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## Imagery in the poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra: A Study

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### Introduction

Indian English poetry is the oldest form of Indian English literature. One of the most widely known and published Indian English poets of our time is Jayanta Mahapatra. He belongs to famous trinity of modern Indian English poets including Nissim Ezekiel and A.K.Ramanujan. Jayanta Mahapatra was born in the city of Cuttack in Indian State of Orissa where he received his education and subsequently became the professor of Physics.

At the age of forty he turned from Physics to poetry. Over a period of more than thirty five years he has brought out a series of volumes of verse. They are *Close The Sky, Ten by Ten*(1971), *Swayamvara And Other Poems*(1971), *A Father's Hours* (1976), *A Rain of Rites*(1976), *Waiting*(1979), *The False Start*(1980), *Relationship*(1980), *Life Signs*(1983), *Dispossessed Nests*(1986), *Selected poems*(1987), *Burden of Waves and Fruit*(1988), *Temple*(1989), *A whiteness of Bone*(1992), *The Best of Jayanta Mahapatra*(1995), *Shadow Space*(1997), *Bare Face*(2001), *Random Descent*(2005) and so on.

His contribution to Indo-Anglian poetry includes his enlargement of its themes; the originality of his approach to, and treatment of his themes and his imagery which is sometimes perfectly realistic, sometimes symbolic, sometimes surrealistic, and sometimes of the common, familiar and every kind. He has written a number of excellent imagist poems. His use of images and symbols in poetry speaks volumes of his trained mind and disciplined art. The images he uses acquire the symbolic overtones. His images make him visionary and one of the most analytical poets of the era deeply rooted in ground realities.

His many poems have been universally recognized. He has matured rapidly, and both the quality and quantity of his poetic output indicate that with the passing of time his poetry would come to be recognized as the best in Indian English. He has maintained a rigid and strict Christian upbringing within the house throughout his poetry, but the outside world was a vast stage of religion rites and rituals, myth and images that the people practiced.

Jayanta Mahapatra is all about being himself. He is an authentic voice and one of the Indian poets who have been honored first at abroad then at home. He drew his own starting line to begin as poet and the Physicist in him created his own metaphysical world covered with myths, imagery and symbols. He is a patient listener and critical observer and bestowed with a willing ear in choosing the subject for his poetry. Earlier he was a man of Physical Science but now his physical world capsulate with Metaphysical imagery in his poetry. He weaves his poetry from varied imagery interwoven with physics and religious, natural and abstract symbols and vision. Myths, History, Rituals, Traditions, Temples and Legends have been a constant accessory and the very aroma of his poetic realm. He puts forth his poems with accessory of images. His poems walk on the skeleton of images. Through his poetry he opines that door of hidden

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corridor; and images are the torch lights to see through the darkness. His concern with the locality gave him themes and he symbolized those themes. Jayanta Mahapatra calls himself an Oriya poet who writes in English. For him Oriya is his blood and breath. He attains a new height in his quest for unknown and untraded using imagery and symbols as comfortable steps. Image holds the very key to understand his subjective world. Talking to Abraham he candidly accepts, "It is simple for me to begin a poem, with some phrases or an image perhaps; but then the going becomes difficult as I grope around from word to word, line to line; as though I had been left behind in a dark room and was trying desperately to find a way out into the light."(5)

### **Imagery in the poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra**

There is a profusion of imagery in the poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra; and the imagery covers a very wide range. Imagery seems to come to Mahapatra naturally. The imagery is integral to the central idea of a poem or to the subsidiary ideas in it. Some of Mahapatra's poems can be described as Imagist poems. It was an American poet by the name of Ezra Pound who founded a school of poetry which came to be known as Imagism. Imagism was a movement in early 20th century Anglo-American poetry that favored precision of imagery and clear, sharp language. He was supported in his initiative by a number of English poets. Jayanta Mahapatra is one of them. An Imagist poem is short, and contains a series of images which are precise and sharply etched. There are many poems which are covered with varied imagery from the various volumes of verse.

"*Dawn at Puri*" is an imagist poem. The Panorama of Puri artistically portrayed with vivid images and symbols, becomes evocative. Puri is the name of a famous town in Orissa, which is considered sacred because of the temple dedicated to Lord Jagannath, the presiding deity of Orissa. This temple is said to date that to 318 A.D. It is particularly famous for the chariot festival of Jagannath; an annual ritual conducted for the glory of this deity and is attended by a large number of pilgrims. The poem opens with the striking images:

Endless crow noises  
A skull on the holy sands  
tilts it 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.(*The Best of JayantaMahapatra*29)

Mahapatra depicts with vivid images and symbols of the temple town of Puri with its 'endless crow noises'; a reference to the endless cawing of the crows, a visual as well as an auditory image. 'A skull lying on holy sands': This is a startling imagery created with the juxtaposition of the abstract with concrete, where the abstract 'holy' and the concrete 'skull' are grouped together. By means of a series of vivid pictures, the atmosphere of dawn has been created. Mahapatra also underlines the importance of the temple town of Puri and what it means to the Hindus in India.

"*Indian Summer*" is remarkable for clear and exact imagery, judicious choice of words and compactness. The diction has a deceptive simplicity. It has three or four separate images or pictures, which are not inter-connected but which combine to build up what Mahapatra believes is the atmosphere of an Indian summer in this country(or in Orissa). The poem begins with the striking lines:

Over the souging of the sombre wind,  
priests chant louder than ever:  
the mouth of India opens.(*Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets* 60)

The poem illustrates the fact that Mahapatra's vision is basically tragic, and his pessimism and somber

outlook may be accounted for his keen sense of the suffering of Indian masses. His dominant concern is the vision of grief, loss, dejection and rejection. Although the poem describes a typical Indian summer, many critics have commented that the poem is a veiled commentary on the "suffering woman". Some others have commented that it was one of the amateur poems of Mahapatra despite the original poetic sensibility.

One of his poems that earned a lot of fame is "*Hunger*". The poem describes the enjoyment of sex by the protagonist with whom a poor fisherman makes an agreement to offer his teenaged daughter as a sexual partner. The fisherman's financial hardness compels him to push his young daughter towards prostitution. Hunger bears ambiguous meaning- the hunger of the belly and the hunger of the sexual organ:

I heard him say: my daughter, she's just turned fifteen...  
Feel her. I'll be back soon, your bus leaves at nine.  
The sky fell on me, and a father's exhausted wife.  
Long and lean, her years were cold as rubber.  
She opened her wormy legs wide. I felt the hunger there,  
the other one, the fish slithering, turning inside. (*Twelve Modern Indian Poets 24*)

The poem primarily has two structures of images: flesh related and poverty related; hunger originating from the flesh and that from poverty. In this poem Mahapatra shows that love is mere lustful passion with an irresistible desire for pleasures.

The sex as a business has also been shown in "*The whorehouse in a Calcutta Street*". In the poem a customer enters the premises with a great hope of seeing pretty faces of the whores as advertised on posters and public hoardings. But he experiences a sense of guilt and shame and learns something more about the women as the whore asks him to hurry up and finish his turn so that she may be able to go away for another customer. The woman is used as an image in this poem. As a symbol, she is usually identified with the 'discarded things'. She is often portrayed as a sexually oppressed by the so called patriarchal system and poverty. The image of the woman has been vividly presented here in the poem, he writes thus:

Dream Children, dark, superfluous;  
You miss them in the house's dark spaces, how can't you?  
Even the women don't wear them-  
Like jewels or precious stones at the throat;  
the faint feeling deep at a woman's center  
that brings back the discarded things:  
the little turnings of blood  
at the far edge of the rainbows. (*Ten Twentieth Century Indian poets 61*)

"*A Missing Person*" too is a very short poem. It contains a picture of the darkened room in which a woman, standing before a mirror with a burning oil-lamp in her hand, cannot find her reflection in the mirror:

In the darkened room  
a woman  
cannot find her reflection in the mirror  
waiting as usual  
at the edge of sleep.... (*The Indian Imagination of Jayanta Mahapatra 135*)

Only the drunken yellow flames of the oil-lamp know where her lonely body hides. The missing person in the poem is the essential being or the inner personality of the woman in the room. The images in the poem are sharply etched and precise.

"*Taste for Tomorrow*" is an Imagist poem too. The poem describes the morning scene in the town of Puri. The first picture here is: 'At Puri, the crows.' Then there is the picture of the one wide street lolling out

like a giant tongue; next comes the picture of the five faceless lepers moving aside to make way for a priest: then the crowds thronging the temple door; and finally, a huge holy flower swaying in the wind, not swaying in the natural breeze but swaying in 'the wind of greater reasons. 'At the end of the street Mahapatra finds a large crowd waiting to enter the temple:

At Puri, the crows  
The one wide street  
lolls out like a giant tongue.  
Five faceless lepers move aside  
as a priest passes by.  
And at the street's end  
the crowds thronging the temple door. (*The Best of JayantaMahapatra*36)

"*Evening Landscape by the river*" is another Imagist poem. There are the fishermen's broken shacks by the river, a temple standing frail and still in the distance as though lost in a reverie, and a six-month old child crawling across the dung-washed floor. The time is evening, and some light laughter is audible. All the imagery in the poem is realistic kind. The poem has not only the essential images but also incidental images like the floor being a "dung-washed" floor, and like "a familiar but useless ornament."

The imagery in the poem "*Events*" is varied, realistic, and interesting. Each stanza in this poem contains vivid imagery. The first stanza of the poem is an example of audio-visual imagery by virtue of the reference to a 'distant whistled tune'. The second stanza contains pictures of smoke lurking in the distance on the river-bank, and of a lone funeral pyre burning in the midst of the pipal trees. In the third stanza the picture of a conference room in which a Restoration is addressing an audience of businessmen and describing to them the routine of American enterprise, with his face glowing with a (false) pride. In the last stanza, there is a surprising picture which is actually happening now-a-days in our country: "A rape penetrates the periphery of the jungle". In our country nowadays rapes are taking place in daylight in big cities, in cottages, in homes, in lanes, and in by-lanes.

Some of the poems of Mahapatra contain symbolic imagery. The poem entitled "*The Exile*", has a mixture of the literal and the symbolic kinds of imagery. Land's distance; the mouldy (or decaying) village beside the hills which may have regarded as the 'charred ruins of sun'; corpses smoldering the wind scattering the ashes; the old, ill parents; the squalid town; the long-haired priest of Kali- these are all realistic and vivid pictures. Then comes the symbolic imagery, with the poet saying that he finds himself in an exile between good and evil where he needs the sting of death and where a country's ghosts force his eyes towards a new Renaissance.

"*The Moon Moments*" contains symbolic imagery, besides a few realistic pictures which are to be taken literally such as: 'Those women talking outside have clouds passing across their eyes.' (The word 'clouds' has metaphorically been used here). Then begins the symbolic imagery: 'Always there is a moon that is taking me somewhere', and 'Why does one room invariably lead into other rooms?' says the poet. And of course there is a symbolic meaning in the last line of the poem: "While the gods go by, triumphant, in the sacked city at midnight?" (*Twelve Modern Indian Poets* 25)

There is also animal imagery in Mahapatra's poetry. An outstanding example is to be met with the poem entitled "*Total Solar Eclipse*". There are two stanzas in this poem in which the behavior of animals during the solar eclipse has realistically and vividly been pictured. The cobra slides along the hill; the hyena sniffs at sudden cool air and utters a despairing wail; the vultures turn away from the still warm belly of the sky; sparrows assemble over the shaking gulmohar; and the crocodile moves more cautiously in the waters. The poem contains other imagery too, but this animal imagery is conspicuous.

"*The Twenty-fifth Anniversary of a Republic*" has highly suggestive images: the jungles have become gentle; the women have become restless; and history reposes between the college girl's breasts. But then comes a realistic picture to be taken literally. The pretty Mina is pictured as going round and round the

gilded stage in an ostentatious manner, hiding jungles in her purse, holding on to her divorce papers, and a lonely Ph.D. "Hiding jungles in her purse" is quite suggestive and very interesting.

The frequently used image of Nature in Mahapatra's poetry denotes the "subjective response" as distinct from the image of the universal ethos. Mahapatra offers fresh images of mountain, city, sun and factory in his verse. In his poem "*The Mountain*", he writes:

In the darkness of evening  
silence and pressure only,  
Multiplying, adding, subtracting,  
In the abyssal heart. (59)

The city occupies a central place in Mahapatra's poetry. Like the image of darkness, the image of city is linked with corruption and industrialization in modern human life (especially as found in metropolitan cities). The city image is predominant in the poem like "Snow in the Iowa City". The following lines of this poem are worth citing in this context:

Here the anguish of the old is hidden  
under the gentle slopes of bearded corn fields.  
But you can hear it in the footsteps. (83)

### Conclusion

Jayanta Mahapatra has made a mark in Indian poetry for various attributes of his poems-imagery being one of them. He is a skilled and conscious craftsman who stirs his images and symbols thoughtfully. Thus an overall study of the poems of Jayanta Mahapatra reveals his ability to transfer codes of his consciousness to the realization of his readers through his images and symbols. His images are his medium, a tool to wipe out the blurred curtains and portray his experience. It is literary impossible to comprehend his poetic world without peeping inside his land through binoculars of his images. He is one of the most subjective and impersonal at the same time, he fondles with contrasting ideas and images in his poems.

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