

# Indian Sensibility and Indigenization: The Poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra

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**Abstract-** *The poetic oeuvre of Jayanta Mahapatra has been highly acclaimed in Indian English poetry for its Indian sensibility and indigenous explorations of Oriya regions. The ebb and flow of his poetic journey is interwoven with his intense desire to give an outlet to his unexpressed expressions and to portray his land with a local color. However, writing came to him quite late but freely but which opened the 'door' to the vastness, unknown, and unexplored. Poetry came to him as freely as his spur-of-the-moment imaginative impulse. Leaving the mortal world last year, he has left a legacy of poetry in Indian English and Oriya poetry. Remembering his contribution, this paper makes a critique of his poetry in a response to his portrayal of Oriya land diving it into deep Indian sensibility. Freedom from existing forms and subjects of poetry colors his imaginative and creative impulse with an idiosyncratic impulse which is peculiar to his writing. Digging deeper into the vastness of Orissa, the paper explores how indigenous color and localization have been embodied in his poetic sensibility.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

...poetry is a deep, inner calling in man. From it came liturgy, the Vedas and Psalms, and the content of religions. Today's social poet is still a member of the earliest order of priest. In the old days he made his pact with the darkness, today he must speak and interpret the light. (Jayanta, 2011, 229-30)

In a profound silence while reading *Walden*, his identity as physics teacher resisted to exist and Jayanta decided to start his writing career to startle himself quite late in his life. However, his observation of writing poetry as a creative art is quite groundbreaking despite having no knowledge of rudiments of writing

poetry. His efforts were directed towards something else called 'modernity'. He did not have the ideas and subjects to write at that age, he confesses, however, he had a great fascination towards language that he nurtured and polished throughout the years. "I loved the words," he (1993) said, "and moved with the twists and turns of the sounds, rejoicing the profound shades of meaning that seemed to come from somewhere beyond the words themselves" (142). Aesthetic judgment, in his opinion, is based on social and economic factors and has got less to do with arts or aesthetics. His rejected poetry (for going against the established rules and due to use of free form) was demanding change as deviation and a sort of pragmatic deviation. His poetry calls attention to the subject of freedom than of shaping the idea of self. The most prominent feature of his poetry is that they do not fit under any idea – neither modernity nor post-modernity. At one place, his poems are symbolic and replete with imagery, yet they are embodied with the idea of self at their centre which shapes them into modernity making them obscure. Sometimes his poetry revolves around contemporary issues like caste, gender, sexuality, self, or globalization. "Undoubtedly," Jayanta (1993) opines, "in the background was the discipline of science and investigation; yet, there always persisted the idea of the self, which served as main reference point in the poetry" (144).

## II. INDIGENIZATION INTERWOVEN WITH MYSTERY AND ORIYA HISTORY

There is an opening in one's heart, in Jayanta's opinion (1992), which directs to another world where the self is filled with vastness and light; however, one is incapable of finding it until that opening is lifted by invisible gleam of light into a realm of freedom. This idea is locked with his poem, when he says,

Out of the dark it whirls back  
into a darkly mysterious house.

Is it the earth within?  
Does it keep us waking, give brief respite?  
(‘Dawn’ in *A Rain of Rites*, p. 3)

The mystery of life and unexplored darkness – “a sense of the unknown, of things unexplainable, even in those areas which appear so familiar in our lives” (Jayanta, 1994) – springs from his early collection of poetry, *A Rain of Rites* (1976). Mystery has often fascinated him. “Mystery,” he (1994) says, “is like the rain, falling like false jewels in the sky, which catch the light as they fall, maybe like the trail of a rainbow; and perhaps it is these bits of a rainbow which a poem should catch to be able to move the reader and instill in his or her mind an alien “stirring” of some kind” (p. 283).

Unraveling the dark mysterious life in past and present, he sometimes takes a leap into his past life experiences. The poetic past of Jayanta gives him ample ‘simple pleasures’ which gives a new meaning to his days. He (1992) says, “I have come to realize that this simple pleasure which could make me feel strange and sad and light at the same time was something I can call freedom. And in this freedom rested the beginnings of faith, of an explicable lightness...” (p. 40). His poetry is packed with the fragrance and lightness of this freedom which often finds its expression either in turning to his ‘poetic past’ or the engrossed self. His poem ‘Old Palaces’ construes this freedom,

Trying to go back  
fulfils fantasy, patterns of childhood, the  
clear bondage.  
Yet perhaps the soul, dispiriting enemy  
inside my own age, tribe, and tongue,  
gives proof enough against this annihilation.  
(‘Old Palace’ *A Rain of Rites*, p. 4)

The poet seeks lost memories of his childhood that has nothing solace or soothing to serve. However, the childhood takes back to the world of childhood imagination living in one’s own ‘fantasy’. The poet does not escape from the present ‘annihilation’ that comes out of his growing age and unenergetic world.

His ‘dispirited’ soul testifies his tawdriness of the present world propels him to get drown in the world of ‘fantasy’ back into his childhood. His poetic past suggests his freedom to travel the once travelled world. Thinking of freedom, he (1992) asks whether freedom is “the path through unknown places of the heart, a path that is both unreal and of a transcendent nature and yet is something that foresees the event of death” (p. 40). He reevaluates the past in order to explore present mystery of life; it allows people to contemplate over the darkest mystery of life. Expressing oneself itself is a form of freedom and poetry is the best example of it. However, in his most recent poem, ‘Freedom’ he remonstrates silence and how the body feels ‘free’ when it is alone.

And each day I keep looking for the light  
shadows find excuses to keep.

Trying to find the only freedom I know  
the freedom of the body when it’s alone.

The freedom of the silent shale, the moonless  
coal,  
the beds of the stream of the sleeping God.

I keep the ashes away,  
try not to wear them on my forehead.  
(‘Freedom’)

The poet has locked this poem with mystery and freedom altogether. In the world of darkness, the poet tries to find out light because he believes that each individual there is an open door (Jayanta, 1992) which is revealed only through imagination. Poetry opens this door to articulate the darkness and to experience the light. This is interesting to note that here the poet implies inner freedom which lies at the core of individuals. Jiddu Krishnamurti’s (1998) reflection on freedom connects the call for freedom from the cessation of inward obstruction.

Freedom implies the complete cessation of all inward authority. From that quality of mind comes an outward freedom – something which is entirely different from the reaction of opposing or resisting. (p. 124)

Krishnamurti calls attention to the freedom of mind from inward authority which brings an outward

freedom. For Jayanta, this freedom of mind bringing outward authority is expressed in the form of writing poetry. He (1992) says,

...self-expression becomes one of the most important human activities, turning the poem which the poet makes into an unavoidable symbol of liberation and confinement....the freedom in the poem becomes a very real one, making us human and benign, and never a myth as is sometimes thought of. (p. 41)

Jayanta reiterates the outward freedom of people that comes after opening the inner door of one's imaginative impulse. It directly guides towards the light through words with poetic sensibility. He prioritizes sleep and dream with the belief that it gives freedom of mind which moves ceaselessly in its own mood; only in pure sleep can one free oneself from the prejudiced eyes" (Swain, 84). In his poem 'Listening', the similar idea about dream is carried forward.

Every man, every beast  
trapped, deaf in his own sleep.  
Only the wind you hear, that scallops  
the silence of a whole birth, speaking  
  
from the skies where nothing moves:  
the horizon black, the motionless; the old  
hills  
which define memory, stars of myth whose  
surfaces  
sling silences. And yet what weaves into  
sleep is not false.

Writing in English and Oriya is his contemplation over creativity in both languages – global and local which makes his position in Indian literature towards glocal. In English language, his poetry expresses both global and local issues. In global, his poetry reflects on mystery, self, and the past while gender, sexuality, and caste make it local. The idea of 'Indianness' is highly debatable term; however, the idea is used to indigenise Indian literature and culture under an umbrella term. He is well known as an Indian English poet but he also owes an eminent place in modern Oriya poetry. In the words of John Oliver Perry (1991),

...though he has recently branched out from merely translating Oriya to composing in his

native tongue, Jayanta Mahapatra has remained an Indian English poet but seems to have accepted the challenge of giving much of his poetry a distinct Orissan location...while some poems have a special national—and even political—appeal and still others are quite cosmopolitan. (p. 219)

His poems on Oriya people, festivities, and location have earned him a distinguished place in modern Oriya poetry. However, in his opinion, contemporary Oriya poetry has overemphasized the use of 'myth'; he (2001) says, "The poetry [of seventies] has been one of 'escape' evolving around the same old myths poets were taking about a hundred years ago" (p. 31). His own poetry on Orissa is deviated from the use of this myth and escape. His poem 'Main Temple Street, Puri' begins with children walking around the streets.

Children, brown as earth, continue to laugh  
at cripples and mating mongrels.  
Nobody ever bothers about them.

The temple points to unending rhythm.

On the dusty street the colour of shorn scalp  
there are things moving all the time  
and yet nothing seems to go away from sight.

Injuries drowsy with the heat. (in A  
*Rain of Rites*, p. 16)

Puri is one of the holiest cities in Indian pilgrimage and it is known for its ancient temple Jagannath, one of the four dhams of Indian pilgrimage. Religious beliefs and customs are often embedded to the place and the mythical significance is always emphasized. However, Jayanta does not glorify the place Puri for its religious purposes rather he simplifies children wandering over the land. The temple continues to grow in its own mood while the adventures on street continue with common people there. Another example is his poem, 'Dawn at Puri' which does not spiritualize the land but localizes it with crude social realities of common life.

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

White-clad widowed women

past the centres 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. ('Dawn at Puri', *A Rain of Rites*, p. 28)

The early morning of Puri does not bring hope for people but it unravels the poverty and starvation of children and widows who live on the bottom line of the land. Commenting on writings in Indian English, he claims that writers in Indian English do write for Indian readers and continues saying (1994) "but one cannot overrule the fact that the poet also had a western audience in mind. So, a kind of Indianness was seen in Indian English poems, an Indianness which arises from emotions, habits, and attitudes" (p. 287). According to Sumanya Satpathy (2001), in post-independence Indian English poetry matured in the "post-allusion period of post-Nehru era" (p. 32) and the influence of Latin American, African and Eastern European poets became eminent and it is found in Jayanta's poetry and translations as well. In Oriya, he did write a poem on himself, where he says,

Oh! Jayanta Mahapatra?  
That Man?  
Oh he lives in dreams  
and will die in his dreams one day.  
How long can he hold on the vast sky all  
alone.

That's right.  
Jayanta Mahapatra never did anything  
worthwhile.

He had a heart of course  
And whatever little space was in there  
He kept it solely to bury his friends and lovers  
In the earnest hope  
That he would finally find himself.

('A Tale, To Begin With', trans. by  
Gopa Ranjan Mishra, p. 29)

#### CONCLUSION

Jayanta's poetry whether written in seventies or eighties or even later periods reveal poetic sensibility of the new poet, the deep darkness of lone heart, and the mysterious life. The exploration of Puri region and

the daily humdrum of life near the shore localizes his poetry to reach and represent the Oriya region. His poetry has left a legacy to be sustained in Indian English and Oriya Poetry. Freedom of his poetry has made them structured in free form; mystery and darkness enwrapped his poetry from the beginning to the end. What makes his poetry more indigenous and Indian is his ability record social realities of the most religious places of Orissa. Despite obscurity of his symbolic and suggestive poetry, the originality lies in his idiosyncratic ability of portraying the most contemporary panorama of Indian landscape.

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