
Social Introspection of Myth, Reality and Self in Jayanta Mahapatra's Epic Poem "Relationship"

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the subjective memory of Jayant Mahapatra through his epic poem *Relationship*, in which his consciousness is subsumed into the question of how to express his love and gratitude for the motherland, the place of his nativity. His originality and authenticity of a major poetic voice have been precisely for the reason that despite the English language being his early creative writing medium, his sensibilities as a poet operate within the boundaries of his typically Oriya culture. He establishes a relationship between his lonely and rootless life and 'this temple in ruins, in a blaze of sun'. The poet seems engulfed in the tedious dualism and oscillating for rootedness between the faith of Christian and Hindu religions. He questions the validity of his relationship with his friends also who are in a state of pitiful or contemptible intellectual or moral ignorance completing the journey of life, 'unsullied by guilt, and untouched by belief'. Mahapatra's response to the landscape, his sense of myth and history, tradition, and the culture of his birthplace gives him distinct identification. The history of Orissa is his subject and the culture of it is the space of his poetry. He considered poetry as a "craft" and used symbols, images, myths, metaphors, and similes to bring out rich and effective poetic vision. Jayant Mahapatra's *Relationship* presents the varied facets of human life poetically. However, this paper argues through the lens of social introspection of myth, reality, and self in Jayant Mahapatra's epic poem *Relationship*.

Jayanta Mahapatra (1928-2023) is the most prolific and the first poet to receive Sahitya Akademi Award in the Indian English Poetry. His originality and authenticity of a major poetic voice has been precisely for the reason that in spite of English language being his early creative writing medium, his sensibilities as a poet operate within the boundaries of his typically Oriya culture. His art is rooted in the soil with a strong awareness of his Indian heritage. The poet, pre-occupied with his personal memory and myth of Orissa, calls his epic poem "Relationship" the 'theme-song of my life'. In *Relationship* (1980) the memory and myth are inextricably woven together since they are both parts of a sensitive poet's intense experiences. About the poem Krishna Rayan makes a pertinent remark, "the journey from feeling of dispossession to feeling of rootedness, which is the "plot" of the poem" (215). It is a spiritual journey to recognize roots in the past. Throughout the twelve sections of six hundred and seventy-two lines of this epic poem, the poet engages with the Orissa's ancient culture, history, and myth. Mahapatra speaks volumes of significance of myth, temple and stone in his poetry as well as his own life. The soil, myth, culture, tradition, rootedness, sensibility and sufferings of Orissa are inundated in his poetry with a deep sign of introspection.

Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry revolves around India and its culture. Being born and raised in Orissa his poetry is naturally affected by the landscapes and myths of the place. He reveals unbreakable and unwavering relation between himself and Konarka, the temple of the sun and its ruined stones. The attachment with the self and the society runs through *Relationship*. In the poem, the feeling of the past becomes acute and the experiences arouse in him the question who he was. Myths are the strong symbols and play a vital role as the old socio-cultural heritage of Orissa. They help man set his pursuits in a difficult world that endlessly warns man's reality.

Relationship is not a poem about relationship of man to men in friendship, love, family or community. It is about a relationship of man to time, man to land and man to generations of men who have passed before him and who will come after him (Jayaprada 89).

Divided in twelve, each section tells a tale of its own perspective. The first rain of the year transports the poet into the past. The first section is endowed with myth and mysticism. Against the backdrop of the sea and its hazards, dark forests, the drift of time, and dark myths of creation, the opening lines of the poem express the poet's encounter with the soil of Orissa and its complex mythical phallus stone overshadowing it all:

Once again one must sit back and bury the face
On this earth of the forbidden myth,
The phallus of the enormous stone (Relationship 9)

The poet attempts to evaluate the aesthetic, historical, physical as well as the spiritual past of Orissa juxtaposing it with the present. The individual emotion of the poetic self creates a sense of deep association of the self with the ecological setting, ritual and totality of life. It creates a sense of association between self and the other. He recreates the scene of the building of the Sun Temple in the eleventh century A. D. The temple is the embodiment of intermingled historical truths, myths and legends. The twelve hundred 'artisans of stone', who built the temple in long twelve years are like 'brown flowers in passion' and the aerial roots of centuries-old banyan tree'. He looks back at the historicity of the place where humans, the skilled and talented wonderful creation of almighty, succumbed to socio-political upheavals under the burden to earn bread and sustain existence. The artisans' shadowy appearance at present relates to man's futile existence in the passage of time. Today the ruins of the temple remind of the unrecognized artistic architectural contribution of the unknown inglorious lives who were the part and parcel of the historical past and the harbinger of the tradition to the next generation. "The Konark Temple stands on its ancient ground as a "messenger" of their death. They are involved with the history of the "cruelties / of the ruthless emperors" "groans and cries", "smells of gunsmoke and smoldering flesh", and of "tactics and strategy" (Relationship 9). The reference to unknown artisans reminds of the Grey's poem *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* where the talent remained unexplored and unknown. Though there is testimony of the artisans' contribution in *Relationship* but in the both cases they, the living beings, are insignificant and forgotten. Mahapatra has realised the heart-beat of the deceased artist in the stone-carving art and statue of the temples in Orissa. He has also made a relation with stone-carving and inscriptions. It is an introspection of self and reality from the poet's socio-cultural perspectives and points towards the oblivion of the lineage and power-structure of historicity by the present day generation. As a poet he points out what it is in regional history and how have we kept our histories ignored. Just we hear others' versions of history and do not have our standpoint. Saroj Kumar Padhi significantly observes:

The present generation's alienation from the archaeological, artistic and aesthetic past has distanced them (the artisans) too far beyond recognition. The war of Kalinga in 261 B.C. the inhuman atrocities of Ashok and the unaccountable suffering of the ancestors are peacefully forgotten in the passage of time. Today people visit Dhaulgiri, on the dead river Daya to see the rock-edicts that bear testimony to Ashok's change of heart. The poet thinks it is the cruelty of time to have rendered people callous to ancestors' glory as well as suffering. The names of the kings resound in our ears. We have forgotten names of the artisans, the names of the Oriya fighters in Kalinga war but remembered Narasingh Dev and Ashok (32).

In the second autobiographical section, the poet ruminates over the passage of time leaving imprints on his psyche by mentioning the grave of his mother. The poet feels the spark

of feelings of the whispers of solitude that encircle him. His becomes deeply serious on the sight of his mother now, transformed in appearance. He ponders how reminiscences keep connected to the ungraspable past and the images of life experiences keep shifting like the sands of time. "These personal reminiscences are also mixed with the memories of history, of war and peace, of the 'swords of forgotten kings [which] rust slowly in the museum of our guilt'" (Shahane 173). Then the poet remembers his old father, daughter and his old village.

The third section starts with the first rains washing the lands and stones but can it wash away the sin and bloodshed that happened on the banks of the Daya river when armies of Kalinga and Ashoka fought the fierce battle turning the water of the Daya river blood-red. The imagery resonates to one of *The Waste Land* and *The Rime of The Ancient Mariner* 'when we think of the skeleton remains, bodies cleansed of rotting flesh'. He preaches that the gospel of peace be carved on the famous rock edicts for posterity to learn the message of peace and non-violence. Now the poet turns towards his personal life and remembers his few friends who sometimes get affected by doubts and envy. He feels the pangs of being lonely, devoid of deep anchoring bond of relationships.

In the fourth section, the poet is finally up against the 'emptiness of his destiny. He wishes to offer a prayer and recalls the scene of the rain and sunshine, the source of joy and solace, to bestow upon him peace and reconciliation.

The section five is an ode to sleep offering the opportunity of dream dreamt with the help of imagery, reflections, remembrance and nostalgia. Sleep may be soothing but does it lead to any destination. His dream world is a probing into the 'miracle of living'. He finds his country full of contradictions where there are fabulous marriage processions and also lies and betrayals.

The sixth section recapitulates the nightmares of the Ganga kings who now seem to be watching the ruins of their bloody battles and ravages of wars, and grieving on the devastation caused due to the storm of the historical power tactics. The poet anticipates only a miracle can save mankind from such outrageous storms.

In the seventh section there is a parallelism between the poet's personal dark world of subconscious psyche troubled with insomnia, nightmares, clash of past and present, innocence and guilt, faith and doubt, and ceaseless invasions of the enemies into the motherland disturbing and destroying its culture, tradition, heritage, lineage and roots. Subsequently, in the eight section, he establishes a relationship between his lonely and rootless life and 'this temple in ruins, in a blaze of sun'. The poet questions the stone lions standing near the steps of the Sun Temple, 'Whose return to life are you waiting for?' Just their waiting continues like that of Samuel Beckett's tramps in *Waiting for Godot*., not sure of whether Godot will turn up or not. The poet questions the meaning of man's existence and also the message of the Sun Temple at Konarka. "Would meaning remain in merely that a thing exists on a simple plane? Or does it lie in the multiplicity of levels of mind derived from the multiplicity of things? Things as they are, or things as they are not?"...He seems to yearn for a kind of Yeatsian quest, of the *second coming of a sailing to (a new) byzantium*, and of the world being born again" (Shahane 175) He asks:

How would I hold the *linga* in the eye
Until the world is made all over again? (Relationship 23)

In the ninth section, the poet attempts to unfold the 'myth of happiness' and also of the souls 'that survive the myth and are entangled in the web of ideas- ideas which seem to stand like brooms on their unsteady heads.' The poet envisions his dead grandfather, close to a burning pyre, floating on the water. His grandfather converted to Christianity under the

influence of missionaries. The poet seems engulfed in the tedious dualism and oscillating for rootedness between the faith of Christian and Hindu religions. He questions the validity of his relationship with his friends also who in a state of pitiful or contemptible intellectual or moral ignorance completing the journey of life, 'unsullied by guilt, and untouched by belief'. "The poet is confronted with the myth of sleep and action, the desire to know 'the deepening nature of all things', the desire for 'perfection', the wish to love...all fellow men....The poet feels that the myth was perhaps like a journey or the spirit in which he might lose himself altogether. Or, was it merely a step in the march towards a predetermined future?" (Shahane 176).

In the tenth section, the poet seems to be confronted with meaninglessness, purposelessness, and silence in the atmosphere around himself, and tries to explore his relationship with Cuttack where he was born and out of whose clay images of sacred goddesses are made, and also how did he become a willing inheritor of the 'mysterious inheritance':

mysterious inheritance
in which roots stick out here and there from the dung,
of broken empire and of vanquished dynasties,
and of *ahimsa's* whimpers:
for before I go to sleep
or go into the unknown in me
this house of blind windows built inside,
doesn't the fear it provides accelerates
our happiness? (Relationship 28)

'Ahimsa's whimpers' allude to king Ashok, the Kalinga war, and subsequent appeal for universal peace through the raised *stupas*, the 'dutiful monuments' celebrating the victory of humiliating darkness over light. The poet is subsumed into all happening underneath the consciousness layers of his heart. He waits for the cry of hope by the creative artists and poets who are confronting the past and could express their creative response to their intense appeal.

The section eleven deals with the 'enduring' relationship between past and present. The poet seems optimistic here and apprehends that humankind that can endure the atrocities of this unkind world can also rise from the gloomy and dark surroundings, and envision a world of peace, beauty and kindness. The poet's journey started with uncertainty and pessimism among the ruined stone Sun Temple:

and yet my existence lies in the stone
which carry my footsteps from one day into another
down to the infinite distances (Relationship 10).

But now, continuing his quest for 'an essence divine', the poet seems to be believing in the graceful relationship among human, between man and god, and art and artist:

For lofty as they are on their twenty-four blue spells,
my walks along the tremblings of the stone
seems loftier still (Relationship 29).

In the twelfth and the last section of the poem the poet attempts at securing release from his inscrutable sense of guilt. The make-believe dream sequence of the last lines of the poem take us to a different level. The poet's inquisitiveness ponders if there 'Is anything beyond me that I cannot catch up, or cope with?' His poetic self is inspired to speak to the beautiful figures carved in stone:

Tell me your names, dark daughters
Hold me to your spaces (Relationship 31).

Who are these dark daughters? Are these the sculptures of the *apsaras*, dancers and drummers

proclaiming the advent of the day, rising of the sun, or are these the poor daughters of India whose tales of pity and pathos we often hear? Are these the dark daughters of the temples working as devadasis or yoginis? Can we detach ourselves from our bare social realities, historicity and earthly connections? Can we remain oblivious of the trouble and tribulation of the common masses? This section “acclimatizes the persona's dream of total merger with the Sun Temple. The self of the persona is seen to be shedding down all personal problems – sin, guilt, fear of death and ageing – with which he had been occupied and obsessed” (Mohanty 44-56). The poet is in eternal harmony with himself as well as others. He owes his new birth in the silence dance of these beautiful daughters. he sees the erotic sculptures carved on the outer temple-walls telling of man-woman relationship, telling of the dharma, artha, kama and moksha motif and the yoga-yoginis. and there he got the dark daughters of his Relationship. “Thus, memory becomes a pervasive mode of comprehending relationships- between personal self and society, the creative self and the arts, sculpture and architecture, which in turn embody the meeting point between life-giving impulses and the poet's quest for comprehending different levels of relationship between art and life” (Shahane 178). A.N. Dwivedi observes:

Indubitably it is a great work which explores with remarkable symphonic effects his unbreakable relationship with rich religion, culture, rituals, traditions and myths of Orissa and, above all, with the primordial shaping influences that Konarka has exercised on him, unfolding the various stages of his own individuality. Resolved into twelve sections, this long poem, a significant corollary of his critical piety and his commendable capacity to confront and interrogate the challenges and deficiencies of all the traditions, rituals and myths that have shaped his psyche, engendering in him a terrible sense of deprivation and defencelessness in the face of the overwhelming presence of the past, is indisputably his profoundly serious attempt at experimental meditation on his origin and his sacred ties with Orissa (Web source).

To conclude, it may be said that Mahapatra as a modern writer tries to lay emphasis on subjective memory and inversely tries to connect man with his contemporary world. His poetry makes the reader look inwards and question himself about life. The depiction of human condition in the context of historicity forms an essential part of his poetry. His consciousness is subsumed into the question of how to express his love and gratitude for the motherland, the place of his nativity. Mahapatra's response to the landscape, his sense of myth and history, tradition and culture of his birthplace gives him distinct identification. The history of Orissa is his subject and the culture of it the space of his poetry. He considered poetry as “craft” and uses symbols, images, myths, metaphor and similes to bring out rich and effective poetic vision. Vasant Shahane observes “Relationship shows the poet's endeavour to connect not merely the past with the present, but also to explore the connecting links between one art and another, between sculpture and poetry between music and poetry and this is indeed fascinating” (Shahane 179). His poetry is essentially 'poetry of self-exploration' and the process of writing for him is the process of discovery of self.

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