

Indian Landscape in the Selected Poems of Jayant Mahapatra

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by

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Origin of the Research Problem:

Landscape, physical as well as historical, mythical, religious, cultural with social life, its traditions, belongingness, contemporary issues from all walks of life irrespective of nationalities and persons (authors) find central place in literatures of all ages. Jayant Mahapatra's poems are in no way an exception for this unwritten rule. He is an integral part of the poetic tradition in India. Vivid pictures of both, city and village life in the past and in the present is the matter of great concern for him. The poet attempts to explore the inner conflicts of an individual in the light of deep rooted myths and traditions on one hand and the new light on the other. The societal problems persistent in Indian society like that of poverty, exploitation, hunger and many other evil traditions have been handled by the poet at length in many of his poems. The research problem here is to investigate in detail, how the Indian landscape has been handled by the poet and to enquire his approach and stand wise in context with the very fragile issues like faith and religion in Indian society.

Significance of the Study:

The study of landscape has got more importance in the age of Culture Studies and Area Studies. In fact, landscape comprises both, physical and non-physical elements together contributing in the making of life in a particular area. The recent advancements in culture and area studies could be considered synonymous to the concept of landscape. Landscape of a country/state/region shapes the imagination of the writer. Myths, legends, history, religion, faith, tradition, relationship, culture and contemporary situations persistent in a land control the psyche of a poet/writer is the broader approach while dealing with Mahapatra's poems. If, Mahapatra is known as the major voice of India in general and Orissa in particular in our time; it is his relationship with his motherland, his devotion to the cause of

projecting the issues of his people makes him a true poet. This study provides the platform to understand lives in his land in joys as well as sorrows through implications of the mind of the poet.

Review of Research and Development in the subject:

Mahapatra is a major contemporary Indian English poet. Many researchers have studied the poems of Jayant Mahapatra from multiple perspectives. *The Poetry of Jayant Mahapatra*, by Bijay Kumar Das is one of the earliest critical books on Mahapatra's poetry. *Nature-Culture Metonymy: Quest for Lost Horizons in Jayant Mahapatra's Poetry* is a book by Kamal Prasad Mahapatra studies his poems meticulously. Besides these books, there are many essays written and published in various anthologies on Mahapatra's poems. Mahapatra's own books are also available; especially his *Door of Papers: Essays and Memoirs* is very much useful in locating things in his poetry. His interviews, speeches have been made available on internet is an added advantage. Similarly, every course in English literature in Indian universities has given space to his poems adds into the eagerness to study his poems and know him as an Indian poet.

Objectives:

This humble study aims at-

1. Studying the social, economic and cultural background of Jayant Mahapatra.
2. Investigating the contribution of the poet to the body of Indian poetry in English.
3. Examining the impact of *Odia* landscape on the poet.
4. Finally to evaluate the success of the poet in dealing with the landscape and moving beyond it.

Methodology:

After close reading of the poems by Mahapatra the researcher has selected poems for study from the viewpoint of Indian landscape. Secondary sources like books, journals, articles, reviews, interviews and dissertations have been used to understand and interpret the selected poems. Analytical approach is the base of this study. Analysis of different images, symbols, cultural and religious concepts is attempted with ample examples from the texts studied. The main argument of the research has been supported with proper illustrations and ample examples from the sources cited.

A Brief Summary of the Findings of the Project:

It is realized during the study that, Jayant Mahapatra is a major poet from the Indian English Poetic tradition, not much older compared to the other *Bhasha* traditions having his own unique voice and melody. His poetry remarkably voices devotion to the cause of projecting and exploring his landscape. The poet as discussed in the respective chapters in the detailed report, prominently used history and historical things, events, characters as the theme of his poetry or referred them through some other topics is an open secret in many poems chosen for this study. The historical symbols like, the 'Konark Temple', the 'Jagannath Temple' and the 'Lingaraj Temple' with the historical events like the Kalinga War, Bhopal Gas Tragedy, Operation Blue Star and assassination of Mrs. Indira Gandhi, assassination of Mahatma Gandhi with countless other issues from the history of India keep him haunted throughout his poetic journey.

In regard with Indianness, poetry of Mahapatra conquers the pride recognition of representing the life in Orissa, the land of his birth in totality, through themes and features. In his poems, he relates to the Indian socio-cultural life in a unique way. Though, his words and expressions are often

complex but, instances in which used, provide clues for the indigenous origin. He constantly reveals his self and his relationship with the outer world is the major concern in his poetry. With this inner struggle, the poet also faithfully describes the landscape around him. He names his poetic persona after mythical characters and exposes their fall in the present time, through their decedents like Yashoda and Draupadi (in *Dispossessed Nests*), arranging for her fourteen year old daughter's abortion and dragging her body into the night, Ahalya (*The Lie of Dawn* 22) possessing the mythical silence and Sita undergoing her *agni-pariksa* in our time. The poet refers to the mythical personas, events, objects and concepts like Arjuna, Putna gandharvas, *apsaras*, demons, *yonis*, *lingas*, and *ahimsa* having some implication with the present issue from Indian society. His using physical landscape of India (prominently Oriya), through the names Puri, Konark, Cuttack, Bhubaneswar, Dhauli, Kalahandi, Balasore, Chandipur, Gopalpur, Ramchandrapur, Kushabara, Bhopal, Kolkata, Punjab and the mountains Annapurna, Dhaulagiri with lake Chilika and rivers Daya and Mahanadi from his motherland Orissa, reflects his possessiveness for his land. These places in different contexts regulate the mental process of the poet and he continues with his ramifications from the same. His memories of 'girl in Zaragoza' and of 'half-ground rice from the stone slab', 'battering rice pancakes' and 'picking lumps of cow dung from cattle path' to have tenderness in life, are seen as the evidences of his being one with the moral and ethical landscape of his motherland.

It is marked that, Mahapatra uses an elite language; an offshoot of his English Christian Missionary contacts since birth and, schooling, throughout in English medium, taught prominently by English teachers. Still, his *Odia* origin lurks through cultural and conceptual expressions giving birth to Indian idiom; an identity of the poet and his proud possession. The poet creates his own idiomatic expressions, exposing the pitiable conditions in Orissa with a

tinge of Indian salt as in, 'the red sun perched on the rickety limbs of the poor/ the open drains flouting the dread of disease. / The naked children crying of their swollen flesh (*Waiting*, 28)', 'Children, brown as earth, continue to laugh/ at cripples and mating mongrels (*A Rain of Rites*16), 'the naked children, with "virus of pox" (43)', and 'her look is a silent water (*The Lie...: 181*) pitying on the social conditions of India.

Thus, the broad spectrum of Indian landscape appears through the serious and stunning poetic imagination of Jayant Mahapatra, grown into his self idiom, voice and personality. The poet has shown acute concern for the issues of Orissa and ultimately of India. His poetry chronologically marks the growth of the poet through his creative art, leaving him in the state of flux. The obsessive beginning of the poet through experiments with language and themes from the cultural arena of the land of Orissa turns elusive and serious about the life of the individuals. His is a journey within and without his self sustaining life in the mythical land through his poetry since ages. The poet focuses upon the implications of history, myth, mythical traditions, legends, folk-lore, religion and the traditional life in the present context in the land of forbidding myths. In fact, he wages a war against the old and new fallacies in Indian society, setting his own stand and idiom with poignant voice.

Overall, Indian landscape substantially appears through the Orissan land in the poetry of Mahapatra. His sensible words imply a universe (being), which is literally lost but present in memories. Hence, he is relentlessly dreaming and creating the same (Indian landscape) with emotions, experiences and care in his poetry. While doing this, Mahapatra seeks for the new light generated out of his new identity (faith) and scientific training. One thing is absolute in his poetry; his rootedness in the traditional land and vibrant landscape.

Suggestions for Further Research

Mahapatra's poems have been studied independently by the researchers focusing on the aspects like myths, history, legends, culture, religion, rites, and rituals with the imagery, vision and symbolism in isolation. But, this study probably, is the first step taken in the direction to bring all aspects of the unique Indian landscape on one scale in his poetry. No doubt, his poetry could be studied from various perspectives and theoretical views like, thematic, stylistic, post-colonial, post-modern, eco-critical, culture studies, area studies and many others. Researchers can explore the themes and techniques used by the poet in his poetry independently or in comparison with poets from his own land, from other literatures (other than Indian) and, from the same and different land at a time (i.e. *Bhasha* literatures), to open new vistas of meaning. Comparative study of Mahapatra with the poets from other Indian literatures will be useful in tracing the unity in diversity of the vibrant Indian culture. Moreover, he could also be studied in comparison with the third and fourth world poets.

Articles published on the topic of Minor Research Project entitled, “Indian Landscape in the Selected Poems of Jayant Mahapatra”

Jayant Mahapatra: A Poet of His Land

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Jayant Mahapatra is a major figure on the panorama of Indian English Poetry quite well known today. Born in the mystic land of Orissa, an eastern state in India, in 1928, the poet lived throughout his life in the coastal town Cuttak. It is a fact that poetry came late in his life but, he compensated the same by producing seventeen volumes of poems in quick succession. He also tried his hand on writing short stories and translating Oriya Poetry into English. His poetry has been awarded both at home and abroad with many awards, one such award, which brought recognition to the kind of poetry he wrote, is by National Academy of Letters for his collection of poems- *Relationship* in 1981. Among his famous collections of poems are- *Close the Sky, Ten by Ten* (1971), *Svayamvara and Other Poems* (1971), *A Father's Hours* (1976), *A Rain of Rites* (1976), *Waiting* (1979), *The False Start* (1980), *Dispossessed Nests* (1986), *Temple* (1989), and *Random Descent* (2006). Besides this, he also wrote poetry in Oriya and did some poetry translations successfully.

To be a poet, has been a hard job since long back, but became more difficult in the modern times, in the wake of prose narratives and the famous descriptive genre of ‘Novel’. According to some critics, Indian Poetry in English has proved recently, by creating its own idiom worldwide. But, even after this claim, an ordinary reader like me feels at first sight that, this has not been given much attention by both, creative writers and the readers for a long time. Otherwise, being the most primitive form, poetry has been the attraction of men since the origin of literature worldwide. This primitive form faced the hard time during the last few decades in almost all the languages in India, with English especially, suffering a threat of disappearance from the Indian literary scenario. Thanks to the first group of poets for pioneering in the Indian English Poetry. Credit goes to- Toru Dutt, Sarojini

Naidu and the most eloquent, Sir Aurobindo, highly praised by most of the Indian critics.

To see this recognition, Indian English Poetry had to wait till the post independence period. That too, it happened late in the sixth or seventh decade of twentieth century with the works of Nissim Ezekiel, A. K. Ramanujan, R. Parthasarthy, Kamala Das and Arun Kolatkar. It is in this period, that poetry came out of the age long romanticism claiming Poetry- 'as a criticism of life'.

Jayant Mahapatra to a considerable extent, contributed to this new form of Indian English Poetry through the last more than four decades effectively. Bijay Kumar Das, an eminent scholar, in the introduction to his famous book on Mahapatra's Poetry comments, about the relationship between the poet and his land, the poet's awareness about his deep roots, saying-

A poet with a live cultural past behind him, aware of his roots and perhaps prejudiced by those roots, has a greater probability of writing significantly than one who has no knowledge of any Indian Language other than English. (Das 04)

The writer here I think, emphasizes the cause behind the fame of the poet and his poetry. As it is a fact acknowledged, that realism/truth has been an integral part of good literature always. Poetry in no way can be an exception for the same. After the imitative romanticism, poets like Mahapatra turned to their mystic being and brought colors to Indian Poetry in English, which I think was the need of the hour. Worldwide literature is passing by the same phase. Recent example of **Mo Yan**, a Chinese Nobel award-2012 winning writer for literature, elucidates about his writing, about himself in one of his articles-

Every writer has a reason behind his being a one, and I am not an exception for the same. What is it important is, why I became a writer of my kind rather than following Hemingway or Faulkner? I feel, the reason behind this is there in the experiences of my childhood. Those experiences proved to be the blessings in my writing and they will be there in future also..... (Further he says about his writing)... The writer can write about the things he knows easily. I grew with Hunger and Isolation. I have been the witness of nude dance of grief and injustice around me always. So in my writing, you will find sympathy for human values and revolt against the social inequality. This is the motto behind my writing. You tell me, if I have gone through that only, if not this, what can I write about?

(Bhonjal 23-24, Trans. Mine from original Marathi)

With all these evidences and many to be seen, we can at least prepare our mind to look at the poet as a poet, representing his land (Orissa and of course India). One who goes through his (often called) difficult poetry, feels the need to refer to the Myths, History, Legends, Culture, Social Milieu, Inequality, Hunger, Gods, Superstition, Faith, Poverty, Love, Sex and what not from human life. A truly Indian (Keenly Orissan) scene/landscape rarely seen on the flashy television channels, passes through the broken lines. Just one needs that zeal to dig in to, to meet the treasure hidden.

Mahapatra being born and brought up in Cuttak, a coastal town in Orissa, this place appears quite often in his poems. In fact, the quadrangle- Cuttak, Puri, Konark and Bhubaneswar occupying a conspicuous position, the places have a strong presence in his poetry. It is not mere presence of these Orissan cities, make his poetry Indian, but, the cultural, moral, spiritual life depicted through his poetry with many other things makes it truly Indian.

One such example can be cited of his poem, *Total Solar Eclipse (Puri, February 16, 1980)* from his book of poems, *Life Signs*. The poem is very much straight forward, presenting the state of affairs in the town of Puri. The poet here talks about both the things; the ignorance and superstition about the solar eclipse and the blind faith and fear associated with among the residents and the scientific attitude with which the speaker, in the poem, comments on the continuous journey of the moon. The poet, in this poem, makes use of animal imagery in the second half. The Cobra, the Hyena, the vultures and the sparrows are disturbed due to the unusual night in the daytime. Further he artistically combines the images of Crocodile and Brahmin Priest in fear. The poet in the last stanza, mockingly states his thought through the lines-

And cautiously the crocodile
pushes its long snout from the deep water
like the fearsome Brahmin Priest in the temple,
secure by shadowy layers of sleep,
so out of date, in alleviative belief,
using darkness to be a portent of the gods.
Who had just revealed a last occasion
to hide the disrobing of human values

by a rabid civilization. (Mahapatra, *Life Signs* 22)

The poet here speaks of superstition, among the people in Puri and in India as a whole, about solar eclipse, in fact a natural event. He focuses on orthodoxy through the priest in the temple, who associates much evil with the event and performs many holy rites to ward off the evil, is that common a picture in any part of India. He also makes a way to the feelings of sin by the mad civilization of today to the human values by disrobing it. It is again one another orthodox burden, perhaps the poet here wanted to have both, the critique of orthodoxy and of moral degradation of men in one stroke. Overall the poem is set around the coastal town of Puri on a particular day, as if, a historical document of eclipse and the state of affairs on 16th Feb. 1980. These details enhance the authenticity of the events and emotions related to the same in the poem.

In one another poem entitled, *Again, One Day, Walking By the River*, the poet honestly makes an attempt to introspect his own deeds. The poet here is on a walk and in the title itself; he makes it clear, the recurring repetition of the images of river, the sun and the same town. No change he could see in them. Then he looks at the women busy, spreading tar on the road to repair it. Suddenly he remembers the time; it is two 'O' clock in the afternoon. Then he remorsefully says- 'soon the leapers would be walking homewards'. Life has become of this mechanical kind. Nothing new happens. It is the poverty, diseases perhaps, let's not happen change in the scenario in our country, is the thought in the mind of the speaker. Road under repair in front of the Judge's house is also suggestive of the happenings and reality. The last lines are much thought provoking, in the sense, to enter the alienation/isolation on the part of the speaker. This is perhaps, due to the sense of his inability on his part. He can see these things again and again but can't do anything to change it. This is the open secret of the inability of a sensitive but helpless middle class person in India. The poet very aptly points through the words in the poem-

I wonder where the day goes.

Even in the bright sun

This was a world I did not know.

(Mahapatra, *Life Signs* 39)

The poet here shows deep concern for the condition of poor working class women. They have to work in the burning heat with the hot tar. Perhaps, the poet speaks first about the yellow colored hay loaded on the boat and the leaf fallen in the water

basin, in the sense that, these poor people are imprisoned in their lives with poverty and he himself feels free like the fallen leaf but caught in to another mesh. Whatever it is, but he cares a lot about the state of his place and people.

A short poem named *Summer*, opens abruptly, reminding Robert Browning's *The Last Ride Together*, with a short line of just two words. i.e. Not yet. This unusual beginning increases the curiosity of the reader to see what is 'not yet'. Throughout the poem, no proper answer to the question is found. But the imagery used has too many things to suggest. The poet begins by referring to the cold ash of the deserted fire under the mango tree. Perhaps, the one who lit that fire abandoned it, so the fire got extinguished and what it remains is cold ash now. Further, the speaker poses a question- Who needs the future? In the next line, Image of a ten year old girl combing the hair of her mother, provides a deep answer to the question by the speaker. Overtly the scenes seem isolated but they are connected with a delicate thread of thought in the caring mind of the speaker. The lines he uses, claim attention towards the harsh reality in our society-

A ten-year-old girl
combs her mother's hair,
where crows of rivalries
are quietly nesting.

The home will never
be hers.

In a corner of her mind
a living green mango

drops softly to earth. (Mahapatra, *The Lie of Dawns Poems* 1974-2008, 17)

Through these lines, the poet opens the soul of a mother for her girl child. Though, they share that love, but when it comes to rights of the girl child, she is always deprived off. Even the mother turns hostile in her mind. Perhaps, the poet says further- The home will never be hers for the same reason. That is what the tradition is in India. This is taken for granted, by the girl, very early in our society. So it is a green (pleasing), unripe (immature) mango drops softly to earth (shatters). Though it is a short poem, the imagery used is very vivid, speaks much about the social condition in India. Not that sure, but I feel, that the poet has in his mind the grim reality about the rights of girl child in our country, so he refers it as cold ash and , as there is no one around, so no hope to lit fire into it again.

The poet appears to be progressing while going through his variety of poems. One of his highly praised, at home and abroad, a complete poem, literally speaking and with an intense and healing thought is, his *Hunger*. Generally speaking, the poet's process of thought into his mind gets revealed, with his variety of themes he touches upon in the way of his progress as a poet. This is an act, intensely subjective, in the sense that, the poet is deeply concerned about poverty around him. People, to survive, undertake an immoral business of prostitution, is a disturbing fact in our country. The poet through the lines-

I heard him say; my daughter, she's just turned fifteen...
Feel her. I'll be back soon, your bus leaves at nine.
The sky fell on me, and a father's exhausted wife.

(Mahapatra, *The Lie of Dawns Poems* 1974-2008, 46)

Shocks a sensitive man and so did the speaker at the father's words. The poet here opens the bare truth about the miserable condition of fishermen around him. Further, the poet, very artistically proceeds with the theme, 'Hunger', from both the angles. First, the appetite, basic need of every living being, and second, which appears next, after fulfilling the first (physical hunger/sex). The speaker is heavy with this second kind of hunger. Mahapatra here makes use of imagery and language very sensually. That can be seen in the lines from first stanza-

The fisherman said: will you have her, carelessly,
trailing his nets and his nerves, as though his words
sanctified the purpose with which he faced himself.

(Mahapatra, *The Lie of Dawns Poems* 1974-2008, 46)

It's really shocking to face it. There is a lot more in the mind behind these words of the fisherman. Only a sensitive man can imagine that. Truth is, when there is no way found, one enters into that filthy business to survive. In the end, when it is the time to get fulfilled their hunger, the speaker and the girl, she opens her wormy legs, the speaker there sees the hunger. While commenting upon the health of the girl, he finds that girl- lean, and though, she is just fifteen, she appears to be cold as rubber. These details are more enough to perceive the effects of hunger on the girl. In this way the poet, handles a very sensitive and open secret subject widening his ambit of themes with poverty and its crude reality in his land, and mourns deep in his heart. Mahapatra reveals about *Hunger* in one of his speech -

The poem is based on a true incident: it could easily have happened to me on the poverty-ridden sands of Gopalpur-on-sea. Often have I imagined myself walking those sands, my solitude and my inherent sexuality working on me, to face the girl inside the dimly-lit palm-frond shack. The landscape of Gopalpur chose me, and my poem. To face perhaps my inner self, to see my own debasement, to realize my utter helplessness against the stubborn starvation light of my country. (qtd in Khan 73)

The poet is often discussed about his live handling of the mythical past of the land he belongs to, with its historical importance, legends, rituals, and never ending religious faith through his poems. One such poem very much famous is- *Dawn At Puri*. The title of the poem makes clear, the theme of the poem, much to the reader known to the famous town of Puri. The poet describes the early morning scene on the sea-beach of Puri, the famous religious place. The town is known for its oldest deity, Jagganath, and its annual famous car festival. The place is often visited by the devotees for worshipping Lord Jagganath. So obviously, the sanctity of the myth of lord Jagganath and the faith people have in the deity forms the background of the poem. The poet begins with the dimly lighted scene on the beach with full of faith (blind?). He makes use of the images of- endless noises of the crow, A skull on the sand, White-clad widowed women, Leapers and Smoky blaze of a sullen solitary pyre reminding in the end, his aging mother's last desire to be cremated there. These images complete the course of action on the part of the poet in the poem.

He is disturbed due to the endless noise of the crows early in the morning. The skull, lying on the sand adds into his disturbances. Perhaps, the poet is reminded of the poverty and destitution of the people in his own land. Another quite contradictory scene is about faith. This faith, affirms the finding, that, "human beings are found more religious in the time of adversity".

The speaker then turns towards the women in white sarees. They appear to him as widows, passed their youth and nearing their old age. Their eyes seemed to the poet, full with solemn expression of religious faith. Then the crowd of suffering, decayed, Leapers and shrunken faces of beggars, break the poet's heart, only to emerge out of it, the way he writes in the lines-

.....and suddenly breaks out of my hide
into the smoky blaze of a sullen solitary pyre
that fills my aging mother:
her last wish to be cremated here

twisting uncertainly like light
on the shifting sands.

(Mahapatra, *The Lie of Dawns Poems* 1974-2008, 21)

In this way, the pathetic journey of sad imagery comes to an end. The speaker in these poems has sympathy for the subject (people referred). So, for that reason, the reader becomes one with the speaker and moves from one scene to the other in a hypnotic way. It is only with the breaking out of that 'smoky blaze' and the desire of his aging mother to get cremated at the scene, he comes into conscience. The speaker here, perhaps temporarily, accepts the only way out of this drudgery, is religious faith (white-clad women and his mother having) to achieve salvation. So, it is that common, a desire found in Orissa, to get cremated after death on the holy beach in Puri.

In all these five poems, *Total Solar Eclipse, Again, One Day, Walking By The River, Summer, Hunger and Dawn At Puri*, randomly selected, themes of Superstition, Ignorance, Faith, Rituals, Sermons, Worship, Myths, Poverty, Corruption, Inability, Inequality, Exploitation, Hunger, Sexuality, Religiousness, Salvation, Starvation are seen dominant. It is not only in these poems that the poet deals with these issues related to the lives of ordinary people from his land. But, almost all his poems have something or the other, an issue related to the people around him. So, it is quite evident, when we go through his poems, see something associated with the land of Orissa and ultimately with India.

Mahapatra himself has acknowledged many times his strong bond with the land he belongs to. The period in this respect, I consider very much important in the world of literature. In Indian literature (including literature of all languages) local color, beliefs, personal experiences, social/political life have proved to be more appealing. The previous wrong perception to criticize things local, to get global (international) recognition came to an end in the recent years, especially in Indian English Literature in general and poetry in particular.

This change is in progressive manner, progress made with and not in isolation from the past. As emphasized by Eliot, the tradition and individual talent together can make a good poet, Mahapatra, though, not learned from the master in twentieth century, T. S. Eliot, but admits the same while answering his inner self-

Today, after a number of years, the situation has not altered. Did I, did I not, belong the Oriya poetic tradition, I asked myself? I don't have any real answer

to this. At times I find my eyes clouding with anger and sadness, held by my own importance. But as a writer, I know that my poetry, although written in English has not lost contact with the past. The land itself is a living presence for me, as are the old Oriya poets whose works I have read and admired.

(Mahapatra, *Door of Paper Essays & Memoirs*, 148)

Belongingness he asserts is not something he claimed and forgot. It is a perennial source for an artist in his process of creation. And truly the same thing is found in one form or the other, as a reflection of the landscape he refers to. This may sometimes appear as a subjective thing. It is a truth that, subjectivity has always been the matter of criticism in literature, but when the writer uses subjectivity to relate only to his social milieu and justify his nativity, then it becomes an objective attempt to sharpen his sensitivity. Mahapatra talks about his personal life in most of his poems, not to project his personal things, but to relate himself with the society at large he represents. A scholar comments on the poet with respect to subjectivity very aptly-

The element of subjectivity helps Mahapatra to relate himself to his milieu and native surrounding. The delicacy and novelty are the mark of Mahapatra's mingling of subjectivity with native landscape. This aspect of Mahapatra makes his poetry outstanding and extra ordinary that was hardly seen before in Indian English poetry (Mishra: 06-07).

These are some of the evidences, to declare Mahapatra truly an Oriya and Indian at the same time. It seems, his mind is been shaped by his present and past including everything he belongs to as a man and a poet.

Finally, I would like to conclude with the words used by the poet, from his acceptance speech on receiving the prestigious Sahitya Akadami Award for, Relationship, 1981-

To Orissa, to this land in which my roots lie and lies my past, and in which lies my beginning and my end, where the wind keens over the great grief of the river Daya and where the waves of the Bay of Bengal fail to reach out today to the twilight soul of Konark, I acknowledge my debt and my relationship.

(Mahapatra, *Door of Paper Essays & Memoirs*, 81-82)

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Contemporaneity and Poetry of Jayant Mahapatra: A Postmodernist Reading

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Abstract:

Literature since time immemorial, records contemporary life in its reality. Rather, that should be the basic principle of an author to record his own time through words. Modern literature across the globe forcefully brought the principle of reality/truth, which resulted into making contemporary issues dominant in the poetry and other works of art. This could be seen as a reaction against the idealized and romantic approach of the pre-independence poetry, so far as modern Indian English Poetry is concerned. In an age of dissatisfaction and broken dreams, Indians found themselves cheated at the hands of their own leaders. This anger could be seen throughout the sixties onwards in literature, cinema and more dominantly in modern and postmodern poetry. 'The angry young man' of the seventies, both in cinema and literature, is the live example of portraying contemporary mind in its reality.

Indian English Poetry has always justified its time by providing space and voicing countless contemporary issues in all its ages, since its inception. In the modern period, Indian psyche witnessed a sort of alienation from its surrounding, so did poetry, declaring a break to the tradition. In the postmodern period, poets came back to the tradition and became a part of very old Indian mythical presence. We have poets like Jayant Mahapatra, Arun Kolatkar, A. K. Ramanujan, Niranjan Mohanty and many other contemporary poets giving much importance to the current issues prevalent around correlating the same with past.

Keywords:

The terms like modernism, postmodernism, contemporaneity, Indian landscape, sensitivity with a few others have been used in this paper in context with the topic chosen.

Introduction:

Jayant Mahapatra is an Indian English poet from Orissa. He is born in a Christian family and brought up in Hindu dominated society. Mahapatra has published seventeen volumes of poems in which he relates himself with the million mutinies of

his motherland through his poetry and imagines purposefully issues of poverty, exploitation, religious orthodoxy, false traditions, culture, hunger (both, of loins and belly), suicides, corruption, immorality, faith, deity, rituals, politics, murder and rarely personal and family life in his age. All these are the elements governing life. Mahapatra very artistically handles all these issues to make the reader sense the reality around and ponder over, for change in the desired way. The postmodern consciousness of Mahapatra exposed all these and many other issues dominant in his society. Let's observe and evaluate how the poet houses these various issues around him into his poetic landscape and follows the principle of contemporaneity.

Poetry of Jayant Mahapatra:

Mahapatra when speaks through his poems, it appears like things are before our eyes with all its implications. It is not always a result of his linguistic ability as a poet, but his emotional attachment and fond relationship with his fellow human beings. The poet himself being a minor, have been introduced with the dark spots of inequality and alienation. Hence, though he did not experience poverty and hunger in his own life, but could feel the pains on the basis of his own imagined experiences. He continuously exhilarates the dominant issues like suppression, exploitation and inequality of women in Indian society. In a simple poem, "Village Evening" the poet relates to the age old problem of male domination through the character of Ahalya. He writes-

In the dark air of hut,
Ahalya, the widow, caresses the rupee
her seven-year-old son
has brought home from his day-long labours,
dreaming of daybreak.
The village angles on her faith.
Life is awake in this humid air,
measured with a woman's voice which says:
"Father, I am so relieved
you aren't here anymore. Or else
this little money would see us nowhere."

(The Lie... 22)

The poet through the quoted lines makes the reader aware of the bare truth about widows, their situations, emotions and feelings. Ahalya is a common Indian widow in a village with her seven year old son. Being head of the family, she is free to take decisions on her own. She owns the money earned by herself and by her small son. The village has different opinions about her daily life. But, the poet underlines that, she is alive and with her own voice. The voice of the village has no job to do in her hut. When she addresses her father, and tells him the fact in her mind and soul, that she feels relieved in the absence of her male partner. Perhaps, the woman is happy for getting relieved of the atrocities of her man. There are many cases around, woman works and her man takes her wages for his satisfaction.

The poet further also mentions, though unfortunate, but they are free to breathe in their small hut. This marks the changed scenario with growing awareness among women. The change is positive, but not expected one. He registers his angst about the tradition prevalent in our society, which he believes, is responsible for the pathos of women in our country as follows:

The air, flowing freely
in the once-blue sky, but stranger
than rape murder without a scream.
And in the wide-open eyes of God's absolute silence,
what has happened is still not over-
because it is made up of a woman's sacrifices,
as Ahalya goes back to bed,
a guilty look on her face,
her promise to feed her son
morning milk-curds another faraway dream.
(ibid)

The poet unfolds the layers of unhappiness of a woman with all reasons. It is not the rape or murder like it used to be in the past; reason of grief but, there are different reasons. The same God (Lord Jagannath) sees all this with his open eyes and remains silent. Things continue in its routine sense resulting into the misery of women traditionally. Her promises will never be over and she will never be happy is the truth poet wants to convey. It is very much true in our time. So, Mahapatra's catching this topic deserves appreciation with a common interest of women empowerment all over the world now.

Mahapatra tells heart-breaking stories he has experienced as a human being during his stay at Gopalpur, a place in Orissa. This is not the story about a person or a family, but a representative of a clan in our society. They have been fighting a lost battle against poverty and hunger to survive. The poet with a heavy heart puts his emotions in the words, in his famous poem, "Hunger"-

It was hard to believe the flesh was heavy on my back.

the fisherman said: will you have her, carelessly,
trailing his nets and his nerves, as though his words
sanctified the purpose with which he faced himself.

I saw his white bone thrash his eyes.

(*The Lie...* 46)

It appears like an imaginary story but, it is a fact visible. You need to look with open eyes and heart. What it takes to offer one's own daughter to someone for earning bread twice a day, could be heard by only those without heart. Still, the poet keeps on telling this unfortunate experience to make people aware of these neglected sections of the society. Purpose is to remind those who have forgotten or have misconceptions about the well-being of people in our society. But, the poet very skilfully reminds the reader of the local issues like hunger in his land and with his creative ability makes it universal. About this true document of humanity (*Hunger*), K. Ayyappa Paniker comments, "On the level of art, the local and the universal must meet. This is what we find in Mahapatra's famous poem *Hunger*" (102). The poet in a complete desolate state of mind says:

Hope lay perhaps in burning the house I lived in....

I heard him say; my daughter, she's just turned fifteen....

Feel her. I'll back soon, your bus leaves at nine.

(ibid)

This very short a poem, written in four stanzas, unwinds the splashy layers of artificiality exposing the severe wounds under. Mahapatra while reiterating his relationship with this poem, authenticates the truth in the poem and around in the words, "I should like to emphasize the experience held in those lines, of the truth that is contained in the poem; a truth that could perhaps overflow the boundaries of the poem because of the language made in the poem" (Mahapatra, *Door...*20). When the poor fisherman offers him, his daughter, the poet replies in heart; to accept his proposal means burning the home he stayed in. Only a man with sensible heart can

have these feelings for the poor and unfortunates. If Mahapatra is known as a mouth piece of Orissa; it is because of his relationship he maintains with the issues of his people without break in the presence.

Mahapatra while speaking about hunger and misery in the life of his people also searches judiciously for the reasons behind the same. He appears very serious while contemplating upon the grave problems. Like ordinary people, the poet also wishes certain things from his fellow poets by taking various issues of concern for the needy around. But, when takes a note of the poets and politicians who are busy doing unnecessary things on serious occasions, turns desolate and registers his pathos through the poem, "Possessions" in the words below-

Another day of waiting out, wondering
about our poets and what they are
going to say about us. In pain perhaps
they stand inside, but cannot
yet slam the door of their voice....
In the street outside, in naked poor twilight.
And a little tired, the minister
who finally had to resign.
In the half-light, his pride sitting
quietly in his chair, the bodies of five-year plans
strewn around, their mouths open to the sky.
The elections over, villages filling with shadows.
(*The Lie...* 117)

The poet through these lines, perhaps, is referring to some event happened recently. He eventually desires; the poets should express their feelings about the event (perhaps deaths of children due to malnutrition). But, the poets also have their own interests; hence, no reaction came even after a long period that disappoints Mahapatra. In a remorseful tone, he reacts to the newly formed Government in harsh words, for not having any signs of change in the words:

Tonight, the politician will turn
on the country with his power.
His face will be well under control.
And tomorrow, sixty thousand children
will go hungry again.

Poets will sip their tea in stupid-looking cafes,
or dangle in unknown fields
like embarrassed scarecrows.

(ibid)

Mahapatra here exposes the hypocrisy of the poets and politicians. Both dangle in unknown fields. They don't have enough courage to face the reaction of the people. So, to hide from the realities, they try to be the scarecrows. The poet with harsh words blames his contemporary poets for their usual temptations for luxuries of life and of poetic themes. Very honestly he voices his desire-

I wish someone could tell my son
that when I died, I died bravely.

But no, there is no real reason
for that either....

The worn-out face of India
holds the weak eyes of dumb, solitary poets
who die alone,
silenced by the shapelessness of life alive.

(ibid, 118)

Thus, the poet wishes to take this challenge, but there is no possibility that he would be able to continue with his work. Mahapatra through these lines directs the attention of his reader towards the corruption in the field of poetry. This is a bit different thing; rather, poets by virtue of their freedom should express what it is true. But, they too have their own interest so; they have learned to keep quiet on certain issues, which the poet here exposes. Further, when he decides to work single handed, sees his end like, "solitary poets who die alone". Overall, the poet makes the reader aware of the consequences of the poetic world in his time.

The poet goes on with his deep concern for his country and countrymen. He leaves no stone unturned becoming an obstacle on the way of happiness in the lives of his fellow human beings. Among the issues of concern, women's pathetic world gets first priority and helps to weave the fabric of his mourning attire. The poet is worried and feels guilty for the situation. He voices his disgust in the sequence of poems entitled, "Death's Wild Land: Eleven Poems", in the words:

The little girl's hand is made of darkness
How will I hold it?...

The weight of my guilt is unable
to overcome my resistance to hug her
(*The Lie...* 119)

The poet in dismal mood finds even the natural surrounding prone to add into the existing problems. He finds no one happy around him. Perhaps, he suggests that, the present time is a brute; through its twists and tricks human beings are losing their original identity of “being human”. This conception is very much serious but seems to be true when observed minutely. The poet comments about the farmers, their problems and dreams in the words below-

To be human
is to see in a dream perhaps
the one who can never be seen;
perhaps to hire out a tractor
to work the fields
or to hook the slippery little carp
which swim
among the muddy paddies.
(*ibid*, 120)

A large population (almost sixty percent) in India is dependent on agriculture directly and indirectly. Reasons are many and diverse in different parts of the country; but, their liaisons could be traced in terms of shattered dreams and continuous threat of survival. Mahapatra like many other poets, writing in their own language, touches the tryst of their destiny. Farmers throughout the country, have unending problems before them. The poet not by illustrating in detail portrays the grim picture suggesting all-

The man of the house
walks back
to the afternoon
and sits in a fear.
Blades of light,
the July heat,
and two ripped out eyes
shaking their tears.
(*ibid*, 121)

The poet blames the politicians for their inability during the long period after independence. Politicians are busy giving long speeches usually, but, nothing concrete could be seen as a result of their endeavours. It is the high time now; the poet shows his anxiety in the following words to state the rotten state of affairs in his society.

Like the glacier, or the river,
the long speeches of politicians get where they go.
How long will we go on killing the dead?
How long will we see the same Truth with different eyes?
(ibid, 123)

Thus, in the chain of small poems, connected not by form but, by theme of death and grief, this poem continues the agenda of the poet in search of relief to the concerned. In this context, concluding remark of Nigamananda Das in his book sounds true, “His songs are everlasting voice like Keats’ Nightingale which will inspire the succeeding generation of poets and writers with its artistry, melancholic note and ecstasy” (235). The poet, if has been assigned the identity of being mouthpiece of India is true by all means and needs no justification further.

With the evils like hunger, rape and exploitation, the poet also takes notice of the temper of the society in his time. The poet is waiting in this poem for the happy season of summer after the dark spot of riots in India. Mahapatra is trying to compare and contrast the grief and happiness after bloodshed in the summer. The poet feels that, this tiny season of happiness may not be sufficient to compensate the loss happened during the riots. He just proposes to voice the consequences around. Indian society is on the threshold of conflicts taking religion, castes, faith and innumerable other issues daily. One such incident he describes showing the brutality on street killing the senses through the lines-

A girl carries her own head before her
as she walks, sweet chrysanthemum.
And a red heart throbs in the street
with its sack of blood.
It’s a time when a child cannot understand love,
left alone with the smells
of burning flesh of her mutilated parents.
(*The Lie...*135)

Perhaps, the poet through these lines suggests the future consequences in the country. It is a truth that, India has witnessed events like this regularly after the independence. The heinous acts performed every time, sow seeds for the next. Especially, small children suffer and grow with a wounded heart; only to result into terrific consequences later on. While grieving on the event, he also reminds the peaceful past of our country. He doubts the language he speaks. Mahapatra here refers to the respect, co-ordination, warm relations and acceptance people had in the past. The present society is divorced with these traditional values. The poet expresses his emotions regarding the same in the words-

Now I don't know what voice I speak in...
where a man easily kills his neighbour
in the poem of God
while he moves about calmly
with a false face and a song.
(ibid, 135)

Mahapatra, while being careful about the pains of downtrodden, slum dwellers in town, farmers and their widows in the villages; takes notice of the traditional daughter-in-laws, the victims of male domination in our society. This neglected class of exploits, forms a larger part of our society. This negligence is the result of their traditional mindset and training of not exposing the family affairs outside. Hence, we see a daughter-in-law; the poet speaks about in every other family in the villages. These women remain busy doing routine chores throughout the day. The poet turns sympathetic towards them in the poem, "The Sprouting Grass" and comments-

All day, she carries around
the smell of hot, lying walls
as she goes about her chores.
Her look is a silent water
from the grind and scrape of bone
on her cornered chest.
(*The Lie...* 181)

The poet compares her with "silent water". It is a truth, that these poor, illiterate and patient by nature daughter-in-laws win sympathy of others naturally. These women never complain for their trouble and accept everything as their fate. The poet marks this behaviour of her through the words-

Long cracks furrow her feet.
Taking a step makes her wince with pain.
And if you look closely at her
it appears as if dirt and filth smear her feet;
yet, not even a bit of grime
fouls the batter for her rice pancakes.

(ibid)

Mahapatra, in this poem makes alive the traditional woman; a symbol of patience and acceptance in the name of fate. These women without making nuisance bear the beatings of their drunkard husband and provide comfort to their in-laws. But, she forgets her day's hard work and becomes one with the joy of her children in the evening. Mahapatra very minutely observes the traditional behaviour of people and evaluates the same using the parameters of morality and immorality and comments aptly in the end.

Conclusion:

Thus, the poet through his poetry, not only achieves recognition for himself as a postmodern Indian English poet, but also paves a way for others. Mahapatra's contribution to Indian English poetry through the rich Oriya culture, heritage and landscape, obligates the critics like NDR Chandra to remark, "Mahapatra's concentration on the native culture has paved the path for Niranjan Mohanty's poetic cultural monument in *Prayers to Lord Jagannath* and *Krishna* and many individual poems of Bibu Padhi, Prabhanjan Mishra and Rabindra K. Swain" (Chandra VI). Thus, the muse in Mahapatra treads with the Oriya landscape to earn glory for both, the poet and his land relating himself with countless contemporary issues.

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Speaking the Unspeakable through Poetry: Re-reading Jayant Mahapatra's Poems

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Abstract:

Literatures in all ages have registered its meticulous observation of the ills, evils and the vulnerable persistent in human world. Moreover, it has shown the ability to voice the unspeakable through appropriate words so as to bring it to the notice of the huge populace it relates. Indian English poetry none the less did this job in the modern and postmodern era considerably. Poets like Dom Moraes, P. Lal, Adil Jussawalla, Kamala Das, A. K. Ramanujan, R. Parthasarthy, Pritish Nandy and Shiv K. Kumar in the sixties and Keki N. Daruwalla, Dwarika Nath Kabadi, Gieve Patel, A. K. Meharotra, Dilip Chitre, Arun Kolatkar, Saleem Peeradina, Agha Shahid Ali, Gauri Deshpande, Margaret Chatterjee, Meena Alexander, Eunice de Souza, Manohar Shetty, Vikram Seth, Imtiaz Dharkar, Shahid Suhrawardy, Ayappa Paniker and Vilas Sarang in their respective times handled the issues of societal ills, evils, violence and the vulnerable in one way or the other. Jayant Mahapatra is one such poet writing poetry with the sensibility of a humanitarian poet. This paper attempts a re-reading of Mahapatra's selected poems so as to discuss the issues selected for this study and to mark the literary ability of the poet to speak the unspeakable in a modest way through poetry.

Key Words: Social ills, evils, violence, vulnerable, unspeakable, realism etc.

About the Poet:

Jayant Mahapatra is an Orissa born poet speaks *Odia* but writes poetry in English with success from last more than forty years. Mahapatra published seventeen volumes of poems at home and abroad. Born in a Christian family and brought up in a Hindu majority ethos, Mahapatra seems to have genuine interest in dealing with the things from life around, making a point into his poetry. Though a physicist by profession, the poet could achieve the skills of a poet through his stronghold; analytical approach developed out of science training both as a student and a teacher

in the same discipline (perhaps). He never gets baffled while handling real issues associated with social ills, evils and violence around him. Many of his poems speak about the circumstances around in a balanced way. The pathetic condition of women, the act of owning them by the dominant male in Indian society, their exploitation through varied daily acts, religious dogmas conditioning life of people, atrocities on the people taking religious reasons, the evil named politics persistent everywhere, riots, killings, governing the fundamental rights of people and many other things appear so vividly through his poetry. Reading and re-reading of following selected poems by Mahapatra haunts the readers mind and makes him think seriously over these issues.

Mahapatra's Poetry: Speaking the Unspeakable:

Jayant Mahapatra is known as a poet of his land Orissa. The Orissan cities like Cuttack, Puri (Jagannath), Konark and Bhubaneswar (the city of temples) form the quadrangle of Indian landscape through his poetic art. These places are just the representatives, he writes about many other small places like Gopalpur, Kushabara and others in Orissa and whole of India. The poet not only possesses the land of his birth, but its past and present, the good and evil, the grand and the humble making life possible in his motherland. The poet seems to have emerged as the saviour of poor, exploited, destitute, women and the crusader of false traditions, corruption, violence, politics and the poor government. He leaves no stone unturned while voicing the issues related to his land and people.

“Hunger” is the masterpiece of Mahapatra. The poet in this poem exhibits his unfortunate experience on his trip to a place in Orissa. This place he names in one of his interviews as Gopalpur. In fact, Gopalpur is just a representative name from the long list of names of places in Orissa and the whole of India having the malarial germs of all ills and evils. The poet personifies this societal illness through the character of the helpless and destroyed (father) fisherman and his fifteen year old daughter. The poet here speaks the unspeakable through his poem. He begins his say in an abrupt manner, as if in a dramatic monologue and opens the discussion in first person. He puts before the reader offer given to him by a father as follows-

It was hard to believe the flesh was heavy on my back.

The fisherman said: will you have her, carelessly,

Trailing his nets and his nerves, as though his words

sanctified the purpose with which he faced himself.

I saw his white bone thrash his eyes. (*The Lie...*46)

The poet describes the situation in the words; a sensible man would be ashamed if confronted. Offering one's own daughter to earn livelihood is the achievement of our society after a sixty year long period of independence the poet underlines here. The poet responds to this stark reality with a heavy heart through words. The poet keeps on telling this unfortunate experience to make people aware of these neglected sections of the society. Purpose is to remind those who have forgotten or have misconceptions about the well-being of people in our society. But, the poet very skilfully reminds the reader of the local issues like hunger in his land and with his creative ability makes it universal. About this true document of humanity (*Hunger*), K. Ayyappa Paniker comments, "On the level of art, the local and the universal must meet. This is what we find in Mahapatra's famous poem *Hunger*" (102). The poet in a complete desolate state of mind says-

Hope lay perhaps in burning the house I lived in....

I heard him say; my daughter, she's just turned fifteen....

Feel her. I'll back soon, your bus leaves at nine.

(ibid)

This very short a poem, written in four stanzas, unwinds the splashy layers of artificiality exposing the severe wounds under. Mahapatra while reiterating his relationship with this poem, authenticates the truth in the poem and around in the words, "I should like to emphasize the experience held in those lines, of the truth that is contained in the poem; a truth that could perhaps overflow the boundaries of the poem because of the language made in the poem" (*Door...*20). When the poor fisherman offers him, his daughter, the poet replies in heart; to accept his proposal means burning the home he stayed in. Only a man with sensible heart can have these feelings for the poor and unfortunates. If Mahapatra is known as a mouth piece of Orissa; it is because of his relationship he maintains with the issues of his people without break in the presence.

The poet marches ahead with his deep concern for his country and countrymen. He leaves no stone unturned becoming an obstacle on the way of happiness in the lives of his fellow human beings. Among the issues of concern, women's pathetic world gets first priority and helps to weave the fabric of his mourning attire. The poet is worried and feels guilty for the situation. He voices his

disgust in the sequence of poems entitled, "Death's Wild Land: Eleven Poems", in the words-

The little girl's hand is made of darkness
How will I hold it?...
The weight of my guilt is unable
to overcome my resistance to hug her
(*The Lie...* 119)

The poet in dismal mood finds even the natural surrounding prone to add into the existing problems. He finds no one happy around him and the situation vulnerable. Perhaps, he suggests that, the present time is a brute; through its twists and tricks human beings are losing their original identity of "being human". This conception is very much serious but seems to be true when observed minutely. The poet comments about the farmers, their problems and dreams in the words below-

To be human
is to see in a dream perhaps
the one who can never be seen;
perhaps to hire out a tractor
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(*ibid*, 120)

A large population (almost sixty percent) in India is dependent on agriculture directly and indirectly. Reasons are many and diverse in different parts of the country; but, their liaisons could be traced in terms of shattered dreams and continuous threat of survival. Mahapatra like many other poets, writing in their own languages, touches the tryst of their destiny. Farmers throughout the country, have unending problems before them. The poet not by illustrating in detail portrays the grim picture suggesting all-

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The poet blames the politicians and considers them responsible for their inability during the long period after independence in making life happy (at least facility wise). Politicians are busy giving long speeches usually, but, nothing concrete could be seen as a result of their endeavours. It is the high time now; the poet shows his anxiety in the following words to state the rotten state of affairs in his society.

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Thus, in the chain of small poems, connected not by form but, through the theme of unspeakable death and grief, this poem continues the agenda of poet in search of relief to the concerned. In this context, concluding remark of Nigamananda Das in his book about the poetry of Mahapatra sounds true, “His songs are everlasting voice like Keats’ Nightingale which will inspire the succeeding generation of poets and writers with its artistry, melancholic note and ecstasy” (235). The poet, if has been assigned the identity of being mouthpiece of India is true by all means and needs no justification further.

With the evils like hunger, rape and exploitation, the poet also takes notice of the temper of the society in his time in the poem, “Waiting for the Summer of 1994” (*After the rioting in India*). The poet is waiting in this poem for the happy season of summer after the dark clouds of riots in India. Mahapatra is trying to compare and contrast the grief and happiness after violence and bloodshed in the summer of 1994. The poet feels that, this tiny season of happiness may not be sufficient to compensate the loss happened during the riots. He just proposes to voice the consequences around. Indian society continuously has been a victim of conflicts borne out of religion, castes, faith and innumerable other issues daily. One such incident he describes showing the brutality on streets, killing the senses through the lines-

A girl carries her own head before her
as she walks, sweet chrysanthemum.
And a red heart throbs in the street
with its sack of blood.
It's a time when a child cannot understand love,
left alone with the smells
of burning flesh of her mutilated parents.
(*The Lie...* 135)

Perhaps, the poet through these lines suggests the future consequences in the country. It is a truth that, India has witnessed events like this regularly after the independence. The heinous acts performed every time, sow seeds for the next. Especially, small children suffer and grow with a wounded heart; only to result into terrific consequences later on. While grieving on the event, he also reminds the peaceful past of our country. He doubts the language he speaks. Mahapatra here refers to the respect, co-ordination, warm relations and acceptance people had in the past. The present society is divorced with these traditional values. The poet expresses his emotions regarding the same in the words-

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where a man easily kills his neighbour
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The poet while being careful about the pains of downtrodden, slum dwellers in town, farmers and their widows in the villages; takes notice of the traditional daughter-in-laws, the victims of male domination in our society. This neglected class of exploits, forms a larger part of our society. This negligence is the result of their traditional mindset and training of not exposing the family affairs outside. Hence, we see a daughter-in-law; the poet speaks about in every other family in the villages. These women remain busy doing routine chores throughout the day. The poet turns sympathetic towards them in the poem, "The Sprouting Grass" and comments-

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Her look is a silent water
from the grind and scrape of bone
on her cornered chest.

(*The Lie...* 181)

The poet compares her with “silent water”. It is a truth, that these poor, illiterate and patient by nature daughter-in-laws win sympathy of others naturally. These women never complain for their trouble and accept everything as their fate. The poet marks this behaviour of her through the words-

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Taking a step makes her wince with pain.
And if you look closely at her
it appears as if dirt and filth smear her feet;
yet, not even a bit of grime
fouls the batter for her rice pancakes.

(ibid)

Mahapatra, in this poem makes alive the traditional woman; a symbol of patience and acceptance in the name of fate. These women without making nuisance bear the beatings of their drunkard husband and provide comfort to their in-laws. But, she forgets her day’s hard work and becomes one with the joy of her children in the evening. Mahapatra very minutely observes the traditional behaviour of people and evaluates the same using the parameters of morality and immorality and comments aptly in the end. The poet, through his poetry, not only achieves recognition for himself, but also paves a way for others. Mahapatra’s contribution to Indian English poetry through the rich Oriya culture, heritage and landscape, obligates the critics like NDR Chandra to remark, “Mahapatra’s concentration on the native culture has paved the path for Niranjana Mohanty’s poetic cultural monument in *Prayers to Lord Jagannath* and *Krishna* and many individual poems of Bibu Padhi, Prabhanjan Mishra and Rabindra K. Swain” (Chandra VI). Thus, the muse in Mahapatra treads on speaking about Oriya landscape to expose the evil, ill, violent and vulnerable to earn glory for himself as a poet and more to correct the societal order.

Conclusion:

Thus, Mahapatra handles prominent contemporary issues like poverty, hunger, exploitation, corruption, prostitution and deaths and the same appears vividly in his poems. In a way, his poetry hosts the essence of life as existed in the land of Lord

Jagannath. The poet claims his poetry born out of a natural call often in his speeches and writings; the reader witnesses the same while reading. In his approach, he appears to be sympathetic towards the poor, exploited and women continuously. The poet being born in a Christian family and residing in Hindu dominated society; a place full of religious rites, rituals, temples and shrines, constantly suffers from split-identities. The same could be seen in the poems studied under the aspects related to faith and religion. His bitter experiences as a Christian, a minority faith in India, brings in his life alienation as reflected in his poetry. This alienation is quiet vivid and evident. In short, his poetry is a voyage within and voyage without. His mental landscape with the physical landscape of Orissa is reflected through his poetry. His continuous search for his roots, his honesty and sincerity towards the issues unspeakable in his motherland, appear in crowd through the poems selected for this study. He never hesitates while attacking the false traditions in his time and exhibits his anguish against the bizarre set-up of the society.

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Women and Poetic Vision of Jayant Mahapatra: A Reading

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Abstract:

Mahapatra appears very much keen about the plight of women and girls in Indian society. Women have been considered as an object of pleasure in the male dominated society is the broader outlook of the poet in his poetic vision. The poet in many of his poems takes this burning issue and portrays the live picture of Indian women in misery. The white-clad widows at the temple gate, daughter-in-laws working throughout days, widows running their household and looking after children, whores, poor girls getting into prostitution, Chelammal from his famous poem Temple quits for being infertile, mothers, daughters and mythical figures like Seeta, Radha, the demon Putna and Goddess Durga fill his mind with imagination to shape his poetic art with the essence of feminine tragic situation in the Indian society. The poet leaves no stone unturned by referring to the traditional Indian burden of women to give birth to a child through the example of Chelammal. The poet skilfully uses the myth of 'golden deer', 'Putna myth' and the myth of 'Lakshman Rekha' controlling the lives of Indian women from ages through the mythical scriptures Ramayana and Mahabharata. Overall, Mahapatra wages a war against the ills and evils have been done to women in Indian society with other issues like hunger, deaths, poverty, inequality and many one witnesses around.

Key Words: The present paper probes into the life of women through the poetic vision of Jayant Mahapatra using terms like exploitation, conditioning, owning, faith, tradition etc.

About the Poet and His Poetry:

Jayant Mahapatra is an Orissa born poet writes poetry in English and is considered as a major voice in Indian English poetry. Though, the poet has been grouped with Nissim Ezekiel, A. K. Ramanujan and other modern poets in India, he kept on writing with ease even in the postmodern period. He published seventeen volumes of poems at home and abroad. Born in a Christian family and brought up in a Hindu majority ethos, Mahapatra seems to have genuine interest in dealing with the things from life around, making a point into his poetry. Though a physicist by profession, the poet could achieve the skills of a poet through his stronghold; analytical

approach developed out of science training both as a student and a teacher in the same discipline. The poet often feels the agony of the poor, minor, marginal, women, destitute and the oppressed in some way or the other. Many of his poems speak about the circumstances around in a balanced way. The pathetic condition of women, the act of owning them by the dominant male in Indian society, their exploitation through varied daily acts, religious dogmas conditioning life of women and many other things appear so vividly through his poetry. Reading and re-reading of the following poems by Mahapatra haunts the reader and makes him think seriously over the issues of women and the poetic vision of the poet.

Women in Jayant Mahapatra's Poems:

Jayant Mahapatra's vision of poetry is truly Indian, he feels the emotions and sentiments of pride and disgust at the same time and expresses through words. The poet is honoured with the most prestigious award by Sahitya Academy for his *Relationship* is the witness of his devotion for the cause of his relationship with his motherland in its perplexity. Mahapatra's poetic cosmos is flooded with the issues and problems in his land. A large part of it could be read and felt in connection with women. Starting from the female foeticide, the traditional act of owning them from the period of *Manusmriti* and even now, controlling their psyche throughout using the tools like religion, faith, fear and many more from the mythical, cultural and day-to-day life. The poet leaves no stone unturned causing plight in the life of women. A few of his poems go as follows making the same an issue of severe concern.

It is observed in course of reading his poems that the poet Jayant Mahapatra though, born and brought up in a Christian family, knows everything around (Hindu ethos) him with minute details. This makes him able to hold the nerve unmistakably of the Indian traditional life in his poems. The poet takes traditional issues from ordinary life for discussion and synthesizes the same in such a way, that a sensible reader cannot pass without having a deep feeling for the same issue in his poetry. Mahapatra never loses an opportunity to relate the conditions in life, with that of the environmental issues. In fact, he symbolically presents the social mind set in Indian society about the girl child, relationship and approach of mother and daughter regarding the place of girl, her share in the household things. With one such intent, the poet describes and correlates the Indian summer in the poem, "Summer", with the agonies of girl child in society. Mahapatra underlines issues like inequality with

girl child in the Indian families. His words in the following lines mark the patriarchal tradition in Indian society.

The home will never
be hers.

(*The Lie...17*),

Even mothers have been constrained to think in favour of the tradition is the crux behind his voice. The poet poses a question, “Who needs the future?” and voices the grave reality in the succeeding lines as follows.

A ten-year-old girl
combs her mother’s hair,
where crows of rivalries
are quietly nesting.

(Ibid)

The poet here exposes the hypnotised minds of Indian mothers. They have been trained and made traditionally like that. Rarely a mother will be found who solely gives equal status/share to a girl child. Opposition by the male in male dominated society could be understood but, when a woman (mother) fails to promote and facilitate her own gender (daughter) kills the hope. The poet says, “The home will never be hers”. This say is crucial. His observation marks the issue as “cold ash” without any fire. The green mango of wish drops before its maturity is the fact in our society. The theme of biased approach towards the girls has been handled with vivid imagery from traditional Hindu society by the poet. In short, it suggests the overall picture in Indian society about girls. As if, girls have not been blessed with dreams, they accept the life seen through the eyes of their mates (father, husband and son) accordingly. He concludes through the words-

In a corner of her mind
a living green mango
drops softly to earth.

(Ibid)

Perhaps, the green mango suggests the unsuccessful/unhappy life girls have to lead depending on men without making sound. The poet wages a war against these traditional evils in Indian society, through his poetry. His entire poetic endeavour records the struggle of an intellectual living in a perplexing social set-up undergoing a change at a fast phase from traditional rural society to a modern scientific one.

Mahapatra observes the lapses and evils in the Indian tradition. Throughout his poetic journey, women's plight has been an issue of great concern. The poet objects women's exploitation continued from the *Vedic* period in his serious poem, "Trying to keep Still". He appeals and attempts to wake women up through his poetic call into consciousness and, prepares them to forbid the bizarre demands of men in our own time. The poet in a very serious tone probe-

Time has lost its hands, trying to keep still
like damp clouds widows deaden the light of the sun
We've become used to poor relics of deeds undone
to the body's fear of dying on rainy afternoons
and to you, woman of my long memory,
where you dream still with impudent eyes
while society draws its fateful circle round you again
(Ibid 86)

The poet seems to be dismayed taking the situation around. He is helpless, both because of the tradition and women being fateful even now. In short the poet considers women in our society victims of the male dominated ethos. These victims fail to understand the crux behind their agony and accept the reality as fate. Further he blames women as follows.

Is it the vedic India you carry in your bones?
In those words you allow to turn into puppets
which dance at the doors of indifferent temples?
Oh we have heard enough of men who speak like God
while silence listens and bleeds away,
(Ibid)

The poet here exposes the age-old darkness in the minds of women. At a time he blames them and states the reason of their silences. Men speaking like God are again suggestive of their supremacy. Women have to listen to them silently and bleed. About the speech of silence in his poetry, Kamal Prasad Mahapatra, a scholar of his poetry observes, "Mahapatra's poetry resonates with silence, the reverberating silence is rendered qualitative, because it guides both the poet and the reader to meditate on the quality of human life. Hence silence is not a state of speechlessness, but becomes creative and meaningful" (147). Further, the poet reverberates, "man's bizarre demands, the terrible act of his owning". Words here have meaning beyond

their denotation. Actions around intend to keep things still is the idea he communicates here in connection with women.

Similarly, he seriously ponders over the orthodoxy prevalent in our society. The blind religious faith has taken charge of the conscience of the widows and grown up men, is the severe picture, the poet sees around. These men and women, spend their valuable time bowing down before God, time and again in obstinate prayers. Exactly opposite is the situation of young people. They don't have faith in these traditional things. Mahapatra voices this concern in his masterpiece poem "Dawn at Puri". The poem very pertinently marks the orthodoxy prevalent in Indian society. Especially, among women; their blind faith, abiding to the traditions without reasoning and their hanging by the dawn's shining strands of faith. The poet describes them in the words-

White-clad widowed women
past the centres of their lives
are waiting to enter the Great Temple.
Their austere eyes
stare like those caught in a net,
hanging by the dawn's shining strands of faith.
(Ibid 21)

The poet here re-opens the women's world, their faith in the Lord, their presence at the temple gate early in the morning and waiting to enter in the temple is the only hope in life, suggests the poet. Perhaps, Mahapatra wanted to highlight the harm traditional life in his land has done. It killed the very ability and courage to ask reasonable questions to the self. In a way, religion, faith and tradition conditioned the minds of these women is his say. The poet turning more personal sees his own mother grown old and clamouring for-

and suddenly breaks out of my hide
into the smoky blaze of a sullen solitary pyre
that fills my ageing mother:
her last wish to be cremated here
twisting uncertainly like light
on the shifting sands.
(Ibid)

Though, the poet here attempts to mark a grave reality (orthodoxy) around in our society, but the presence of the widows adds into the plight. Imagery used by the poet suggests a lot about the uncertain liberation of their conditioned psyche.

Hunger has been a dominant theme in Mahapatra's poetic corpus. The poet considers hunger as an enemy of mankind and more prominently in his land. While dealing with this theme, Mahapatra exposes the origin of this issue, its consequences and effects in his poetic mouthpiece "Hunger". Mahapatra in his famous poem, "Hunger" blames the system considering responsible for the social abuses like prostitution as an outcome of hunger in the drought prone areas of Gopalpur. About this true document of humanity (Hunger), K. Ayyappa Paniker comments, "On the level of art, the local and the universal must meet. This is what we find in Mahapatra's famous poem *Hunger*" (102). The poet while dealing with this very serious issue speaks about two different types of hungers; first the hunger of belly and another that of loin. The poet considers the society, political leaders during the last more than sixty years of independence responsible for malnutrition and deaths due to hunger in Orissa and in India. Another hunger of loin is much different and victimises women in one way or the other. Mahapatra here speaks of dragging girls and women into prostitution to satiate the physical hunger. His very famous poem "Hunger" describes the dagger named hunger. The poem of-course speaks about poverty, lack of opportunity, no food to eat and the only option to offer one's own daughter to a stranger for survival, but it also underlines that, the fisherman is the victim of opportunity only. His daughter is the real victim of fate in the Indian context. Women have to accept the life decided by men is the cause discussed by the poet in this poem. The poet voices the agony of the girl in the following words-

I heard him say; my daughter, she's just turned fifteen...
Feel her. I'll back soon, your bus leaves at nine.
... Long and lean, her years were cold as rubber.
She opened her wormy legs wide. I felt the hunger there,
the other one, the fish slithering, turning inside.

(Ibid 46)

Two types of hunger thirst upon the girl. First of her father's, by turning useful to earn livelihood and second one of the person's one who enjoys her in sex. Perhaps, the poet symbolises the age long hunger of male domination in the Indian society. Thus, women have been considered as an object to satiate the hunger of the male

domination in both ways. The poet skilfully handles the issue of hunger and of women in one say; underlining the sure loss of second anyhow.

Though, Mahapatra 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. Thus, the poet possesses the traditional mythical mother figure in his poetic oeuvre.

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. The images like "crows of rivalries" in between mothers and daughters, "like damp clouds widows deaden the light of the sun" and many others portray his poetic cosmos in its entire plight. 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 86) 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.

Conclusion:

Thus, the poetic vision of Mahapatra in his poetry is found very much keen about the plight of women and girls in Indian society. Women have been considered as an object of pleasure in the male dominated society is the broader outlook of the poet in his poetic vision. The poet with above mentioned and in many other poems takes this burning issue and portrays the live picture of Indian women in misery. The white-clad widows at the temple gate, daughter-in-laws working throughout days, widows running their household and looking after children, whores, poor girls getting into prostitution, Chelammal from his famous poem *Temple* quits for being infertile, mothers, daughters and mythical figures like Seeta, Radha, the demon Putna and Goddess Durga fill his mind with imagination to shape his poetic art with

the essence of feminine tragic situation in the Indian society. The poet leaves no stone unturned by referring to the traditional Indian burden of women to give birth to a child through the example of Chelammal. The poet skilfully uses the myth of 'golden deer', 'Putna myth' and the myth of 'Lakshman Rekha' controlling the lives of Indian women from ages through the mythical scriptures *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Though, the poet comments on the woes of these women; he offers no solution to the persistent problems. Perhaps, he leaves that decision for the reader. The poet while commenting upon the flaws in society through the tradition of *Manusmriti* inculcates the seeds of dependence in women through generations at different stages. The poet turns helpless when encounters the conditioned psyche of women by the traditional religious practices in Hinduism. Thus, the poet searches for solution of these problem and meaning in their present life through the past.

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