IIT ROORKEE

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NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE

Indian Poetry in English

Lecture 09: Jayanta Mahapatra

BINOD MISHRA

DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES



Socio-Political Conditions

- Post-Independence India
- Emergency in 1975 ,Terrorism in 1980s & Bhopal Gas Tragedy 1984
- Rising Intolerance
- 2015: Mahapatra protested against growing ‘moral asymmetry’ in the country by returning the Padma Shri .



Introduction to the poet

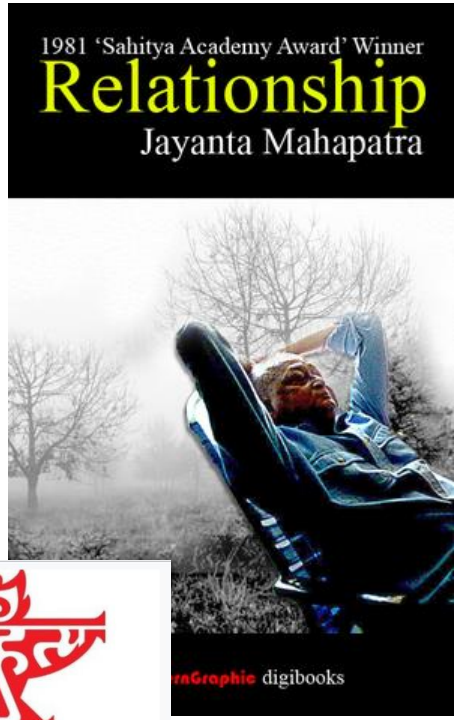
- Born in 1928, Cuttack, Orissa
- Family: Christian Convert
- Christian upbringing in a Hindu dominated society.
- Oriya
- Physics Teacher of Ravenshaw University,
- turned to poetry late in life.
- Culturally and geographically restricted to Orissa.
- Deep understanding of the Indian environment.
- A bi-lingual poet and essayist
- Literary Magazine: *Chandrabhaga*





Sahitya Akademi Award in 1981
Padma Shri in 2009
Returned in 2015

Mahapatra's Poetic Corpus



1981

- *Close the Sky, Ten by Ten (1971)*
- *Svayamvara and Other Poems (1971)*
- *A Rain of Rites* (1976)
- *A Father's Hours(1979)*
- *Waiting* (1979)
- *The False Start* (1980)
- *Relationship* (1980)
- *Life Signs* (1983)
- *Burden of Waves and Fruit* (1986)
- Whiteness of Bones(1992)
- *Shadow Space (1997)*
- *Bare Face (2000)*
- *Land (*2013)

Themes of Mahapatra's Poems

- ✓ Prevalence of 'silence', Loneliness, and emptiness
- ✓ Introspective preoccupation
- ✓ Historical, cultural and social themes
- ✓ Ironic reflections on love, sex, and politics
- ✓ Juxtaposition of images and symbols – (Bery)
- ✓ Death, disease, decay, lepers, beggars, poverty.

Contd…

- Certain vagueness in his poems provides them with their Indian sensibility.
- Striking images
- Colloquial
- Ellipsis
- Wisdom from cultural legacy
- Poetic Geography: Puri

"Physics taught me to write with a consciousness, not to use the 'unnecessary word' in a poem."

– Mahapatra

"Poems need to be revelatory, they should show something that *has not been shown before.* If it offers something new, either through images or through statements made, then the poem has possibly done what it was meant to do. If you look at all the best poets we have had, they've always been spiritual people. They have always looked upwards. A good poem should lift you from the plane we live in, this mundane plane that we exist in now, into something a little higher. It's a sort of prayer, worship, *sadhana*. If it does not take us higher, of what use is that poem?"

Characteristics of Poems

"Psyche equivalent to landscape"-

Is it or is it not?

"Mahapatra's imagination is of the type that is Jungian (or whatever an Indian, more specifically Orissan equivalent of that may be). Many of his poems seem to be the result of a quest for verbal surface indicators of primordial, pre-linguistic, dream-layered experiences, the legends and archetypes of a collective unconsciousness, the grass-roots of the emotions, the ancestral lineaments of personal identity."

- Syd Harrex in "Ripening Vines"

“A Rain of Rites”

Sometimes a rain comes
slowly across the sky, that turns
upon its grey cloud, breaking away into light
before it reaches its objective.

The rain I have known and traded all this life
is thrown like kelp on the beach.
Like some shape of conscience I cannot look at,
a malignant purpose is a nun's eye.

Who was the last man on earth,
to whom the cold cloud brought the blood to his face?
Numbly I climb to the mountain-tops of ours
where my own soul quivers on the edge of answers.

Which still, stale air sits on an angel's wings?
What holds my rain so it's hard to overcome?

“Dawn at Puri”

Endless crow noises
A skull in the holy sands
tilts its empty country towards hunger.

White-clad widowed women
past the centers 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.

Contd…

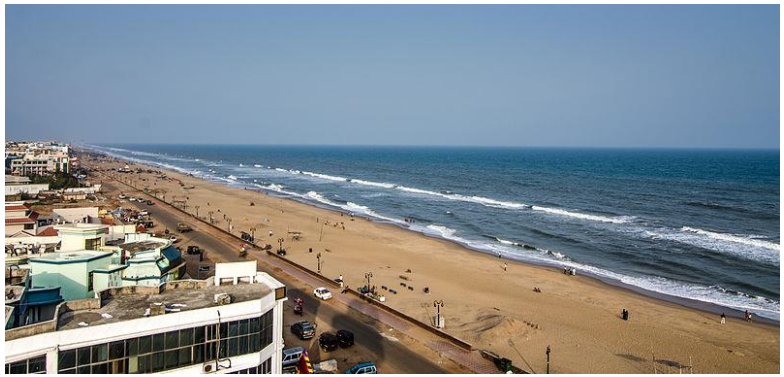
The frail early light catches
ruined, leprous shells leaning against one another,
a mass of crouched faces without names,

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.

Analysis of the Poem: “Dawn at Puri”

- Description of the landscape of sea beach where funeral pyre keeps burning in Puri.
- Dwells on local details
- Meditative and hypnotic imagery
- Oriya sensibility
- Faith and experience
- Images palpitate with life
- Cremation at Puri *Swargadwar*



“A Missing Person”

In the darkened room
a woman
cannot find her reflection in the mirror

waiting as usual
at the edge of sleep

In her hands she holds
the oil lamp
whose drunken yellow flames
know where her lonely body hides

Plight of Women

“Where are things called homes
sticky with toil; need after need
tempts the fates to touch them,
trap the homely, embarrassed hurt.

Year after year
like onions and herbs hung out to dry
their hearts heavy
the quiet too long.
What do they live for(…..)
They seed, though.” (“A Rain of Rites”)

In Defense of His Art

“These images have made my life; it is the land that has made me, and in turn shaped my poetry. So, yes, I am intimate with the land; I could not have lived elsewhere, nor could I have written poetry anywhere else.”

“To Orissa, to this land in which my roots lie 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 Konarka, I acknowledge my relationship.”

“What use is a poem if it is easily understood, if there is a straightforward working of the words, more in the manner of a statement? True poetry, perhaps, has always lent itself to an indirect approach, and where one wants to return to an overwhelming silence. It becomes difficult to explain such processes which take place in the mind.”

Conclusion

- ✓ Early poems as strands of love and passion
- ✓ Pain –an integral theme
- ✓ Links his poetry to Indian reality
- ✓ Relationship of the self to the other, relationship with his ambience,
- ✓ From ‘understandable to ununderstanable’

Works Consulted

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https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Puri_Sea_Beach_viewed_from_the_light_house.jpg

All this naked knowledge makes me tremble,
defeated as I am by my own tactics, my poetry,
by the words I measure my pain,
the ceremony I make of every date on the calendar.
(*Life Signs)*

Thank You