this 'altar' makes him aware of the lost glory of stone. To know this, he wants to come up through the yesteryears. He wants to revitalize the past. Here it seems that his is an attempt to draw his self out of 'time'

to draw my body out of a thousand years
and to reflect the earth's lost amplitude¹⁷

Though he wants to draw his body out of thousand years to revitalize past, the dark shades of past makes him weary. His heart is weary with the echoes of past suffering. He is left with a sense of bitterness, loneliness and sorrowfulness. Past is now like a 'tasteless ash' giving him a 'good-bye'.

In section five, the poet continues his peep into his dream world and his quest to probe into the 'miracle of living'. He picks up 'the sleep-habit' in order to realise 'the miracle of living'. His country seems to him to be full of contradictions of the fabulous marriage processions and also of lies and betrayals, a country in which the granite at Konarka 'binds the sun to a rhythm of desires'. In such an environ, we

'weave' our 'Flaming play'. Here, we find the poet expresses his incapacity to cope with this. So he says 'I shall seek the sleep-habit/of golden deer, tempter of the tastes. The poet tells us that this myth of 'Sleep' is needed to come to terms with the past and traditions, to live in the midst of 'the different dimensions of lies and betrayals'.¹⁸ To run away from contemporary he accepts sleep habit. He is very much disturbed by both past and present. But while defining himself, the sense of alienation continues.

Rejecting the sensuality of the world, he takes refuge in the idea of maya, 'the sleep-habit/of the golden deer'. Was the grand temple Konarka extirpated and thousands of Oriya massacred by the fabled king Ashoka? This nagging thought relieves its pains in the myth of 'Sleep' or dream. To get relief from the guilt-ridden past, and evil, he accepts dream like state and thus dispossession continues. He observes this condition as follows:

This sleep is a song
that is heard from all sides continually
a coarse cage that can hold larger life
a time that stretches the scarlets in the mind
and graves the hearts mind with clear wind¹⁹

Section seven seems to explore the poet's private world, his insomnis, his nightmares, his predicaments

in the midst of heralding the periodic invasions of the enemy into the vanquished city - a city of his psyche where the armies of faith, innocence and guilt of the past and present clash at night perhaps to make the poet aware of the night in the soul. Thus anguished sense of dispossession continues.

In section eight, the poet at once establishes a relationship between his own life and 'this temple in ruins, in a blaze of sun'. This is obviously a reference to the Sun Temple of Konarka, the most magnificent piece of sculpture and architecture in the world. When he sees the ruins of this magnificent temple in the blaze of the sun, he becomes more and more conscious of the fleeing of time, of his ageing, which is referred to in moving images like 'a late autumn night' or 'Calmly circling hawk-like overhead for prey'. The poet realizes his loneliness and records it in the following lines.

It is my own life
that has cornered me beneath the stones²⁰

Then the poet questions the sun-lions asking them 'Whose return to life are you waiting for?'²¹ Here is the realization that these lions are powerless; they have lost their glory in the hands of time and their waiting for the renewal of the past glory is in vain. Here the anguished sense of alienation from the past haunts Mahapatra's mind.



The poet looks through and beyond these 'granite peaks of dream'. Now the poet contemplates on the sculpted symbols. Through the sculpted symbols the poet experiences the 'fever of love'. He traces this intensity of love in the three kingdoms i.e., mineral, vegetable and animal. The symbols on the temple are imitations of what is desired and not experienced. The gandharvas and demons are counterparted by females. The sculpted are desired and what matters is the body itself. These passionate symbols make the poet to realise that these are the mere symbols 'we have made'. He observes:

This is the real body: raging pachyderm
with the crazy testicles, red and wild
the lusting god of the blackest Siva night²²

Further the emphasis is on fertility and maternity. Through these passionate figures he realizes the origin of age long sexual life. He finds himself in these desired figures. Thus he apprehends his roots in the culture and tradition. He underlines it as:

For now I touch your secret order
embarrassed yoni²³

In the midst of the complexities of life and pain and suffering and the inherited blood-ridden past and guilt, the poet expresses his inability to revitalize the past. He expresses his dilemma as well as his alienation when he addresses his land.

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?²⁴

It symbolises the recovery of the past from the stones of temple 'Konarka'.

The earth is at the centre of the poet's cosmic vision. Now, the poet is confronted with the question of meaning, the meaning of man's existence as well as the message of the Sun Temple at Konarka. The poet, in fact tries to search for some meaning. But his search only sharpens the sense of loss. He thinks that the past glories cannot be retrieved and our existence made meaningful "Until the world is made all over again". Here he explores the purpose of the present sorry state of our existence:

Would meaning remain
in merely that a thing exists, on a single plane,
in the helpless sips of loneliness we have made
marooned on the stone, on the dark chariot of the sun
whose fevered granite wheels claw desperately
at the strangled earth in our lives?²⁵

He recalls the guilt and blood-ridden historical past and feels ashamed of it. A sense of loneliness and isolation are created in his mind. He records this savage historical past in these lines:

of ruthless emperors who carved peaceful edicts
on blood-red rock²⁶

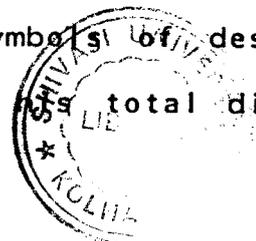
Section Nine attempts to unfold the 'Myth of happiness', the myth of 'The wounded sun' encased in the Konarka Sun Temple Sculptures. The poet has raised the question more than once: "but what was this myth?" He considers it essential to comprehend the myth of Konarka in which is captured the unceasing rhythm of life. Myths are timeless. It is easy to appreciate the past. The wounds of the heart exposed "the cry of the wounded sun silenced among the ruins of the Konarka" is the culmination of the prolonged feeling of one's "wounded pool of living".²⁷ A sort of anguished sense of self-identity haunts his mind. He feels outcast, exile and alienated from the past.

The poet further states that the past souls survived themselves with myths. The myths were their life veins and marrow. They accepted them as sacred and hence cannot define their reason and the result: their life slipped away through it. The poet feels that they have lost the "purposes" of living. A feeling of humility and sense of alienation extends further. He accepts the myths as guilt-ridden past.

The myth of the colossal temple having crumbled in the distant past seems to cast a spell on the poet's imagination and he is engulfed in its enmeshed environs.

The poet feels that the myth was perhaps like a journey of the spirit in which he might lose himself altogether. Or, was it merely a step in the march of time towards a predetermined future? Thus he identifies himself with roots.

The poet is confronted with the myth of 'sleep and action'. He makes it clear that he cannot lose himself in this myth of 'sleep and action' wearing his grandfather's smile²⁸ or accept the past with its bitter memories the way his grandfather, and perhaps his father too, could accept it. The past to them meant only sacred events, benevolent gods and goddesses, an order of things kept in place by the powers they worshipped. Their attitude to the ancient past and tradition having a religious bias and based on their strict observance of rites and rituals could not have been detached and objective. But it is impossible for Mahapatra, the poet, to look at the past in the same way. He is too sensitive, too conscientious, and too much invested with historic sense to look at only the flattering aspects of the tradition. To him, the past is also bitter, ripe with memories of violence, war, bloodshed, death, stagnation, poverty and suffering. The river of memory seems to carry with it a great deal of blood, stench, waste, and symbols of destruction and disintegration. Thus we find total disgust



with myth. A sense of loneliness and alienation haunts his mind.

When he contemplates the present he recalls his friends. It creates a strain of humility. On his mind when he remembers his friendship, a sense of alienation grows acute in his heart. A sense of disgust only because they misread him. The poet says those who have been his friends throughout the years, he refers to 'The rapture of ownership on their voluble faces'. Their eyes are:

Black and bitter with malice
like envelopes with poisonous glue on their flaps.²⁹

Here his poetic endeavour to trace his relationship with his friends creates an eerie atmosphere.

His revulsion against the present further extends and makes him sad. He recovers himself from the past shadows and makes a dialogue with the present: We find his total disgust and disenchantment with the present. Like friends, the present elements are also unlovely:

"Now"
there are prostitutes with white hair
who are excited simply by having stared
at their inaccessible sons ...
and newspapers that bend our minds
with gleaming and immaculate words
and daggers that are anxious to return
to the naked flesh
and shameless fevers³⁰

Like Kamala Das's grandmother Jayanta Mahapatra's grandfather is a dominant figure in his family poems. The poet envisions his dead grandfather. His dialogue with his family members is more personal. When he contemplates that myths point out how his grandfather became enslaved by the myths of life. That savage past is paingiving him. He realizes that there is no use to follow the life-styles of his grandfather. The pictures emerging from the past are brutal and evil. He declares:

It is no use now if I try to wear
my grandfather's smile³¹

In the tenth section, Mahapatra recalls moments when he stumbles out of the door of his present-days' temporal and spatial life in Orissa. He has done so to see his troubled face wearing -

sage-like look of final awareness
sitting under the people tree³²
all alone unspoken repose against the body cozing of love

He seems to be confronted with an atmosphere of meaninglessness and purposelessness. We find his disenchantment with present and hence a sense of alienation.

The poet envisions the scene of Cuttack where he was born and out of whose clay images of goddesses were made year after year. The clay itself assumes sacred shapes. He tries to explore his own relationship

with Cuttack and how he, as a man and poet, becomes a willing inheritor of that 'mysterious inheritance':

Mysterious inheritance
in which roots stick out here and there from dung
of broken empires and of vanquished dynasties
and of ahimsa's whimpers
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 accelerate
our happiness?³³

He identifies his roots here.

Though he accepts as a inheritor of his historical and mythic past, his mind is full of humiliation. His is a total disgust and it is in an ironic tone. He feels that Ashok's Stupa has no sense though it stands for universal peace; because before that one horrorsome war had been fought by Ashoka that was evil one. Today's Orissa is former Kalinga which had experienced massacre. Now only the ruinous phases of empires and dynasties have remained. The poet stands among these ruins with shadows around him. Thus his anguished sense of self isolates him from the brutal past.

His painful awareness of the past leads him to make the dialogue with the present. But he is not satisfied with the present also. He is disgusted with his friends. The poet says, the poems of his friends

seem 'abject and anxious'³⁴ giving a feeling of stale cupboards turning black with the colour of their past. Thus we find his revulsion against the present.

While in the past he felt alienated from the people around him, he says 'We are delivered by the myth'. Identification with the myth is a fixed relationship and it is a relationship one cannot hope to survive. The only relationship that allows one to survive the myth is one in which self-identity is no longer in question: One has to have slipped past one's life, gone beyond it into other territory. Once this is known, we can appreciate the poet's view of myth.

We are delivered by the myth
which exhorts our sleep and our losses
that wakes us like toys springing out of a box
opening out like humiliating episodes
or dutiful monuments that celebrate
the victories of that darkness over us³⁵

In the twelfth and last section, the poet bids farewell to a lingering, guilty conscience that was eating him to his very core. He says, the past is something 'beyond me that I cannot catch up'. He says boldly:

Fear of my guilt, I bid you farewell³⁶

The poet's attention wanders to the song that arises from the latticework of stone and he is confronted by something beyond him which he cannot cope with.

He then salutes the sculptured bodies of the dancing women on the temple stones, because it is to his contemplation of their dance that he owes his new birth. And then he is inspired to speak to the great beautiful figures in stone.

Tell me your names, dark daughters
Hold me to your spaces³⁷

The poet seems to believe that his own elusive birth and his sleep are encompassed in the dance of these apsaras and nayikas, which adorn the great Sun Temple and the stone itself watching the ebb and tide of his sadness becomes a dark soul of his memory.

Thus we find the pilgrim's progress from alienation to identification. He identifies his roots with the past without any guilt in mind. At last his destiny is realized. ?

The final message that emerges from Mahapatra's poetry seems to be message of involvement and action rather than escape or inaction. Perhaps, action here, — ? means acceptance, acceptance of life as it is with all its past and present as well as the implications for the future. But it is not a meek acceptance of the complacency or the ignorant as that of grandfather's or father's. It is an acceptance rooted in awareness which will make him wait, for the moments of revelation.

With conviction, he stands.

among these ruins
waiting for the cry of nightbird³⁸

Though he is not happy with the present it seems
that his is a determination to look hard at the world.
It is there possibly to live fully in the present:

I draw the day into myself, trembling with being³⁹

Thus he apprehends his roots both in the past and the
present.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

Mahapatra, Jayanta, Relationship (New York: The Greenfield Review press 1980). All references are to this edition of the text.

- 1 Relationship, p. 9.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid., p. 10.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid., p. 11.
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- 7 Ibid., p. 13.
- 8 Ibid.
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- 13 Ibid., p. 14.
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- 27 Ibid., p. 24.
- 28 Ibid., p. 25.
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- 31 Ibid., p. 26.
- 32 Ibid., p. 33.
- 33 Ibid., pp. 27-28.
- 34 Ibid., p. 27.
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- 36 Ibid., p. 31.
- 37 Ibid., p. 37.
- 38 Ibid., p. 28.
- 39 Ibid., p. 29.