

A Postmodern Reading of Jayanta Mahapatra



Literature

Keywords: Postmodernism, History, Rootedness, Indian woman, Love, Contemporary condition.

Goutam Karmakar

Assistant Teacher, Department of English, Bhagilata High School (H.S), Raiganj, Uttar dinajpur, West Bengal, India.

Abstract

Indian English Poetry before and after Independence are open to discuss and debate. And we can also divide Indian English Literature from 1930s to the end of 20th century into two phases: Modernism and Postmodernism. Modernism came along with Raja Rao's 'Kanthapura' (1938) and Postmodernism came with Salman Rushdie's 'Midnight's Children' (1981). Actually literature after 1980 came to be known as Postmodern Literature. In case of poetry Nissim Ezekiel's 'Letter-Day Plasm' (1982) marked the beginning of postmodern Indian English Poetry. So many poets came after Ezekiel and wrote poetry bearing the tagline created by Ezekiel. Among them, Jayanta Mahapatra's work can be said to embody the characteristics of Postmodernism in the last two decades of the twentieth century. In his paper, I have attempted to show Jayanta Mahapatra as a Postmodern Indian English Poet through some of his eternal verse.

Introduction

Few Indian English Poets came to the world literature who raised the status of Indian English Poetry to a new level and Jayanta Mahapatra is one among them. He is such a talented poet that young poets seek inspiration and guidance from him. He is not only a poet but also a sensitive, estranged artist. The later poetry of Mahapatra may seem to us as Postmodernist in both its semantic, indeterminary and relaxation of form. A deconstructive reading shows that some of his poems need explanation with creative deviation and foregrounding. Some of his notable volumes where we find the postmodern characteristics are Relationship (1980), Life Signs (1983), Dispossessed Nests (1986), Selected Poems (1987), Burden of Waves and Fruit (1988), Temple (1989) and A Whiteness of Bone (1992) and Bare Face (2000). As a postmodern poet, he combines history, myth and vision in his 'Relationship'. His deep sense of rootedness, love for native country and culture are shown here. Here he depicts the Orissa culture, their religion as when we come to know the myth of twelve hundred artisans worked all the time to complete the Konark temple under the order of a strict emperor. Hence our sympathy evoked for them. In his 'Dawn at Puri', he shows the importance of Puri:

"Her last wish to be cremated here
twisting uncertainly like light
on the shifting sands." (Dawn at Puri)

Actually Mahapatra tries to search his root and wants to show his place's glorious past. In 'Somewhere, My Man', we find his sense of belonging to the places of his land of birth and also his state's landscape. As he shows:

"A man does not mean anything
But the place
sitting on the river bank throwing pebbles
into the muddy current
a man becomes the pride." (Somewhere, My Man)

But the poet becomes Pessimistic as the so called guilt consciousness haunts him because his generation failed to keep up the martial tradition of his ancestors which they showed in Kalinga war. This war even changed King Asoka into a religious person. The poet says that now the Daya river silently witnesses all these. As the poet says:

"Orion crawls like spider in the sky
while the swords of forgotten kings
rust slowly in the museum of our guilt." (Relationship)

Images of family is one more prominent theme in Mahapatra's poetry as he turns to his private history of family in order to do an inward journey to make a relation with the past. In his 'Grandfather', he shows how his grandfather changed his religion because of hunger. His grandfather adopted Christianity. Probably Mahapatra tries to show that his ancestors are not responsible for the change of faith. For this he regrets and says:

"We wish we knew you more,
we wish we knew what it was to be, against dying,
to know the dignity." (Grandfather)

In another poem 'The Hour Before Dawn', he shows his concern for his dying father. He loves his father very much. Here in this poem pathos are visible as the poet realizes that his father's death is inevitable:

“The silent world floats beside me;
tomorrow may be I’ll hear my father is dead
but he might bear the face of my son.” (The Hour Before Dawn)

As a postmodern poet, Mahapatra also tries to show the Indian nature, sky, landscape, birds with typical Indian sensibilities in some of his well known poems like ‘Dawn’, ‘Village’, ‘Oldplace’, ‘Summer’, ‘Country’, ‘A Twilight Poem’, ‘Indian Summer Poem’, ‘Evening’. He also tries to bring an integration between landscape and people. As in ‘In a Time of Winter Rain’, he shows that past memory is needed to recreate the present. Here he says:

“We learn to smile in a time of winter rain
under a wet sky it’s no meager komfort
...
How I have waited, shaped by memory!
These many years with knowing exactly why
Does childhood spread out all the way
From the hills of innocence to the horizon of the sea?”
(In a Time of Winter Past)

His pasteurizations of Indian landscape shows our past glory and also shows his concern for the dead who once lived in this place. In ‘Evening Landscape by the River’, he says:

“This is the kind of sadness which closed the eyes,
Here the memory for faces of the dead never appears.”
(Evening Landscape by the River)

Mahapatra is not a romantic poet in depicting nature but a realist one who sees life against the backdrop of landscape. In his ‘Of a Dawn’, he is burned with a consciousness that enables him to see into the life of things in a more vivid way. As he says:

“The dawn looks strange; skilled in the world’s ways
oldman feel their shrunken years
and return to their dark with an insane longing
for injustice,
...
what do I know of those things
which let themselves be measured by a quiet
submissive frame of hurt, by a soft trust?” (Of a Dawn)

Even landscape plays a great role in shaping Mahapatra’s poetry. It is his love for landscape that alleviates his suffering and helps him to understand the world in its proper way. As in ‘Evening’, the poet says:

“I would forget the causes of suffering, mine and others,
to justify my evening’s spirit, searching the landscape
for the leaf’s green, the stone’s ochre
for what I would not make of myself.” (Evening)

As a postmodern conscious artist, he creates relation between dead and living, the past and present of the world. In his poem ‘1992’, he wants to show us the relation between individual self and history. In his ‘Trying to keep Still’, ‘The Shadow of Day’, ‘Bazar Scene’, ‘Possessions’, he wants to show us that it is quite tough to see our futility, some meaningless poetry and less self-reflexibility. Sometime a sense of detachment gives his poetry objectivity. In this period he was cynical and even wrote poems on death. In his ‘Talking of Death’, he shows the traditional attitude to death. Death is a deliverer which helps mankind in past, present and future. As the opening lines of this poem show:

“Because everyone believes that it moves us
and yet no one believes until we find ourselves.” (Talking of Death)

But Mahapatra is not a pessimist. He shows love, nature and Indian Woman in his poetry with the touch of Indian sensibility. In ‘Bare Face’, he shows the image of Indian woman who entered into a pond and shook her hair loose to have a bathe and the raindrops dropped through the bamboo grove. All these bring before us the typical rural Indian woman and nature. As he says:

“By the scummy pond, in the thin rain,
a woman shakes her hair loose,

Leaves green, sway under the cloudy sky
and only the woman's sun bronzed face looked out
above the water. The air drops quietly back into the past
a part of the present seems to break away.
The destiny of India heaves in darkness,
In the memory of ancient water." (Bare Face)

As a postmodern poet, Mahapatra shows love in his poetry from various perspectives. Some of his well known love poems are 'Another Evening', 'Women in Love', 'The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street', 'Hunger', 'Armour', 'Love Fragment'. In his 'Another Evening', he shows the protagonist's feeling as he lost his love and became sad:

"Your absence
is part of growing older, and this October
a time for measuring an indefatigable memory." (Another Evening)

In 'Women in Love', the poet wants to create a relation with God through love as here love and spirituality go hand in hand with a new passion. As the poet says:

"Women, what things
you would make me remember
what would you make me do." (Women in Love)

But due to his unfilled love, his sense of failure finds a new route to express this. Erotism and sex find a new way in the hands of Mahapatra and being a postmodern poet, he discusses it in his own way with Indian sensibilities. In 'Of Armour', he states that:

"she is where you have followed her
and where her fleating panting space
you could if you would not
press your own skilled ghost
against her tumbled heart
if she only let you be
yourself naked and gaping
hanging on the doorstep without a name." (Of Armour)

In 'Hunger', Mahapatra's use of the word hunger is really symbolic. Here hunger means sex starvation and he shows this through the story of fisherman. These lines of the protagonist really show this:

"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.
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." (Hunger)

As a postmodern poet, Mahapatra shows in his poems both socio-cultural deterioration and contemporary social and political condition. His poetry shows Naxal Movements in his 'India'. He says here:

"Why am I hurt still by the look in the hand of the
Graceful Naxal girl who appeared out of nowhere
That Winter holding a knife as old as history." (India)

Mahapatra in his poetry uses a number of imagery, symbols, rhetoric to give his poetry more intense meaning and feeling. A close look to his poems show that he uses rain and time theme repeatedly in his poems. His well known rain poems are 'In a Night of Rain', 'A Day of Rain', 'The Rain Falling', 'After the Rain', 'A Rain', 'Four Rain Poems', 'Rains in Orissa'. He uses rain as a symbol and image or medium to show different aspects. As in 'In a Night of Rain', rain is used to show the passion of love:

"A time of rain and old town
...
There's a sound of crying in there
Of an evening jasmine being born
The sounds of satisfaction after love's been made."
(In a Night of Rain)

He uses rain as it gives him hope for a better tomorrow. After rainfall, the poet thinks for a better weather in life and also the rain makes him aware of his reality. As he writes in 'Again the Rain Falls':

"Rain stands on the margin of my time,
a discovery, like theft,
making me careful how I lay the hour down
looking at the trees growing too large
for my little yard, filling with lurid light
and I hardly see spring coming in." (Again the Rain Falls)

Mahapatra uses time as a theme and symbol in various way. One such is found in 'Today':

"Time faces me and there
like the lucking madness in a tyrant's eye
is the worm of another day
dark wings shut and unmoving in the blue." (Today)

In another poem 'Relationship 1' he shows that time will take everything in course of time. Time is actually a part of eternity and he says this in these lines:

"But time has no mouth
and the black labyrinth
of casuarinas along the edges of the sea
closes the sky's eternal vault
...
Now caught in the currents of time
I watch the blue of the sky
Seep out slowly." (Relationship 1)

As a postmodern poet, Jayanta Mahapatra also tries to create a contemporary myth out of Gandhi in his poetry. Actually Gandhi is an major subject in postmodern and later postcolonial literature. In his 'Requiem', he shows:

"You become the red earth
that a perfect, constant gravity
achieved through the aeons
It is a world in itself
This ahimsa." (Requiem)

In his 'Relationship', he mixed myth with history to present an integrated vision before us. As he writes:

"I know I can never come alive
if I refuse to consecrate at the alter of my origins." (Relationship)

The discussion regarding Mahapatra as a postmodern poet will be incomplete without the discussion of irony in his poetry. In his 'A Monsoon Day Fable', he ironically says that after rain good weather may not come as our loveless lives lost tune and existence. As he says:

"I pick up the morning newspaper and see
how a nation goes on insulting itself
with its own web of rhetoric." (A Monsoon Day Fable)

In his 'Requiem', he criticizes those who took Gandhi in a wrong way and criticize Gandhi. He ironically writes:

"What you have left behind are
faded pictures on bare office walls. A day
every year as a national holiday." (Requiem)

Conclusion

In a nutshell, it can be said that Mahapatra is truly an Indian poet writing in English language that at once qualifies him to be an Indian English Poet. He in his poems tries to create a new rhythm, a new style with the characteristics of postmodernism. As Bruce King aptly comments on Mahapatra, "Mahapatra's vision and obsessive writing of poetry as a hopeless search for meaning in the human condition is however a characteristic of postmodernism as found in Beckett's later work." (Bruce king, 195)

References

1. Mahapatra, Jayanta. Relationship, Greenfield, New York: Greenfield Review Press, 1980.
2. Life Signs, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983.
3. Selected Poems, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987.
4. The Best of Jayanta Mahapatra, Calicut : Bodhi Books, 1995.
5. Ramamurti , K.S, Twenty-five Indian Poets in English. New Delhi, Macmillan India Limited, 1995.
6. King Bruce, Modern Indian Poetry in English, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987.
7. Naik, M.k., Dimentions of Indian English Literature, New Delhi : Sterling Publishers, 1984.
8. Das, Bijay Kumar. The Poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra. New Delhi : Atlantic Publishers And Distributors, 2001.
9. Prasad, Madhusudan (ed.), The Poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra: A Critical Study. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1986.