

Social Realities in the Poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra

¹**Dr. G. Arputhavel Raja**, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Annamalai University

²**Dr. V.K. Saravanan**, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Annamalai University

Mahapatra's domestic and poetic worlds seem to be dominated by unrelieved darkness, shadows and inertia, where light comes painfully without brightening the atmosphere. Infact, for Mahapatra, darkness has a great deal of psychological import as he grew up in the gloom of his sad childhood house surrounded by tall deodars which instilled strange fears in him. He observes his environment and listens quietly, sensitively to his inner feelings, the sources of his poetry, bringing momentary perceptions of relationships and fleeting images of contrast. The poems appear a continuous relation of aspects of the isolation, loneliness, solitude, alienation of the self from external realities in a world without apparent purpose. This is the existential dilemma of most modern literature. While Mahapatra's world is filled with personal pain, guilt, remorse, hunger, desire, and moments of renewal, his environment is filled with symbols of belief by the ordinary lives of the people of Cuttack, the temples, the Hindu festivals, the ancient monuments. Poverty, deprivation, and prostitution recur in his verses.

The memory of his unsympathetic and non-cooperative mother, moving about with an oil lamp in her hand in the listless darkness of that house only intensified his fears further. Thus, darkness became an early childhood fixation in Mahapatra's life, which projects onto his poetry almost as a neurotic obsession, symbolizing the fear of the unknown, uncertainty, a sense of entrapment and a host of other negative feelings. For example, in "Iron," Mahapatra says:

A pain for the slight light at dawn
assails me; dark earth,
behind me still follows the darkness.
darkness from shadows under the roof and leaf
from the fish's belly white against the hardness
of water, from the salt in the blood
which carries the body forward like love.
What branches of the dark will guide one home? (7-14)

This pervading darkness makes the poet acutely aware of himself, his limitations, frustrations and failures. Mahapatra can see through darkness into the abysmal corners of his soul wherein lie the dreams, aspirations as also the dark designs of unexplained guilt, fear and his inherent sexuality. The following lines from "A Country" amply illustrate this point:

When darkness falls
the old speak of the past with sleepy voices;
my ears tremble when I hear their tales.
I look at their faces, and their eyes are dead as stone.
Here is my world, and it makes me dream as a child;
yet why do I wear myself out
feeling for the girls who die
before their breasts are swollen with milk? (7-14)

The darkness sharpens Mahapatra's sensitivity though as it only results in pain and despair, and he dwells in the world of darkness with his archaic despair, willingly I always return to the black world.

Mahapatra's poetry reflects, throughout, this swinging pendulum of his emotions: darkness represents the unfulfilled man, yet it is only darkness he wants because it throws light on what he has lost both as a poet and a man. The projection of this despair is of course, significantly, without self-pity. However, because of the contrasting emotions, darkness actually remains unmediated, or its mediation takes place only at the level of imagination. Darkness thus becomes Mahapatra's meditative ground, which directs him to look inward, the way people often see, closing their eyes in a mood of deep contemplation or prayer, focusing their whole attention on one single aspect of their meditation. Mahapatra offers a wide spectrum of darkness for introspection, providing diverse points of view. This is the reason why Mahapatra's poetry does not have one single dominant mood, motif or theme. In "Love Fragment," and "The Years Last Evening," the following lines show the degree of variance of Mahapatra's mood, attitude and perspective:

And I take you into my heart,
a country that will settle down to another day
hungry for darkness
by what I do not know. (24-27)

Here, in familiar darkness,
with its queer tenderness staying in the veins,
the past becomes beautiful because it faces us
Like old fireflies against the cold banyan. (9-12)

The above quotations illustrate the constant shifts in focus which is characteristic of Mahapatra. It also represents the unsettled mind of the modern man and his troubled world of conflicting values, shattering faiths, unshared inheritance and the absence of a common destiny that all can believe in.

"A Missing Person," "Hunger," "The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street," "30th January 1982: A Story," and "The Twenty-fifth Anniversary of a Republic: 1975" are the classic examples of Mahapatra's poetry as social reform. At the same time, the poems lead to the realization of human predicament entrapped in the complex web of social pressures which, act as serious constraints on the choices open to an individual to lead his life in accordance with his personal preferences. Thus, an individual's freedom is crippled and is made subservient to the demands of social pressures which dictate his fate. Mahapatra's humanistic voice becomes sad and heavy when he deals especially with women's issues. He feels deeply for the plight of Indian woman who bears the burden of her womanhood in the utter loneliness, helplessness, humiliation, deprivation and often deplorable degradation. In "Hunger," Mahapatra depicts one such incidence.

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.
 I followed him across the sprawling sands,
 my mind thumping in the flesh's sling.
 Hope lay perhaps in burning the house I lived in.
 Silence gripped my sleeves; his body clawed
 at the froth his old nets had dragged up from theseas.
 In the flickering dark his lean-to-opened like a wound.

The wind was I, and the day and night before.
 Palm fronds scratched my skin. Inside the shack
 an oil lamp splayed the hours bunched to those walls.

Over and over the sticky soot crossed the space of my mind.
 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 wile.
 Long and lean, her years were cold as rubber
 she opened her wormy legs wide. I felt the hunger there,
 the other one, fish slithering, turning inside. (1-21)

Poverty and sexuality play havoc in the life of man and women debasing them to sub-human levels: a father is prostituting his girl-child, hardly out of her teens, luring a prospective customer in casual business-like manner that is most shocking. It is the stark poverty that has driven the fisherman takes refuge in "trailing his nets and his nerves" (3) which indicates his disturbed psychological state of mind where an irresolvable conflict is going on. The fisherman is restless, and nervous; perhaps it is the first time that he is forced to sell his daughter. He is perhaps unable to reconcile himself to the bitter reality and his helplessness probes him on the unpleasantness of his atrocious act; yet the father in him prompts the fisherman to caution the customer against being rude to the girl child. The fact that she still is a small girl is stressed by the line "she's just turned fifteen" (16). And the father's concern is registered in these lines: "Feel her. I'll be back soon, your bus leaves at nine" (17). "Hunger" is a profoundly human document, which contains within itself the stifled cries of countless innocent victims who fall an easy prey to situations, driven as they are by terrible hunger to become the objects for satiating the hungers of the flesh. Between the two hungers, these unfortunate men and women lose all dignity of their human person and live like mere shadows dragging their uneventful, burdensome lives from one day to the other, being resigned to their cruel fates, with no hopes of ever seeing a better dawn. Thousands of men and women are unfortunately condemned to endure this sickening life.

In this context, the protagonist too is a victim of hunger, i.e., his own inherent sexuality which forces him to seek pleasures in the ramshackle hut of a poor fisherman. The protagonist is also in a dilemma as to whether he should proceed or retreat. His moral world crumbles heavily on him. He feels that "the sky fell on me" (18) and realize that "hope lay perhaps in burning the house I lived in" (8). Yet he follows the fisherman, unable to restrain himself and "inside the shack" (13), two hungers confront each other, each as powerful and compelling as the other. Both the protagonist and the girl are victims of their respective hungers: both are losers: the protagonist loses his moral certitude and the girl, her chastity. Above all, human dignity becomes the first casualty in this whole process, which shatters the self-respect of an individual. This is no less destructive and damaging to the human person than an attempted suicide.

"The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street" reads more like a sequel to "Hunger" but less successful than "Hunger." Nevertheless, the hollow world of prostitutes, the moral hesitancy of the protagonist, his frustrations and the same inviting business-like tone that tempts the protagonist continue to be essence of this poem too.

You fall back against her in the dumb light,
trying to learn something more about women

while she does what she thinks proper to please you,
 the sweet, the little things, the imagined;
 until the statue of the man within
 you've believed in throughout the years
 comes back to you, a disobeying toy
 and the walls you wanted to pull down
 mirror only of things mortal, and passing by;
 like a girl holding on to your wide wilderness,
 as though it were real, as though the renewing voice
 tore the membrane of your half-woken mind
 when, like a door, her words close behind:
 "Hurry, will you? Let me go,"
 and her lonely breath thrashed against ... (28-42)

The protagonist thinks that he can "learn something more about women" (29) in the whorehouse whereas the prostitute goes about playing the tricks of her trade which is "an old, hard tradition" (30) and "does what she thinks proper to please" (30) the customer without being moved by any feelings. For her, ever new customer means only more business. The whore cannot afford to have any emotional involvement either with the customer or with the act. That is why she is impatient and hurries the customer through the act of sex- "Hurry, will you? Let me go," (41). The sex-act becomes unsatisfying because the whore offers her body as a ware and not her heart. She tricks the customer into a quick orgasm and the protagonist walks out of the house more frustrated, disappointed and ashamed of himself: "the statue of the man within / you've believed in throughout the years / come back to you, a disobeying toy" (32-34).

In "A Country," Mahapatra brings out the picture of hunger and starvation of countryside people in India. The poem records the sorry plight of the people even after Independence. Struggle and fighting could not change the condition of the people. He sometimes visualizes and thinks about the condition of his own country. He broods over the sorry state of his mother land. He sings:

Sometimes at night when all voices die
 my mind sees earth, my country-
 to accept sacrifice, the loss of friends,
 and sons who vanished suddenly in seventy-two.
 However much I provoke and curse
 I am unable to force an answer out of you.

Wherever I try to live,

in pious penitence at Puri
 or in the fiery violence of a revolutionary
 my reason becomes a prejudiced sorrow like socialism. (20-28)

Mahapatra seems closer to the modernist movement of the first half of the last century with its open-ended form and reliance on recurring symbols to provide coherence to non-linear, fragment structures. Mahapatra's persona is of an estranged, distanced, sensitive artist rather than that of an invisible or playfully prominent post-modernist author. As in modernist writers, there is less importance on the material world and more emphasis on subjective memory and the inner self, the psychological, in contrast to the post-modernist's emphasis on almost totally self-enclosed art forms. Mahapatra's is an elite art, aimed at a small, discriminating readership.

The poet searches for a savior, the quest to find himself in relation to his country's present as well as past. An Indian writer writing in English is bound to encounter an identity crisis. Mahapatra attempts to prove that his poetry is the product of the soil and that through his poetry he celebrates nothing but his own soil.

References:

- Alam, Q.Z. *The Dynamics of Imagery*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 1994.
- Alexander, Meena. *The Poetic Self*. New Delhi: Arnold Heinemann, 1979.
- Cullar, Jonathan. *Structuralist Poetics*. London: Routledge, 1975.
- Daruwall, Keki, N. "The Pain that Moves the Bell." *Poetry Review* Spring, (1993) Vol. 3 No.1.
- Mahapatra, Jayanta. *Close the Sky, Ten by Ten*. Calcutta: Dialogue Publication, 1971.
- . *Svayamvara and Other Poems*. Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1971.
- . *A Father's Hours*. Calcutta: Untied Writers, 1976.
- . *A Rain of Rites*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1976.
- . *Waiting*. New Delhi: SamkaleenPrakashan, 1979.
- . *The False Start*. Bombay: Clearing House, 1980.
- . *Selected Poems*. New Delhi: OUP, 1987.
- Mukherjee, Meenakshi. Ed. *Considerations: Twelve Studies Of Indo- Anglian Writing*. New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1997.
- Naik M.K. *A History Of Indian English Literature*. New Delhi: SahityaAkademi, 1982.