

Post-colonial traits in Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry

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Abstract

Jayanta Mahapatra, a physicist turned poet who is Oriyan at the core of his heart but his choice to write in English can be viewed by an uninformed reader as an output and gesture of a colonized mind for which the English Language has still been the language of the powerful. But, he has incorporated in his poetry all the postcolonial characteristics, such as, piercing quest for his own existence and identity; a strong deviation from the British poetic approach, and anxiety for Indian culture, heritage; the forging of Indian identity with images and their transfiguration into language; a recognition to facts, details, history, emotions and sensibilities that were long suppressed by force; creating an innovative idiom for poetic expression, etc. The paper justifies Mahapatra's journey as a postcolonial Indian English poet who surprisingly subverts the erstwhile colonizer with his multiplicity of Indian themes.

Keywords: colonialism, post colonialism, imperialism, idiom, myth making capability, identity etc.

Introduction

Jayanta Mahapatra (1928) has most significantly and meaningfully contributed to the making of a perfect idiom in the Indian English poetry by constantly revising his poems in order to establish a postcolonial approach in his poetry. What compels his readers to witness this element is not just his simplicity of the expression or the idiom, but his microcosm which is certainly evocative as his poetry consists of his provincial country, its history, landscape and milieu. In his poetry, one can conveniently find Oriyan cultural heritage, beliefs, folktales, myths, and rituals with his own attitude, clearly reflecting the Indian ethos, and representing the macrocosm. The evolution of this thought in his poetry is a result of his own observations during the life spent and the present. A well-known aspect of post colonialism is the establishment of one's own independent identity, consciousness and space in the literary world, and so does Mahapatra in his 'A Whiteness of Bone (1992)', 'The Poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra' (1995) and 'Shadow Space (1997)'. B K Das has very precisely described the term 'post-colonialism' in his article "A Critique of Post-Colonial Theory" "Semantically post-colonialism means something that has a concern only with the national culture after the departure of imperial power. But, in actual practice, it has to be understood only in reference to colonialism. Like colonialism, post colonialism is a state of consciousness, a critical stage in the continuum of our cultural process and self-awareness. Colonialism involves two types of imperialism – political and cultural. Therefore, myth and history, language and landscape, the self and 'the other' are all very important ingredient of post-colonialism." In the light of the above-mentioned sentence, Jayanta Mahapatra's concern for landscape, self and the other, his treatment of the myth and the existing political conditions of India, which he shows in his poetry, comes in the periphery of post-colonialism, for he treats these matters in an altered way.

T. Vijay Kumar argues that the term 'post-colonialism' foregrounds some aspects of the term, and this analysis can help us take the use of the topics and their treatment by Mahapatra in a postcolonial way. First, "When we refer to a literature as 'postcolonial', we do not only over-emphasize its continuing

concern with the colonial experience, but also hinder its integration into the tapestry of literatures written in the 'local' languages. I am obviously thinking here of Indian literature in English and its relationship with the literatures in other Indian languages. Surprisingly, but perhaps expectedly only Indian literature in English is referred to as 'post-colonial' literature, as if only those who write in English have been subject to the colonial experience." T. Vijay Kumar's this first aspect puts Mahapatra's poetry in postcolonial category for he writes from Oriya background of culture and geography. Mahapatra's uniquely coloured feeling of India in his English is a result of his grounding himself in Oriya background. Further, it facilitates both the erasure of the specificity, multiplicity, and unfamiliarity of post-colonial situations, and their differences under the unitary and familiar sign of colonialism. The centering of colonialism empowers 'post-colonial' critics, at least those who see the colonial experience everywhere as the same, to draw up universal models for post-colonial societies. In *Empire Writes Back* Ashcraft et. al., presents the American example as 'paradigmatic for postcolonial literatures everywhere.' The post-colonial poet is found in the making of an image of the "native land" and "the native idiom" - the two characteristics which are common to all post-colonial poets.

The theme of landscape and national identity makes a rewarding study when applied to Indian English poets. Indian landscape has always inspired the Indian English poets to create newer and more fascinating images of 'India' that have not been created before. Mahapatra's almost all poems have the elements of the Indian landscape which create the spirit of being an Indian. He incorporates the heat and dust, the sun and the flood, the crowd, the senses of poverty and deprivation into the texture of his moods, for example, his poems on Konarka Temple and his poems on Orissa landscape.

Nissim Ezekiel's poetry emanates from life. India's poverty, the rituals observed on the country and her people in all walks of life attract the attention of the poet. In the same vein, Jayanta Mahapatra's various themes in terms of the elements of the landscapes have the weight of the poetic reconciliation of the spirit and the country, a sub-conscious empathy with the

topographical and human aspects of the Oriyan landscape, Mahapatra, a child of the sun and the sea, delights in invoking the god of fire and the god of water in the poems like 'Sun burse', 'The Exile' 'Indian Summer', 'This Stranger, My Daughter' and 'The Beggar Takes it as Solace.' Puri is a living character in several of these poems. The history and the myths of his land coupled with the vision of Mahapatra present an integrated experience. The Oriyan landscape comes fully alive in his poetry, particularly in 'Relationship'. Not only Puri and Konarka but Chilika Chandipur and a few other religious and historical places occupy the still center of his poetry. Besides references to Orissa, where he comes from, he also includes other parts of the country in his poetry, but in the relation to the question of the identity, as it is articulated with reference to land, a sense of belongingness is established if the poet is able to connect with the place and the community. According to B. K. Das, this is also an important means of establishing the identity of a poet. He says, "a poet's response to the landscape of his country, his sense of the tradition and the culture of the land of his birth and many other factors go together to make him assume an identity of his own."

Mahapatra's post-colonialism is a very subtle kind of post colonialism. B. K. Das is of the opinion that "Mahapatra writes to establish opposition nationalism as a kind of resistance to the former colonizers." Das quotes P. P. Ravindram in this context, "Mahapatra's struggle with the colonial self seems to be an on-going process, and it might be difficult to identify a neat point of rapture between this self and the decolonized self. So that the elements connected with the two selves co-exist in his poetry right from the early verse down to the most recent. However, as one moves from *Close the Sky, Ten by Ten* to *A Whiteness of Bone*, one cannot fail to notice a progressive recognition by the poet of the strong need for the former self to yield place to the latter. The native culture has to assert itself in Indian English poetry too."

Mahapatra places his poetry at the very juncture of post colonialism and this quotation clearly brings out the fact that in asserting the native culture Mahapatra has created a lot many new myths. He has an insistence in his poetry in questioning stereotypes likes the oppressor/oppressed. It may be the reflection of inadequacies of anti-colonial and socio-historical pressure crested by awareness about the new imperialistic strategies operating in the political, economic and cultural sides. These sides are discernible as a process of interrogating social obligations as anti-colonial resistance. As a consequence, poetry is seen as a seminal or instrumental exercise, shifting from Commonwealth to post-colonialism. Mahapatra has shown this in his Oriya poetry also and which is a literary exercise to erase the inferiority instilled into the native minds of values caused by the psychological damage to the colonized people.

Irrespective of scientific achievements, globalization and its influences, Mahapatra succeeds to capture the identity of his own, his nation's and his birth place's and creates a niche for his position among notable postcolonial poets. According to Nissim Ezekiel, "A writer needs a national or cultural identity, without that you become a series of imitations, echoes, responses, but you do not develop because there is nothing at the core to develop." (Ezekiel, 89).

Mahapatra's poetry is decolonized by poetic craftsmanship, his capability to describe native landscape in native language. Like other post colonialists, he tries his best to revive his own local identity and nation's identity damaged during colonization.

Elleke Boehmer says, "Indian, African and Caribbean nationalist writers focused on reconstructing from the position of their historical, racial or metaphysical difference a cultural identity which has been damaged by the colonial experience. The need was for roots, origins, founding myths and ancestors, national fore-mothers and fathers: in short, for restorative history." (Boehmer).

In his 'Rain of Rites', Mahapatra he tries to merge in his native place's identity:

*"A man does not mean anything
but the place
sitting on the riverbank throwing pebbles
into the muddy current
a man becomes the place."* (Rain of Rites)

Striving hard to retain the identity, like other Victorian poets, he chooses his poetry as a medium of expression and a medium of sustenance. In his 'The Stories in Poetry', he shows us:

*"The world plots on
and poetry stumbles and falls
everything is called sacred
in my land. Even poems. And children
who are sold and bought everyday
in the streets of Bombay and Calcutta
through words
I try to recover my balance
Not let life get too far ahead of me."* (The Stories in Poetry)

While searching for his own roots, he undergoes the present, the historical and the mythical structure through the description of different temples, landscapes and myth. He enjoys the present, but feels haunted by the past also. He pays tribute to the martyrdom of the tradition of Orissa. In 'Shadow Space, poem 11', he says:

*"To live here
antlered in sickness and disease
in the past of incomprehended totems
and in the split blood of ancestors
one would wear like an amulet."* (Shadow Space. Poem 11)

In his 'A Summer Poem', he describes Puri very beautifully:
*"Over the sougning of the somber wind
Priests chant louder than ever
The mouth of India opens."* (A Summer Poem)

He is again haunted by past, be it sad colonial or historical and cultural. Going down the memory lane, he feels solace, calmness, happiness, bliss and peace. In this way, he is thoughtful of his parents and grandfather. Again, being fearful of the present, he wishes to escape even the present. In his 'A Whiteness of Bone', one can easily find his search for Oriya family, his dying father's memory:

*"My father, teetotaler, vegetarian
took two baths a day,
one at dawn, the other
before his evening obeisance
to Lord Shiva at temple."* (A Whiteness of Bone)

Poems like 'Dawn at Puri', 'The Exile' depict the Oriyan landscapes, rituals and temples, and Indian sculpture:

"Thirty-nine graves, there legends floating in the twilight of baleful littoral the flaking history my intrusion does not intimate..."

(The Abandoned British Cemetary of Balasor)

*"You say you are a poet;
you sit next to me
and talk to me from a distant country
yet your own past is too large
for you to talk sensibly about it."*

(Shadow Space)

In his 'March', he is anxious for pain, suffering and agony to be faced by the coming generations and feels disturbed by visualizing the naked, clear and harsh realities and pictures of life.

*"Men here build cities,
cities work their way
into a maze of stories
from where man's mind
fails to see ahead.
The lessons are the same
a story of the future
is not much different
from this game of the past
when Nero heard himself laughing."*

(The Poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra, 73)

The present unpleasant and uncertain social scenario, similar to colonial past, poverty, hunger and violence makes him even more grieved, and he lets out:

*"This ground is jagged with the defeat
of races, of morphines of memories;
huge shadows and dark waters of a life time
now comes after us, climbing our way."*

(The Absent of Knowledge)

In his 'Freedom', he says:

*"Here, old widows and dying men
Cherished their freedom
bowing time after time in obstinate prayers."*

(Freedom)

He is pained to observe injustice, violence, corruption, discrimination and indifference even in this postcolonial era. 'The Stories in Poetry', simply describes the hunger stricken people of Somalia:

"It's the world again

*that must not take one unawares a world where hundreds die
of hunger in Somalia and elsewhere
where poetry is no mystery
even the most tender embrace says
there is no heroism for us to live on."*

(The Stories in Poetry)

As a postcolonial poet, he always wants to modify his affected colonial past and culture. But he says that darkness prevails everywhere and knowledge is very hard to combine as the present society and culture is full of dark gloomy atmosphere.

Once in 'Darkness', he expresses this thought as here he makes a comparison between colonial past and postcolonial present scenario as the harsh past always haunt the present:

*"From a window, here and a door there
darkness lifted its head and looked
who would show it the way?
It slipped past reason and knocked on the Minister's heart
from the light of hostile history
Then came and stood out there
in a middle-class neighbourhood, stark naked."*

(Darkness)

Mahapatra's capability of creating a myth well establishes him as a postcolonial poet. He creates a myth about Gandhi, an undeniable messenger of non-violence, truth, indomitable spirit, honesty and peace.

In his 'Excerpts for Requiem', he glorifies Gandhi:

*"You became the red earth
that a perfect, constant gravity
achieved through the aeons."*

(Excerpts for Requiem)

*"In me
Your body opens slowly*

*As if you have been bound tight all your life,
As if flesh could see
What the mind believes is true."*

(Requiem)

The myth of Putana, a devilish character, who tried to poison Lord Krishna by transforming herself into a beautiful woman, gets well expressed in the character of Chelammal. This myth is a symbol of the multi 'faces', a person has in postmodern world.

*"And now the ogress,
transformed into a lovely woman,
her poisoned nipples
the moksha-centre of her own martyrdom
awakens the woman of the mind
seeking the light in hidden knolls
where the red hearts of rocks
stop beating
when the year's hysterical winds pass by."*

(Temple)

Mahapatra succeeds in decolonizing the culture, tradition, society and Indian English poetry in this postcolonial era. Colonial literature substantiates the colonizer and postcolonial rejects imperialism, creating indigenous culture and tradition. A perfect blend of native past, culture and present can be well witnessed in Mahapatra's poetry. P.P. Raveendran puts it all, "Alone of all Indian poets writing in English, with the possible exception of A.K. Ramanujan, it is in Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry that this decolonizing act takes on a quality and especially comparable to the best verse written in Indian regional languages." He creates a new Indian English idiom, a new independent identity and reflects the present society in an innovative approach with indicative text. All these postcolonial traits, such as, multiplicity of themes, motives, symbols, a new idiom and outlook justify his position as a leading post-colonial Indian English poet.

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