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## Jayanta Mahapatra : A Silent Valediction

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### ABSTRACT

Sahitya Academy award winner Jayanta Mahapatra - a luminary of Indian English Poetry was born on October 22, 1928 in cuttack-Odisha and died there on August 28, 2023. He belonged to a lower-middle class Indian family and after having gained Master's degree in Physics began teaching in different Government colleges in and across Odisha from 1949 to 1986. Meanwhile he authored 27 books of poems of which 7 are in Odia and the rest in English. Best known for "Hunger" and "Indian Summer" Jayanta Mahapatra's "A Rain Of Rites" has an unusual enthrall and merit that I have attempted to interpret/unravel briefly in my own culturally creative mode in this article besides commemorating his death. It is a book having imagery and symbolism as its main thematic concern. The image of rain is used by the poet to symbolize fertility, creative impulse and destructive power-potency. The rain as metaphor at various places never falls rather gets converted into light and then fails to accomplish its objective. Moreover, the whole series of poems suggest a process of purification by means of -strange stillness, quietude, solitude, mud-built houses, rivers, hills, trees and a vast stretch of landscapes. The soul of the poet is torn between good and evil, fair and foul and the ultimate judgement for deliverance, Mukti or salvation. As a whole *Rain Of Rites* is an exacting lyric of troubled soul and undefined unhappiness that has left a good legacy: a gift.

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Jayanta Mahapatra—a doyen of Odia and IEP while penning/ scribbling poetry in his death-bed slipped away peacefully to heavenly abode on Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> August 2023, at the age of 95 from his earthly abode of Tinconia Bagicha, admitted as he was, for treatment of asthma/pneumonia at S C B Medical College : Cuttack. The painful news came from his homeland-- Odisha : a land of crowded people, more or less corroded by monsoon rains in which loll his roots, dreams, memories, tradition, culture, history, mythology, architecture and ecology sprawling from the deity of Jagannath at Puri to the Sun temple at Konark and from the waters of Mahanadi, Chandrabhaga to escalating seashores that's what left his peers and cohorts speechless and aghast at least in a two minute silence. He was a person who silently revolutionized IEP. He was born on 22<sup>nd</sup> October 1928 at Cuttack in an ordinary middle class Odia Hindu/Christian family. His grandfather Chintamani Mahapatra enforced by famine, drought and consequent poverty consented conversion to Christianity while his parents Lemuel and Sudhansa Mahapatra's callous behaviour constrained him to lead a tough childhood. Anyhow Jayanta grew up to have his Master's degree in Physics and began his teaching career in 1949 till his retirement in 1986. He began his writing career in early sixties -- initially rejected by several publishers till his invitation to participate in International writing programme at Iowa (USA) which gave him global exposure and coverage. By and by, Jayanta Mahapatra became major part of the trio that laid the foundation of IEP almost in equal proportion with A. K. Ramanujam and R. Parthasarathy. Soon, as an Indian English Poet Mahapatra not only carved a rare niche in India but also grew to be a best known poet in the West. Composing English poetry in India then was not an easy task neither was it a comfortable proposition. Accordingly living in Indian ethos and ethnicities at that time seemed to have had a different linguistic terrain. The poet genially well-in-time doled

out this dilemma by negotiating the tug of war between Daffodils and Rajnigandha, between Canterbury Church and Puri Temple and thus gave to his poetry a global habitation and a name that won for him national and international recognition, such as—first Sahitya Academy award for English Poetry in 1981 . Padma Shri in 2009 which he returned in 2015 to protest against rising intolerance in India, Jacob Glatstein Memorial Award—Poetry : Chicago in 1975 , Allen Tate Poetry Prize for 2009 from The Sewanee Review. In 2009, he received the SAARC Literary award at New Delhi. Besides, a lot of national and international laurels, honors and awards have titivated/enhanced his literary legacy.

I remember during 1980's, Jayanta Mahapatra in unusually luscious envelop sent for me, as a more or less known academic peer, his most engrossing book -- *A Rain Of Rites* {1}. It is published from University of Georgia Press : Athens, in verdure cover design extracted from Mrs. Albert Christ Janer's lithograph -- Seaform-69 and like strings of a garland weaves 49 beads all of unequal design different in theme and construct hidden under subtle strand of Mahapatra's supple, enjambed tranquility called--Subjectivity. These pieces of poems exude radiance and talk with candour about his career and life reverberating time against backdrop of the eternal—the present against the past, reality against dream and mundane against the metaphysical followed deftly by the flow of consciousness. The foremost poem in slight ascerbic diction evokes the past to enliven the present—"a silence recalls companions lost"(1). The sentimental love with the land of birth, emotional bond between natives and the land they survive in, familiar landscapes all give resemblance to the aura of regional poetry—"The Peepul-tree silence on the bleak burning ground?/ beside the low mud walls of the hut"(2). What is rooted in the soil is not substantially slime/grime but flawlessly sublime—"The Vermillion smeared whored stone"(3). The poem "Old Palaces"(4) consist six stanzas—first four stanzas are arranged in quincunxes and remaining two are composed in six lines each. The theme of the poem intones both the humble and the lofty—"The distance opens and closes the palm of my hands"(4). There is ample of scope in the poem for ascertaining brevity of wit and philosophical/mystical musings. The liberated soul/Jeevan Mukta is a bird to carry away to the blue unknown the quintessence of truth freed from the commonplace evils, ugliness and treacheries of life. In subtle concoction of fear and want the poet conspicuously cognizes the rising sense of insecurity, inner-woes/angst—"In the darkened room /a woman/cannot find her reflection in the mirror"(7). Samsara (8) is a wonderful poem giving hints to familiar notion in Hinduism of worshipping the dead or the manes in ritualistic manner every year for the time period of a fortnight recurringly to appease the concept of Metempsychosis-- "And a man begins to begin again/In the centre of this past/and sees no end of it"(8). However, the poet cannot undermine, in spite of faith and efficacy of the tradition, the hard-realities of the mundane world—"The air smells of sick, mortal children/Stone feels warm as a pillow."(9). At another farthest end the poet sneer at the violence and social disparity—"These brick-batted roads of violence/Which go on breathing after dark/I can feel the air that wounds"(9). "Rain Of Rites"(10) being more subtle in its complex of sense and feeling has no immediate accessibility. The movement of rhythm is also as slow as the singularity of rain. The pain and anguish gasping underneath the sky -"A malignant purpose in a nun's eye"(10) is indicative of the light reflecting the shape of human conscience and hypocracies of the mortal world. However, the poet airs to share an objective eye. While-- "A Rain"(11) having four parts equally composed in couplet form sounds sense and meaning and feeling of good sense and clarity pervades. As a symbol of creative, regenerative force the rain sustaining the growth and vitality of earthly things moves ahead to create an impression of vastness and totality. Underneath the vast firmament lies a curious deal between levity and seriousness, between harmony and balance. So much so that the voice of rain ultimately succeeds in reducing the world to its basic sound-structure

called Nada Brahma.

What creates tangible concord is the rhythm, the ambiguity and the subtle journey of the soul concisely expressed to appear unobtrusively subjective. The obscurity of relationships from Grandfather to Grandson conspicuously comes to the fore in the poem—"The Exile" (12) against the backdrop of sublime landscapes, inconsequences of childhood, intensely personalising angst due to fear and guilt adeptly creates harsh-humour—"The long-haired priest of Kali/Who still packs stolen jasmines" (12). Another poem—"Summer" (14) as if in meditation exquisitely adjusts three dimensions of time. The past is re-echoed by—"Under the mango tree/the cold ash/of a deserted fire" (14). While the present vividly portrays existential reality—"A ten year old girl/combs her mother's hair/where crows of rivalries/are quietly nesting." (14). In the meantime the future beginning with—"Not yet" (14) marches forward to extend a questioning mode—"Who needs the future?" (14). The poet not only creates a weird world of spirits behind nature's ubiquitousness but also fascinatingly intones the primeval sound: the cause of creation. The swooping of hawks or the chattering of the monkeys usually break the silence while the mortal-world abuzz in activities confer on readers the awareness of socio-cultural reality. A distinct flow of consciousness shapes the creative design and thematic relevance of the poem—"Ceremony" (15). In tandem the serene landscape of poet's wakefulness deftly lug a multitude of riveting myths and symbols. The poem—"Main Temple Street, Puri" (16) echoes invariably a sensibility more or less steeped in religio-cultural composition of beliefs. Two contraries: contradictory and complimentary at the same time prefigure ironically. The first is the magnificence and pervading silence of the temple and the second the urbane squalor and the humdrum of city life—"Children brown as earth continue to laugh/at cripples and mating mongrels/nobody ever bothers about them.../The temple points to unending rhythm." (16). Comparatively long in conceptual and thematic texture—"The Whore House In A Calcutta Street" (19) poignantly expounds the fallacy of man-woman relationship in poetic precision preferring intensity to clarify and density to justify. The poet like T.S. Eliot being aware of modern man's plight, his alienation and anguish fully succeeds in re-creating a mirror for mortal things in a rare mixture of elegance and sophistication. The idea of Indian Literature as a whole combines tradition, culture, ritual, rites to represent and go back as far as to the Vedic era of Brahminism. The reality of life and death vividly yet ritualistically relates in alliterative syntax the dichotomy of existence through the poem—"Appearances" (21). Rambling in the mystery of creation the poet takes his readers into the world of mythology—"Some holy curse changed a woman to stone" (21). The total effect is gained by the kaleidoscopic rendering of the world either as a devious dream or the fading illusion. However, poet's varied interest in folklore, anthropology, structuralism and bi-culturalism appears seeping through the pores of the skin of the poem. The poem—"Myth" (22) sounds like a recurring prayer at the temple altar. Disciplined handling of English language and sharply etched crystallized images have ample scope for a separate and fullfledged study of Jayant Mahaparta's—"A Rain Of Rites". Divided into four separate stanzas—"Four Rain Poems" (23-24) talk about auspicious secret of creation in a rhythm/diction almost exalted. The rain symbol at once fuses the subtle and the gross, the old and the new to glorify/clarify the notion of primeval chaos, sustenance and deluge. This poem truly has a dynamic force that raises poetry to the level of highest art. The ingenuity in inventing indigenous/native rhythm for delineating the illusion/magic of rain is a rare ploy rarely seen elsewhere save the regional literatures. Look from any direction or angle you will find Mahapatra's poems fresh and vibrating.

What we call in Sanskrit Vibhatsha is the ghastly element employed to meet the

timely situation—"Endless crow noises/A skull on the holy sands"(28). There is another side of the land where hunger overshadows the holiness of death or cremation. Faith and austerity walk side by side and we see the poet recalling the great temple where—"White-clad widowed women/Past the centres of their lives/are waiting to enter the Great Temple"(28). The tone resonates subjectivity and the poem—"Dawn At Puri"(28) is so meticulously vivacious that even today it shimmers in freshness. It's wisdom and humour is timeless. "Listening To A Prayer"(29) as though, through a miracle conjures up a healing touch which cures as well as sustains. Moreover, the poem deals with the yearning of the soul having a pious wish to suffer the agony. Another poem—"On The Bank Of The Ganges"(32) is not only a verse but also as Maharishi Aurobindo quips—"An illumined vision"{2}. The holy river Ganges, as it is, used and misused by all and sundry not only cleanses and purify but also acts as a bridge between the here and the hereafter: an awareness of what we call in Indian lexicon-Parmarthabodh. It is the only poem that merits attention because it qualifies for grace by presenting a conjunction of feeling, intellect, emotion and intuition. The poem—"A Tree"(34) being larger part of ecology/environment communicates to men/people it's divinity as well as anxiety—"All day and all night/I moved by myself/Only the tree that is there/the axes of seasons in a derelict eye"(34). There are many other poetic pieces where tradition in a lively manner is dedicated using harsh-humour to the philosophical idea of death—"The good wife.../Dreaming still, unexhausted/by the deep roar of funeral pyres"(35). There lurks an unforeseen pain—an agony behind the mask of self-revelation—subjectivity to share for readers that most of us willingly do. It has a forceful redeeming effect, redeems not only the ignorant and the meek but also those who seek freedom from illusion to affirm the continuity of belief. That is why the phallic symbol-The Linga as central theme enlightens. Here is poetry in/as truth. Metaphors not only clarify, lend grace, illustrate and adorn but also carve a poised movement musical as well as rhythmic that carries the full load of feeling without letting it overflow. Social snobbery dyed in satire and irony creates a sacramental mode to extol the mood revealing purity and perspicuity of perception—"A man bathes at sunrise with passion/Plucks some holy flowers/Sits down to worship/Motionless on a mat."(42).

"Hunger"(44) has four stanzas: first three in pentagonal shape and the remaining in sestet form thematically weaving a symbolic tale of an angler circling around hunger, poverty and flesh. The texture is as strong as a citadel of iron-chains hard to penetrate. However behind and beyond the periphery lies a sense of intense search and wholeness which takes poetry to the realm of vision. However, reading the poem give us a sense of living vicariously the spiritual crisis of India's emerging Anglophone poet's life with two simultaneous lexes: endonym and exonym. Multiple images different in theme and construct are employed to siphon off excess thought. The poem neither abounds in neology nor in tautology but reels in scientology as an expression apt and chaste. There is one more poem bringing to light contemporary political chicanery—"The grafting goes on through my winters/Each season a stratagem for her smile"(49). Against this background the poet candidly avers—"Juices from my daughter's body/Are filling the noisy hives"(49). In order to devise the notion of spiritual erotica he dives-deep to construe the invisible source of creation. It is not an empty void, he surmises but a womb full of amniotic fluid—an ineffable light/radiance. Like a mature rhetorician inebriated with the exuberance of his own verbosity the poet deftly designs a concise picture of his native inhabitants/residents rolling in deep-faith to enliven an age-old bicultural tradition—"The Shiva Linga/the rhythmic susurur of chants on wrecks of petals/the cage suspended in every father's just eyes"(50). The faith is kept intact and the Karma seems to bind, heal and cure like a salve.

In love as in music diverse notes blend together to make a perfect chord, likewise the poem stands still to include miscellaneous rhythms revolving/ evolving into absolute harmony and balance—"and restore/ the breath the living holds"(51). The notion of metempsychosis like scattered pieces of gems can be seen here and there all over—*A Rain Of Rites*. The poet prefers to pick up appropriate situation to express himself—"free the guilt-ridden senses like an afterbirth of life"(51). The whole poem moves around the circle of life keeping the faith undamaged in its civilizational journey. While the poet seems to have groomed by multiple facets of Odisan/Indian culture as home-bound pilgrim. Amidst common gentry, familiar landscapes, proverbial imagery and tenor Mahapatra's innate quest lead him to reveal subjectivity as such and an intense search for roots—"Even my father's face is turned inside out."(54). "The Tattooed Taste"(55) one of the longest poem opens in uncomplicated subjective manner—"Night heads downwards across the Indian ocean/ In the cold main road of my rain smothered town" (55). Giving expression to human as well as humane vision the poet moves ahead to prove the immortality of the past, of ancient Indian tradition—"doling out palmfuls of rice on holy Monday"(55). "Now When We Think Of Compromise"(58) is the last poem in this consummate collection. The recurring use of symbols in turns creates a more subtle and complex sense of feeling. Poignancy and rapture side by side lend aristocracy to the poised movement while personal thought/anguish are adduced to the pleasure of a lively syntax—"At times the sunlight loses its fleeting habit/ and with simple fingers touches my feet"(58). Thus Mahapatra's poetry purposefully gives vent to modern man, his predicament, despair and destiny hidden underneath the visible garment of creation. The poet penetrates to go across the mirage of molecules—the Maya, where invisible seamless matrix of infinite possibilities, creativities, of indefatigable perfectionism and abundance proliferates to magnify instant love guided by compassion.

What Mahapatra left behind, as his legacy, the day he died, a couple of months back, is a zeal for unending life—"I am sure the world will be a witness to JM'S poetry which will resurrect after his ashes will melt and mingle the waters of Chandrabhaga. The river Chandrabhaga and his poetry magazine shall continue beyond the borders."{3} A towering personality in literature, JM'S other side of life, as acknowledged by Nabina Das—"was mischievous—fun-loving and frolicsome"{4}. The Holi celebration in March-2023, at his weed-overgrown garden-yard, was in fact the last—Hurrah! Poetry for JM was life and the life he lived with his wife Runu and with poet-friends proved to be poetry in reality.

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