

## Odisha Landscape, History, Myths & Socio-Cultural Reality in Jayanta Mahapatra's Poetry.

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**Abstract:** Place exerts a profound influence on literature. The beautiful landscape of Odisha impresses Jayanta Mahapatra a lot so he depicts an overall picture of his native state including its glorious history, fertile culture, myth, legend and scenic landscape in his poetry. The native land and its socio-cultural analysis have globalized Odisha through the poetry of Mahapatra.

**Keywords:** Jayanta Mahapatra, Myths & Socio Cultural Relity

Jayanta Mahapatra is now universally acclaimed as one of the greatest and the most gifted Indian English poets who has not only contributed significantly to the development of Indian English poetry, but also along with Nissim Ezekiel, A.K. Ramanujan and Kamala Das, given the Indian English poetry a local habitation and a name- a name that has now earned global recognition. He strikingly widens the scope of Indian English Poetry by composing well-knit, compact and precise poems on a wide variety of themes and his poetry is remarkable for depth of feelings, true poetic imagination, complex artistic vision, suggestive and evocative symbols and images, aesthetic structure, perfect craftsmanship and linguistic versatility.

As a poet he is intensely aware of his environment and with sharp sensitivity and striking details he has vividly depicted, in his poems, the landscape, history, myths, culture, social life, poverty, religious rites and rituals, superstitions and beliefs prevalent in the local life of Odisha. Odisha Landscape has the same dominant place in the poetry as Waverly has in the novels of Scott, the Lake District in the poetry of Wordsworth, Wessex in Hardy's novels and Malgudi in the famous novels and stories of R.K. Narayan. The poet himself once said "These poems are just attempts of mine to hold a handful of earth to my face and let it speak..... perhaps this signifies a return to my roots so that they reveal who I am." K.N. Daruwalla, another celebrated Indian English poet and critic writes about the characteristics of Mahapatra's Poetry – "Tradition, a myth consciousness and the Odisha landscape play a large part in his poetry. There is an abundance of local details in his poems – shrines, temples, women prostrating themselves to the day's last sun, home bound cattle and rickshaw pullers abound..... The local touches form an essential

part of a wider and more complex poetic fabric". The poems like Dawn at Puri, Bazar 5 P.M., Odisha, Taste for Tomorrow, The Crows, Odisha Landscape, Thoughts of the Future, Slum, Evening Landscape, Evening in an Odisha Village, Dawn, Temple Street Puri, A Rain, An Abandoned British Cemetery in Balasore and Relationship – all hold testimony to that.

Critic V.A. Shahane writes "the main focus of his poetic creativity seems to be centered on the naked earth and the mythological, symbolic or aesthetic structures firmly rooted in the naked earth of which Odisha and India form a significant part." On receiving central Sahitya Akademy Award for his magnum opus "Relationship" in 1981 the poet himself remarked "To Odisha, to this land in which my roots lie and lies my past and in which lies my beginning and my end, where the wind weeps over the grief of 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".

Hence the purpose of this critical essay is to examine and enunciate the poet's rootedness in the naked soils of Odisha and its history, myths and culture.

Mahapatra's poetry is an exploration of the Indian sensibility and ethos, especially the Odisha landscape, religious and psyche. He vividly portrays the variegated Odisha landscape and the physical landscape represents the deeper levels of Indian consciousness and psyche which have been shaped by age old cultural and religious forces coming down to the present from the hoary past. The real landscape becomes symbolic, a suggestive image in his poetry. Quite a number

of poems in his Third and Fourth collections of poetry *A Rain of Rites* (1974) and *Waiting* (1979) such as *Dawn, Dawn at Puri, Village, A Rain, Taste for Tomorrow, Slum, Evening Landscape by The River, Events, Odisha Landscape, Evening in an Odisha Village* etc. portray the Odisha Landscape. *Dawn at Puri* is a vivid and realistic description of the Temple town of Puri with its endless crow noises, a skull lying on the holy sands, white clad widowed women waiting to enter the great Temple. *Taste for Tomorrow* is also a vivid pictorial account of Puri with its crows, lepers, rituals and pilgrims thronging the temple door.

The one wide street  
 Lolls out like a giant tongue  
 Five faceless lepers move aside  
 As a priest passed by  
 And at the street's end  
 The crowds thronging the temple door  
 A huge holy flower  
 Swaying in the wind of great reason.

Odisha Landscape is a picturesque record of the variegated landscape of Odisha with all its filth and squalor—"sour smell of faces, crushed grasses and wet earth" a temple with nervous phantom, lines of devout pilgrims, the sickly and polluted atmosphere consisting of filarial water, amoebic dysentery, bodies ribbed and packed with hunger. The Odisha poems and *Evening in An Odisha Village, The Crows, Thought of the Future* and many other poems are noteworthy for unfolding the various aspects of Odisha before the reader. The Odisha landscape history, culture, social life, poverty, rites and rituals constitute the most important theme of Mahapatra's poetry and of his poetry is pictorial recordation of the multitudinous aspects of religious life in Odisha.

'Odisha Landscapes' picturesquely depicts vivid vignettes of Odisha landscape and life. The muggy brief from the river blows with the sour smell of faeces, crashed grass and wet earth. A temple stands on the left bank of the river. The rampant pollution in the atmosphere reflects the inner malaise of people lives in the temple town of Puri. God worshipped in the Puri Temple, is malevolent or at least indifferent and takes no pity on the hungry staring masses. The hard sky stares everywhere like a god. The poet communicates the degeneration of religious spiritual and moral values through highly suggestive symbols and images.

Cobras of a frozen, merciless faith  
 Slither into sluggish eyes lured into the cold shrines  
 of skulls  
 A rustling in prayer veined woods.

There is ceaseless and on ending continuity in the flow of life since times immemorial which no doubt suffers from devaluation of values and cherished idealism at present, but the poet cherishes the hope of a better and happier future. His mother "with her varicosed fingers" and made weak and feeble by the modest thought of debt, holds out the hope of a brighter and happier life. In thought of Future Mahapatra caricatures a soothsayer, named Jagannath Mishra who predicts about Future in Puri. Puri and Konark temple partly in ruins, dominate Mahapatra's poetry.

'Bazar 5 p.m.' is one of the finest poems of Mahapatra exhibiting his undiluted Odia sensibility at its best. The spectacle of "scared common faces at the centre of rapped prayers, a prostrating old woman, the kneeling people, the setting sun, the exhausted rickshaw puller as the hot ridge of the road, the ambling afternoon suddenly suffering the foot falls of home bound cattle and finally the bazaar an orange ruin of limp echoes expresses the poet's Odia sensibility. 'Konark' relates a legend about the Sun Temple of Konark. The crowning slab of this 13<sup>th</sup> century temple would be fitted properly in the place by the 12 year old son of the chief architect, subsequent to the futile attempts made by 12 hundred artisans. Soon after the boy jumped to death from the finished temple to save honour of his father.

Konark, black in sleep  
 Cold become of my silent land  
 Messenger of death  
 Here a little boy in a dream  
 Waved so the man once  
 And death hung its peace  
 And indifferent time of stone  
 Marks the burnt out funeral pyre  
 And the sun rise  
 That journeys again and again  
 To call this grief of man  
 It's own.

Mahapatra's masterpiece 'Relationship' (1981) explores his unbreakable relationship with the religion, culture, rituals, traditions and myths of Odisha and above all with the primordial shaping influences that Konark has exercised on him. The poet vividly conjures up the gruesome past when in 261 B.C. Emperor Ashok invaded Kalinga and butchered countless of people of Odisha in Dhauli, near the river Daya. King Ashok saw the river turned red with the blood of the vanquished underwent "sea change" and carved his "peaceful edicts" on the rock face of posterity. But no contribution and repentance could absolve him of the guilt of genocide. The gory reality of the

historical past disturbs the poet when he thinks how his ancestors were mindlessly massacred:

What can ever wash the air of its gashed voices?

It is hard to till now

What opened the anxious skies how the age old proud stones

Lost their strength and fell

And how the waters of Daya

Stunk with the bodies of my ancestors;

My eyes close now

Because of the fear that moves my skin,

The invaders walk along the only road they know

That leads to their bloody victories

Again the poet calls the poem 'Relationship' as the theme song of his life. He writes :

I know I can never come alive.

If I refuse to consecrate at the altar of my origins

Where the hollow horn blows every morning

And its sub urban sound picks its way

Through the tangled moonlight of your lazy slip

The poet once said of himself that he is an Odia poet who incidentally writes in English and his poems may be read as translation from Odia. Thus Jayanta Mohapatra the great Indian English poet from Odisha which has a very rich tradition of poetry not only takes his themes but also his symbols, images and metaphors from the Odisha landscape, history, myth, culture and socio-economic reality.

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