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### **Portrayal of Odisha in Mahapatra's Poetry**

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#### **Abstract:**

Jayanta Mahapatra was a physicist, a professor of physics, and a bilingual poet. He was an internationally acclaimed Indian poet not from the field of literature but an Odia who started writing verses in English. To him, physics was poetry and poetry physics, an exchange of both. Mahapatra is the first Indian English poet to have received the Sahitya Akademi Award (1981) for his better-remembered work, the long poem, 'Relationship.' In 2009, he was awarded the Padmashree Award by the government of India for his outstanding contribution to the field of literature. His close observation of realities became the base of his works. He frequently raised problems like anger, myths, customs, traditions, rituals, hunger, problems of identity, frustration, etc. Mahapatra was part of a trio of poets who laid the foundations of Indian English Poetry, which included A.K. Ramanujan and R. Parthasarathy. The poets writing in English came from a variety of backgrounds. His most characteristic note is one of quiet but often ironic reflection, mostly concerning love, sex, and sensuality in the earlier poetry and the social and political scene in some of the later poems. Mahapatra's poems are rich in allusions and references to Odia legends and history. As he says, "My writing would go on to portray cultural values native to Odisha.....And perhaps I have done just this in my poetry". He assimilates and identifies with the history and heritage of Odisha.

**Keywords:** heritage, history, cultural values, myth, etc.

#### **Introduction**

Jayanta Mahapatra is one of the best-known - Indian English poets. He was born in Cuttack, Odisha, in 1928. He grew up in a small-town atmosphere. He was a

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physicist, a professor of physics, and a bilingual poet. The poets writing in English came from a variety of backgrounds. Mahapatra was an internationally acclaimed Indian poet who was not from the field of literature but an Odia who started writing verses in English. Being a professor of physics, physics was poetry and poetry physics, an exchange of both.

Poems are a sort of revelation in which the poet expresses his willingness to come back to terms with himself as a person and as a poet. Poems are records of one's own expertise and experiences to be shared. Poetry is a harmony of the self and outside. In Mahapatra's life, poetry came late, but his writing is a prized heritage of humanity. Being an Indian, he wanted to glorify the importance of Indian Poetry in English.

However, Mahapatra was from Odisha; he has made an enormous contribution to Indian English poetry with his experimental topics and native poetic idiom. His poems are about the poet's strong attachment to his childhood experiences, along with the Odia fairy testimonies, myths, legends, and high-quality Indian epics. He holds the distinction of being the first Indian English poet to have received the '**Sahitya Akademi Award**' (1981) for his better-remembered work, the long poem "**Relationship**." In 2009, he was awarded by the Government of India the '**Padamshree Award**' for his outstanding contribution to the field of literature. His close observation of realities became the base of his works. He frequently raised problems like anger, myths, customs, traditions, rituals, hunger, problems of identity, frustration, etc. He was part of a trio of poets who laid the foundations of Indian English poetry, which included A.K. Ramanujan and R.Parthasarathy. His poems are rich in allusions and references to Odia legends and history.

As he says, " My writing would go on portray cultural values native to Odisha ....and perhaps I have done just this in my poetry". His most characteristic note is one of quiet but last often ironic reflection mostly concerning love, sex & sensuality in the earlier poetry and the social and political scene in some of the later poems. He assimilates and identifies with the history and heritage of Odisha.

Mahapatra selected different types of subjects for his poems, starting from the landscape of the country to the Indian International problems. His deep emotions are rooted in tradition, beliefs, culture, and philosophy. His poetry gives a picture of his motherland. His deep love for his birthplace can be seen and felt through his poetry. Being born in Odisha, from the core of his heart, he is an Odia. His poetry portrays historical, political, and physical India. His poetry portrays the authentic

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picture of Odisha with its topography, folklore, tradition, and myths. We can say he was a regional poet, as Bruce King remarks, "While Mahapatra's world is filled with personal pain, guilt, remorse, hunger, desire & 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. The poems are varied attempts to bridge an epistemological, phenomenological gap to know, be part of, enclose, experience with the worlds and the other whether it be a woman, temple stones a Hindu priest."

Throughout his life and literary career, Mahapatra's passionate quest for Odia self through his consciousness of the Odia tradition and culture with which he identifies himself in his poetry. The history of Odisha, as well as the myths, legends, and rituals associated with its soil, draw Mahapatra's attention, and he tries to revive them in his poetry. His poetry explores religions, the psyche, and the intricacies of human relationships, being remarkable for depth of feelings and true poetic imagination, embracing a variety of themes like rootlessness and emptiness in modern existence with the support of poetic craftsmanship.

As Mahapatra admitted that the setting, background & sensibility in a poet's work should be rooted in his soil. Mahapatra's style of writing is very obscure and rugged. He was a poet of human relationships and most of his poem's centre around man - women relationship. Mahapatra used his emotions & feelings as a tool to express himself. As a child he felt a sense of alienation from his mother which has also been reflected in his works.

The name of his first collection of poems is *Svaymavara and Other Poems* (1971), followed by other collections like *Close the Sky Ten by Ten* (1975), *A Father's Hours* (1976), *A Rain of Rites* (1976), *Waiting* (1979), *Life signs* (1983), *A Whiteness of Bone* (1992), *Shadow Space* (1997), *Bare Face* (2000), *Random Descent* among others. He has written a short story titled *The Green Gardener* (1947) and edited a literary magazine, *Chandrabhaga*.

The collection of his poems in Odia is *Bali* (1993), *Kahibi Gotu Katha* (1995), *Baya Raja* (1997), *Tikil Chhayee* (2001), *Chali* (2006), and *Jadiba Gapatyayi* (2009). Mahapatra was also translated into English from Odia and Bengali.

Some of his translated works include *Countermeasures Poems* (1973), *Wings of the Last: Poems* (1976), *Verticals of Life: Poems* (1996), *Discovery and the Other Poems* (2004), and *I Time of Rising* (2003). His poetry gained recognition not only within India but also on an international platform. His poems found a place in

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prestigious poetry anthologies such as 'The Dance of the Peacock: An Anthology of English Poetry from India', published by Hidden Brook Press in Canada. He also worked as a translator by rendering Odia's works into English. Several of his translations found a home in the bi-monthly literary magazine Indian Literature. He was one of the most acclaimed Indian English writers. He made a unique and original contribution to Indian - English poetry in a relatively short span of time.

There is an abundance of local details in his poems. Dawn at Puri, Taste for Tomorrow, Slum, Evening Landscape by the River, and Events are some of his poems, which deal chiefly with the Odisha landscape. Other poems depicting the Odisha landscape and alluding to the culture and the ancient history of Odisha include The Orissa poems Orissa Landscapes and Evening in an Orissa Village. Some poems like the whorehouse in a Calcutta Street & Hunger are on the theme of sexuality, Prostitution & poverty. There is an inherent existential concern in the entire garnet of Mahapatra's poetry. He describes a serious and dark vision of life, which is characterized by dejection, sorrow, suffering, loss, and alienation. The logic, grass, the Exile, the abandoned British Cemetery at Balasore, Total Solar Eclipse, and The Moon Moments are the most conspicuous and the most impressive of poems of the category, having philosophical, reflective, and psychological undertones. His poem 'An Old Country' has a realistic depiction of this contemporary India and expresses the poet's deep anguish over the downfall of India, which once boasted of being one of the greatest civilizations of the world. In the volume 'The Father's Hours,' which consists of four poems, the poet reveals the contemporary socio-political reality of the multiple problems facing India. When we talk about the theme of love, to the poet, love is aligned with sex. Sexual fulfilment alone leads to the realization of love. His poem 'The Logic' describes the consummation of love. It was also a great success. His memorable poem, 'A Missing Person,' is about the theme of love, which reveals the poignancy of separation in love. Lost is one of his best love poems.

In his 'The Dance of Shiva' about the dying process of Hindu myth, Mahapatra confronts its dying process in the men and women in Orissa. He is the most intense of Indian poets writing in English. His poems Hunger, Myth, India, and the Accusation are flawless examples. His poetry describes what he sees around him.

Mahapatra's emotions were firmly rooted in his native land, Odisha. The important places of his state, Puri, Cuttack, Bhubaneshuvar, Konark, the Chilika Lake, its legends, history and myths, tradition and culture, its past, present, and future occupied the landscape of his mind. In his first volume of poems, Close the Sky, Ten

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by Ten, he emerges as a poet in the making who reveals a commendable capacity to mold the language like clay. His second volume, *Swayamvara & Other Poems* (1971), shows his remarkable maturity in poetic language and style. His next volume, *A Rain of Rites* (1974), is about the depiction of Orissa's depiction of landscape rituals, The Indianness, especially with its religious sites. Another volume, *The False Start* (1980), deals with the theme of silence. His masterpiece, 'Relationship' (1981), achieved the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award. It is like a modern epic, a poetic depiction of his relationship with the root culture, religion, history, legend, rituals, tradition, and myths of - Odisha, which shaped his psyche's personality. *Life Sign* (1983) reveals his concern with the external world.

The landscape of Odisha, as depicted, is not only a picture of the scenic beauty of Odisha, but also comprises the physical landscape, the temples, the ruins, and the inevitable presence of the mythical past. There is a triangle of Puri, Cuttack, and Konark, which supply the chief ingredients to weave the fabric of his poetry. History, legends, and myths associated with these places constitute the central theme of his poetry. The Odia landscape as the setting brings about the mental evolution of the poet. Down at the Puri emerged as a realistic document of the Hindu psyche and their tradition. Being a Hindu, one knows the importance of the town of Puri. It is considered to be a sacred place of lord Jagannatha. Mahapatra was well aware of Odisha's orthodox cultural convention. The port speaks about the hollowness of traditional practices and customs. Many Hindus or widows feel that salvation can be attained by dying at Puri as there is a stretch of beach called; 'Swargadwara' or 'Gateway to Heaven' where the dead are being cremated. This poem brings out the characteristic atmosphere of Odisha, its sufferings, poverty, hunger, and its age-old customs, rites, and rituals. The early morning scene of the sea beach at Puri can be imagined through images of crows, sand, widows, shells caught in a net, etc.

Mahapatra tried to revive the history of Odisha, the myths, and the legends through his poems 'Grandfather & Dhauli'; the poem Dhauli is about the wars fought there, and the poem Grandfather is about the after-effects of famine. Dhauli is a historical poem; its time is the one when the War of Kalinga was fought and the time immediately after that. Odia soldiers were massacred on the river Daya; their blood flowed through the river Daya, and their corpses were scattered on the battlefield to be torn by vultures, wolves, and jackals. The poem challenges the masculinity and sexual power of the soldiers when he says, "buried into dead hunger with its merciless worms guided the foxes to their limp genitals."

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Grandfather is a poem that reflects nostalgia. In this poem, he reveals the struggle of his wounded psyche to come out of its cocoon. The speaker is haunted by the invisible spirit of his grandfather. He calls his grandfather a board that has helped him and his children to grow and move ahead. Mahapatra seems to have grasped the immensity and dimensions of the terrible crisis faced by their grandfather. The poet reconstructs this imaginary debate in the mind of the grandmother and the reader. The poem is a critique of some state-imposed social order that feeds people but at the cost of their lives.

Mahapatra's poems depict Indian women in a helpless and objectifying light. A major example of power of male and sexuality is seen in his poem 'Hunger'. In this poem, he opened the theme of hunger in three different ways; hunger for food, hunger for solitude and sexual hunger. The speaker, the girl, and the fishermen are all trapped like fishes in the net of hunger. The poem shows different perspective of how hunger affects people.

Mahapatra's Sahitya Academy Award Winning Masterpiece, 'Relationship', illustrates of his quest for his roots. The relationship is divided into twelve sections. It begins with an invocation like an epic. In this volume he comes out with his real strength containing myth, tradition and history of Odisha, the land of great historical, cultural, and religious values.

Its chief concern is to know the origin of this universe:

“once again, one must sit back and bury the face,  
in this earth of the forbidding myth,  
the phallus of the enormous stone,  
when the lengthened shadow of a restless vulture.”

(Relationship, lines 5-9).

This is a poem of unrelatedness in terms of style and topic. It yearns for the comfort of home for the end of fallibility and guilt, whereas the truth of the poem could only have been reached by fallibility. It is tempted by total identity with the myths of home but cannot avoid the discordant memories. The locale also has a great hearing on Relationships. In this poem, he remembers Odisha's heroic past. He exhibits the glory and pride of the ancient Odisha. This poem is set in Odisha. He recalls with reverence the prowess of his ancestors. Who fought the Kalinga war in 261 B.C., converted the emperor Ashok into a deeply religious man. In this connection, he refers to the river Daya, which serves as a witness to his ancestors'

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heroic effort, which has acquired its mythic dimension. Mahapatra's flowing verse form takes the readers from reality of the present to myth and legend - strewn past and back again to reality. The poet takes us from the ruins of the phallus to its beginning in the 13th Century. He revitalizes his sense of the historical past by recapitulating the legends tagged to the temple's finish.

Mahapatra's cultural sensibility in the poem "The Indian Way" says that the lover will not touch the lady's love until the wedding is over. The poet is shocked by the living death in their lives. The more the poet tries to understand the people and their place, the more sorrowful he becomes. The poet says that the people are uprooted from the true tradition and are leading a wooden life," being insensitive to the burnt whispers of the wind at Konarka like the lost faces of a lost language at Dhauli "(Waiting, lines 5-7).

He found a voice and a medium to express and relate to his own inner self through his poems. Being an Odia who started writing verses in English, in his last few years he moved to his native tongue, translating from and writing verses in Odia. **Conclusion:** Mahapatra's poetry is redolent of the Odisha scene, steeped in history, legend, and myth. According to him, landscape is not only a physical phenomenon. Rather, it is a parameter of life and faith, unchangeable as his own body. His poetry encompasses the macroscopic India in the microcosm of Odisha. He was of the opinion that a poet's identity cannot be based only on his private and personal upbringing, on the landscape, his consciousness, and his response to the tradition and culture with which he identifies himself identity. The strength of Mahapatra's poetry comes from his living intimately with his native place. Srinivas Iyenger rightly observes: "No true poet can escape tradition, for all our yesterday's involved in the poet's deeper are consciousness, and no true poet can escape the pressure of the present, for he is in it and of it, and the best he can do is to relate the immediate present to the living past" (Iyenger 641-42). The secret of Mahapatra's success lies in not disowning his Indian inheritance and not falling prey to what has been called a feeling of alienation; he presents his depth of feelings rooted in Indian culture and his ethos. Being born in Odisha, he was firmly rooted in Odisha soil. He was an Odia to the core and his poetry will keep him and his word shining ever.

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