

# Nature Unbound: A Study of Jayanta Mahapatra's Selected Poems

Monu\*

Research Scholar, Department of English and Foreign Languages, MDU, Rohtak

**Abstract – One of the most widely known and published Indian English poets of our time is Jayanta Mahapatra. Like A.K. Ramanujan, he is widely read and discussed both at home and abroad. But unlike Ramanujan, Mahapatra is difficult to read for obscurity, complexity and allusiveness in his poetry. But his contrived image, learned vocabulary set him a class apart from most of his contemporaries. At the same time, in his desire to acclimatize an indigenous tradition to English language and create something new in Indian English, he shares some of the concerns of the well-known Indian English poets of our time. Like Nissim Ezekiel, Kamala Das, Keki N. Daruwalla, Shiv K. Kumar and A.K. Ramanujan, Jayanta Mahapatra has given Indian poetry in English a local habitation and a larger public outside India. Jayanta Mahapatra published his poetry in the United States of America.**

-----X-----

We are living in a world where man has become the center and his surroundings are in the background. Though the surroundings, i.e. nature is most important part for a being to exist because it is nature with the help of which any plant or animal can stand on earth and survive. Every creature on earth accepts this notion by honoring its surroundings. But in the case of man, nature is pushed back into a corner by human society. Once, nature existed for its own sake. Every creature on earth had its own desires to fulfill. Nature if left to its own can grow in different directions with high rate of diversity where we can find various types of plant and animal lives. Nature can develop different ways to survive which adds its beauty and diversity. But wild nature has been tamed by humans and turned into botanical gardens. In these botanical gardens and even in our surroundings, we can find that nature is reduced to mere existence. Nature has lost its autonomy, and untamed growth. Greg Garrard differentiates between, "mere material existence" and independent 'herself' nature by citing Heideggerian Eco philosophy; Heidegger's starting point is the fundamental difference between mere material existence and revelation of 'being', or the thing-ness of things. To 'be' is not just to exist, but to 'show-up' or be disclosed, which requires human consciousness as the space or 'clearing' (lichting), in and through which it is disclosed. (34) Today, nature is more or less in the condition of mere material existence whereas man has become the controlling agent on earth. Nature is wordless and if it has any voice then the man has failed to understand the voice of nature to preserve it. Mahapatra depicts the different aspects of nature through his poetry:

The autumn night struggling with its breath,

The fireflies pulsing and drawing back

To reveal the fallen teeth of the forest,

And the moon, to whom we owe

the tempests of light among the shadows,

seeking refuge

In a narrow window of our wakefulness. (30)

Here, nature is portrayed not in its independent state but in a struggling state where it has to fight with some external factors which force our environment for shuffling and readjustment. Shuffling and readjustment mean that the present situations are not in proper way and that they should be changed. But in the present scenario, lives on earth are created and nourished by nature herself. It is the man who manipulated and now reconstructing our surroundings which ultimately forces nature to shrink and surrender into manmade frames. In above given lines, Mahapatra shows an uneasiness in nature and that uneasiness is created by human society. Nature is wordless so we have to understand its communications through changes in the behavior of natural objects such as animals, plants, and natural phenomena like day, night, tempests etc as "autumn night struggling with its breath," "fireflies pulsing and drawing back." "Fallen teeth of the forest" are such words which shows that nature is not performing on its own terms and conditions.

There is a clear indication that something has changed the proper course of nature and that is why she is forced to shrink into a corner of her own. According to Heideggerian Eco philosophy this is the mere material existence of where nature is confined to mere survival and cannot grow wildly. Such is the influence of human society on nature that we have to find imagery of shrink nature as, "the iron trees in the park blur in the blush of light/from circles of human order" and again, "the caged grass of the heart of the river/ in the hope of easing the spirit's weariness" (7). A dark wind. It is not that nature is everywhere cornered by human society. Somewhere we find that nature shows its original behavior or instincts. It reveals its true nature. At such places, we can observe that nature and natural phenomena are working properly and they exhibit their typical behavior and tendencies despite any influencing factor. As Mahapatra writes, "I can see the wind moving the bracken/ moving so fiercely that it blurs all thought/ tracks of the season" (whiteness 5). Natural Phenomenon 'wind' shows natural feature that is to blow in its own movement without caring for anything else. "Blurs all thought" shows that the natural Phenomenon 'wind' blows smoothly and uprooting symbols of human creation like 'thought'. In a way, nature asserts its own identity. At another place Mahapatra writes:

Sun- struck, even the fallow fields dance

in the autumn valleys of the Mahanadi.

The trees hold out, Indefatigable. The house

on the main street looks insignificant. (51)

Nature presented here is uncontaminated and undamaged by human social factors. Here, 'fallow fields' dance in the autumn valleys of the Mahanadi, which is, an uncontaminated place or wild area where nature is left to herself. 'Trees' are here 'indefatigable' from human burden and the most significant thing that establishes the autonomy of nature, that is where nature is portrayed into its true self and the imagery of 'house', a social phenomena, looks 'insignificant' even in the main street amid human society. Here, nature reclaims its true self. Carolyn Merchant speaks for the rights and claims of nature through her definition of 'Eco centric Ethics,' "An ecocentric ethic is grounded in the cosmos. The whole environment, including inanimate elements, rocks and minerals along with animate plants and animals, is assigned intrinsic value.... All things in the cosmos as well as humans have moral considerability" (74-75). Everything in nature has freedom to pursue the activities for its own growth and prosperity but such activities should not interfere with the life of others. So the nature too has this right to survive without any hindrance. Today, man has overpowered nature and controls its growth. Now, wild nature is turned into man-controlled gardens. To attain the autonomy and freedom, a person has to

resist against obstacles and we can observe the resistance of nature in our surroundings. Mahapatra perfectly captures the resistance:

All lives are not equal who would not

Refuse to die this way? Perhaps hence forward

Voices from a far will enter the head,

Substance of an external debris.

That cannot be cleared up with desire or pain. (15)

Nature and man should be in harmony because they are so much in close affinity and dependent on each other. However, it is man who is more dependent but thinks he is equal to nature and gifted with power as well. Poet persona feels and speaks on the behalf of nature that 'all lives are not equal', though human being has the faculty of language, through which he can communicate and rule over nature. Garrard criticizes language as "everyday chatter" through Heidegger's words, "because it discloses both language and beings to us as mere instruments of our will; disposable words correspond to a world of disposable stuff" (35). On the basis of language and other faculties, man conquered the half of the natural world but the conscience of sensitive human beings hears the "voices from afar". These voices are the resistance of nature against the monopoly of human being. Nature through these unclear voices registers its anger on the soul of sensitive humans. Garrard reproduces Heidegger's words that, "the essence of beings, their autonomy and resistance to our purposes is disclosed by a similarly resistant language" (35).

When nature is wordless and incapable to change the status quo then it is the duty of responsible humans to play their role for the rights of other species when power policies become distrustful in the society that ignores the relevant issues, it is the poetry which "simply wants to know what sort of thing/ war was, or a sunset, even a bizarre crime" (9). Poet persona wants to know and speak about the "bizarre crime" that is to destroy nature. Garrard put it as, "through poetry, then, we learn that 'man is not the lord of beings. Man is the shepherd of being" (35). So being the shepherd, it is the duty of humans to preserve nature and other species.

Though a poet has potential to express the pressing need of the time through his poems but here Mahapatra seems to be doubtful about the desired end of a poem. He knows that a poem is to convey a message to the people but today people are so engrossed with their materialistic aim that they don't pay heed to the grave issues like environmental crisis. That's why Mahapatra writes, "The mirror grown so small / that it doesn't show

any image at all", at another place writes, "But what use is a poem, once the writing's done? / words looking for what, in the dark of the soul / like the sound of a match striking, then over" (34).

The relevance of a poem becomes the cause of conflict in poet persona's conscience. The poetry is considered as the most reputed form of learning in all branches of knowledge. But there are some doubts concerning its usefulness, whether it could perform its sacred duty to teach and delight, "Will a poem of mine be the only answer? /

Will its words make me feel something/I do not want to forget? An impossible wish" (LS 45). Again, Mahapatra doubts the sacred aim of the poem, its desired end that is its influence on mankind. He wants to convey the message that man has done vast destruction to nature. It is time to analyze his deeds and must focus on nature friendly activities. Till now nature was everything to man and now it is man's turn to be savior of nature. Mahapatra is doubtful about very sacred end and influence of the poem and writes, "A step here and a step there, / and yet the sleepless line I walk on leads nowhere" (45).

Nature is unintelligible and if at all it seems to convey something, human beings don't give any attention to it. There is no communication between man and nature. Therefore, the words that humans use to interact with each other are only to assert one's identity. So no real interaction occurs. The poet laments that we humans turn deaf ears to the 'voice' that speaks for nature's sake. We have lost the art of listening. Mahapatra writes:

I know now each new poem of mine

Will only push me near it,

Each word will only leave me on the corner,

breathing hard, feeling licked,

perhaps to make me beg and betray. (LS 46)

Poet's dilemma comes to the surface about the ruthlessness of the people. People are unwilling to lend their ears to this grave problem. They are so much engaged with their daily materialistic activities that now they cannot enjoy natural beauty and to preserve it is very far from this. Before preservation, we have to admire it, and then we have to respect it and then come the act of preservation. Preservation of nature is possible when we start considering its value for its own sake, not for its materialistic value. Deep ecologists, who are known for their radical thinking, also emphasize the "intrinsic value" of nature as commented on by Greg Garrard in his book *Ecocriticism*:

Many deep ecologists see the first point as distinguishing their position from environmentalism", whereas 'shallow' approaches take an instrumental approach to nature, arguing for preservation of natural resources only for the sake of humans, deep ecology demands recognition of intrinsic value in nature. (24)

Jayant Mahapatra, being a sensitive poet and intellectual pioneer, it is his duty to lead the society into a new era of awakening where environmental crisis can be recognized as the most serious problem and to find an appropriate solution for this problem. Mahapatra understands his duty of literary intellectual and to draw attention of the people towards changing predicament in the society and new evolving needs and necessities of our environment and people. He understands that there may be difficulties on the path of struggle. People may ignore and reject him. But he knows that it is duty of his and necessity of whole living world to try hard to preserve the nature. Mahapatra is a poet whose duty is to make people aware about the environmental crisis. A poet's words are not simple words that are to be heard and forgotten. There words are to shake and wake humanity from the slumber of ignorance and negligence. Therefore, Mahapatra says, "My words only draw up / over the land, they aren't humble words anymore" (43). He asks people to rediscover the pious ways to live so that nature can be prevented from destruction and extinction and can live in harmony with nature. Mahapatra writes: You must find a new way / try to turn the desire you hold into fierce power" (43).

Mahapatra is quiet sure about the potential of poetry that it can contribute and usher in a new era of harmony and co-existence and therefore he uses poetry as a tool to fight against the injustice done to the nature and whole natural world. He writes, "when all else has failed / the poem's words are perhaps justified" (34).

## WORKS CITED

- Bandyopadhyay, Nibedita (July 2014). "Ted Hughes and his Animal World: Analysis of the Poems of Ted Hughes by the Yasdstick of Eco-Criticism". *Galaxy: International*. 11.4 pp. 1-6. Web. [www.galaxyimsrj.com](http://www.galaxyimsrj.com).
- Das, B.K. (1985). *The Poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra*. New Delhi: Atlantic, Print.
- Gerrard, Greg. (2007). *Ecocriticism*. London and New York: Routledge, Print.
- Glottfelty, Cheryll, and Harold Fromm, eds. (1996). *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Athens, Georgia: U of Georgia P, Print.

Mahapatra, Jayanta. (1992). *A Whiteness of Bone*. New Delhi: Viking Penguin, Print.

Research Scholar, Department of English and Foreign Languages, MDU, Rohtak

---. *Life Signs*. Delhi: OUP, 1983. Print.

[monu.berwal05@gmail.com](mailto:monu.berwal05@gmail.com)

---. *Shadow Space*. Kerala: D C Books, 1997. Print.

Meeker, Joseph. (1996). "The comic mode." *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Ed. Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. Athens, Georgia: U of Georgia pp. 155-169. Print.

Mishra, Indrajeet (2008). *Nativity Rituals: The Poetry of Jayant Mahapatra*. New Delhi: Adhyayan Pub.. Print.

Mohan, Devinder (1987). *Jayant Mahapatra*. New Delhi: Arnold Heinemann, Print.

Naess, Arne. (2007). "Self-Realisation." *Thinking Like a Mountain: Towards a Council of All Beings*. Comp. John Seed et al. Gabriola Island: New Catalyst Books, pp. 19-30. Print.

Parameswaram, Uma (1986). Review of *Life Signs*. *Journal of South Asian Literatures*, 212, pp. 255-57. Print.

Parthasarthy, R. (1976). *Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets*. New Delhi: OUP, Print.

Rowe, Stan J. (1994). "Ecocentrism: The Chord that Harmonizes Humans and Earth". *The Trumpeter*. Web. 11 (2): pp. 106-07. Print.

Roy, Arundhati (2011). *Broken Republic: Three Essays*. New Delhi: Homish Homilton Penguin Books, Print.

Saxena, H. M. (2000). *Environmental Management*. New Delhi: Rawat Publications Print.

Seed, John, Joanna Macy, Pat Fleming, Arne Naess, ed. (2007). *Thinking Like a Mountain: Towards A Council of All Beings*. Gabriola Island: New Catalyst Books, Print.

Shankar, R. Jayanta Mahapatra, (2003). *The Poet: Quest for Identity*. New Delhi: Prestige Books, Print.

Swain, Rabindra K. (2000). *The Poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra: A Critical Study*. New Delhi: Prestige Books, Print.

---

**Corresponding Author**

**Monu\***