Chapter Three

Metha and Mahapatra: Poets of Humanism

Introduction

For expression of fraternal human agonies,

his poetic journey begins.

The deep imprints of suffering pile up in the heart.

(Metha, "Tear Blossoms"

15-17)

If the world weeps, are you moved?

Will it show you where to go?

Does the world grow according to its own needs?

Pity is only felt for one

whose eyes are blind to the ways of another,

With those eyes

I cannot walk barefoot here. (Mahapatra, "Bazaar

Scene" Shadow 24-30).

This chapter seeks to scrutinize the poetry of Mu. Metha and Jayanta Mahapatra from the perspective of their social vision and subjective pangs which they experience as they view socio-political issues and religio-cultural customs. “Art is not created in a vacuum; it is the work not simply of a
person, but of an author fixed in time and space, answering to a community of which he is an important, because articulate part” as Wilber Scott rightly observes (123). The idiom of their poetic creations is mostly moulded by their keen awareness of the ethos of their respective regional cultures, but they shed their regional insularities as they mature in their major collections and transcend even religious boundaries. An attempt here is made to substantiate the view that these two writers are socially committed in varying degrees and that their personal worlds are marked by pathos. Their temperamental differences discerned in their attitudes towards social issues and personal pangs are also pointed out so as to show what accounts for Mahapatra’s propensity to retreat into his private world when the plight of humanity is felt to be beyond his endurance. Metha, being something of an extrovert, does not flinch from fighting for social regeneration and restoration of the human values that the leftist in him has throughout cherished.

I Gandhi: National Dream and Socio-Political Reality

Lyngdoh, a couple of months before he laid down office as the Chief Election Commissioner, termed politicians as “cancer” for which there is “no cure at the moment.” He went on to say that no cure had been found for cancer yet and when this disease was cured, “We will have to find some other expression” (“Lyngdoh Rubs Salt Into Politicians’ Wound” 1). Mu. Metha and Jayanta Mahapatra very much seem to echo the same view although not in
so many words. Their anguish is evident when they portray crafty and corrupt politicians who have appeared on the post-Gandhian scene in India. The pitiable absence of probity in public life and the apathy to the moral and material progress of humanity excite Metha’s fury while it leaves Mahapatra melancholic and meditative. Metha and Mahapatra recall the solitary figure of the Mahatma who “stands in street squares with his head hung in shame” – “the one voice who spoke of truth” – and in their different poetic fashions flay today’s plunderers who masquerade as political leaders (Metha, “‘A Street Singer’s Tribute to the Father of the Nation’” [Tear] 161-165; Mahapatra, “Concerning August 1998” Bare 7).

In Metha’s above said poem Gandhiji is imagined to be standing in street squares with his head hung in shame while his portraits are taken out in processions. The nation has lost its colour and attempts are made once in a year to repaint it. The poet seems to hear the Mahatma’s lamentation on the sad plight of the nation. The poet sheds tears as he looks at the statues of Gandhiji because there is no peace in the land. The poet praises those who laid down their lives for India’s Independence in these lines, “The lines on the map of India/ are the ribs of the martyrs/ who fought for freedom” (24-28). The poet proceeds to point out what a blessed horn of plenty the Mahatma
intended India to be and “what remains in our hands/ today/ is a begging
bowl” (41-43).

Referring to what today’s leaders take away from their followers and
deny them their due, the poet pictures the populace as a flock of sheep and
says:

Ignoring our bellies
they care only for our teats …
Though we don’t our fodder get
the shepherds alone
somehow get their gifts of money … (67-74)

The poet makes fun of criminals who make pilgrimages to shrines for
expiation of their sins and so, “Our children of Bharat/ without a speck of
dust/ remain pure” (92-95). The contrast between the rich and the poor is
focussed:

While crowns of laurels are worn
in the royal mansions of this nation,
only tears well up
in the eyes of slum children. (96-102)

How Gandhian values are flung to the winds here could be seen in the poet’s
reference to our “weaving threads of gold/ instead of khadi” (105-107). With
sarcastic bitterness the poet quips, “In one respect people of this land/ follow
you dutifully. They too dress half-naked” (112-117). These leaders who have turned the entire land into a slum are honoured with garlands.

The poet, referring to the desecration and vandalism of Gandhi’s statues in Salem, writes in “Cuckoos of the Mind Cry in the Land of Mangoes”), “Your statues are broken/ yet you in charming smiles/ remain immersed ...”. The poet continues to say how much mental pain he and his sensitive fellow citizens suffer in “the land of mangoes” as they break the monuments of the man, who helped to unite the broken regions of our land. He pays the Mahatma glowing tributes:

the man who obtained divinity
for the ostracised untouchables.

The heads of our Akalyas
hung in shame for two centuries
were raised as you trod on. (मेथा [Tear] 1- 20)

Metha recalls how, for Independence, the Mahatma “had a bath in fire.” He, punning on the Tamil words “fire” and “hate”, points out how “Today some/ in hate have a game” (27-29). The poet says that he might forgive the wrongdoers as usual but he cautions that in the gun that killed him there are bullets left. The poet points out in anguish that the sacrilege done on the Mahatma boomerangs on every Indian.
Metha in “குரு தர்க்காளன் மாவட்டம்” (“A Leader’s Death”) from போராடி (Procession) draws a contrast between politicians who today bargain for positions of power and Gandhiji who “ever remained a giver of positions,/ never was a recipient” (3-5).

In his poem “இந்தியாவுக்கு நான்” (“India and I”) from the collection வருகை (They), Metha speaks in the garb of a poor Indian citizen. Here fake political plunderers and blackmarketeers are dubbed “distributors” of the film of “Freedom” and the “dancers” at the concert of Democracy. The masses of India, the film makers, and Gandhiji, the real hero are the losers and victims. The poet goes on to say how in “the drama of equality,” the last scene where “all equally shared hunger” gained great applause (38-44). In the refrain Metha poignantly writes, “India holds in her hand a long history./ I also carry in my hand ancient poverty” (50-53). The Tamil words “செயல்பாளரும்” and “துரைந்தை” (“history” and “poverty”) rhyme suitably for the foregoing lines.

There is a more scathing attack on the corrupt and unscrupulous political leadership in his poem “காந்தியுடன் கைத்தொண்டு கைத்தொண்டு” (“A Meeting between Gandhi and the Poet”) from புரட்டு (Face). The poet is seen to be a keen political analyst and an anguished observer of how the Mahatma is disowned by current political exploiters. His name is sold to buy social and political acceptability. These self-seeking men are denounced thus:
Sales—
carried on swiftly.

There is only this difference:
After driving out white traders
black traders opened shops.

When foreigners exploited us
we fumed.

Now—
When our own compatriots exploit us
we just look on!

The reason—
Is it not our own people
that exploit? (160-164)

Alluding to selfishness prevalent today, he tells the Mahatma:

You practised self-denial.
But we barring selfishness
rejected and hated
all other things. (196-202)
At the end of the poem, with much pain suffusing his subjective consciousness, Metha writes:

You for the sake of the nation

stayed awake even in slumber.

But my ignorance-filled motherland

now practises the art of

sleeping in wakefulness. (211-218)

The poet now asks with anguish mixed with anger, “Won’t your staff gain life/to put an end to this sleep” (219-224). What the poet has to offer to the father of the nation are not heavy garlands but tear blossoms, “As the heart is heavy/the tear blossoms I’ve with me/ I offer to you” (6-10).

In “Look Back O Country” (“Look Back O Country”) of Single he is bitterly critical of politicians who maintain that there are in politics neither permanent friends nor permanent foes. He asks them to declare that there are no permanent principles either.

In “Golden Jubilee” (“Golden Jubilee”) of the same collection, comparing the leaders of yesteryear with today’s politicians, Metha says, “Then were leaders who thought of the country./ Now are there leaders who think of the count of votes” (19-24). He adds:

Now-a-days film stars

aspire to be leaders of the State
because political leaders
have turned pretenders. (35-41)

The pun on the Tamil word "இதுல்" ("actor") adds to the wit and humour of the lines. The poet points out why freedom of the country is sought to be safeguarded. He wonders whether it is to be proportionately shared amongst these self-seeking politicians.

The degeneration of Tamil culture is depicted in "நமது வலமேக்கில் கதை" ("A Tamilian’s Tale") from அவாசி (Festival). The Pehan of old out of his generosity sought to clothe the shivering pea-cock. But today’s Pehans long for “lovely young pea-cocks” to take off their robes (17-18).

In "நூற்றாண்டுகளின் சேவகம் செய்தல் நெருக்கம் தொன்றும்" ("Let Us Emulate the Television") from சுமார் (Dream), Metha in a satirical vein says that, we frequently get occasions to test the veracity of our nation being the largest democracy. The people here go partially naked and the crops wither while “waters flow in pubs.” Referring to smuggling, the poet says that if it is done individually, it is dubbed “smuggling of gold.” If the nation does this, it then becomes “economic reform.” How politicians are time-servers and opportunists is effectively portrayed here (23-88).

Metha in the poem called “மந்திரந் யார்” ("The Gandhian Way") of இல்லையே மைன்கால் (Mind) asks, “What’s the principle that the world accepts?/ What’s the principle that the world seeks?” and answers:
That’s the principle of peace
The principle allied to truth is that principle.
The magnetic principle that attracts with love
What drives away poverty and war
is the Gandhian principle, the principle of peace. (1-8)

In his poem “Gandhi” from Close, Jayanta Mahapatra, like Mu. Metha, is pained to see Gandhian values jettisoned by the political descendants of the Mahatma. Witnessing the brutal murder of Gandhian socialism, the poet feels that “We have burst open his blood/ to bleed”. The poet is sad at the fact that we pretend to be “on his side” and yet “we hate him/ We do not know it” (7-8).

In “A Poem to Mahatma Gandhi” from his collection named Waiting, the poet shares with Mahatma his sense of isolation. The poet wonders if Gandhi has made him insensitive and “unjust”. As he finishes the portrait of a man petting his dog, a part of his life, gun shots are heard. But the poet says, “I try not to think of it at all/ but it keeps sounding/ like a blare of my heartless laughter” (12-14). One today is made out to be “heartless” and indifferent to what goes on in society at large. Violence, which Gandhiji shunned, is a fact of life today. That is why the poet tries not to be distracted by the “small explosion.”
The ordinariness of the day of Gandhiji’s martyrdom observed on January 30th is pictured in the poem “30th January 1982: A Story” from the collection Burden. The usual events of this day in 1982 are woven into the story here. But what strikes one is the total repudiation of the Gandhian way of life. Gandhiji wanted goats to be reared for their milk. But here they are butchered for their meat. As the goat lay on the butcher’s block and “stared wide-eyed,” “the butcher worried that his knife/ was fast losing its sharpness.” The situation here is made paradoxical with the arrival of “the mobile loudspeaker van/ of the Department of Public Relations” “pouring out the words of Gandhi’s once-favourite hymn” (3-9). The rich woman’s anger at being disturbed by its sound so early in the morning brings out the fact that Gandhiji is no longer venerated. Our instinct to take away life from live fellow creatures and give imagined life to our trivial possessions could be seen in the butcher’s action and the five-year-old girl’s urge to cuddle her broken doll’s head to dispel the void of her life. The postman going out on his usual rounds suddenly gets killed at the garden fence apparently by a letter bomb. The assassin obviously did not go to bed but plotted “one of the evil schemes/ which led through the long night into dawn.” No one could discern this plot getting ready inside his mind. “The morning breeze” on that fatal day is said to be “restless/ with the heritage of blood” (21-30). Both the neighbours, Amar Babu and Sham Babu smiled at each other at the butcher’s shop, as
usual. The bitter social reality of Gandhian principles of non-violence and the practice of their violation are powerfully pictured with pathos by Metha and bitter irony by Mahapatra.

Mahapatra’s pangs could be seen in sharper focus in his poem titled “The Fifteenth of August” from his collection called Whiteness. The poet here stands staring into the distance of his country as the monsoon raindrops keep falling. As the poet looks at Gandhiji in an old photograph in the new airport lounge, the old man seems to return his promise to him. None of the promises made to Gandhiji has been fulfilled. There is no love in anyone for the motherland. So the poet says, “Land, our land,/ there is so much land between us now” (11-12). The distance between him and the land keeps growing.

Mahapatra is pained to see the present cultural degeneration and his pang is revealed effectively in “The Twentyfifth Anniversary of a Republic, 1975” from Father:

What is wrong with my country?

The jungles have become gentle, the women restless.

And history reposes between the college girl’s breasts:

the exploits of warrior-queens, the pride pieced together

from a god’s tainted amours. Is this where the

advantages lay?
Mina, my pretty neighbour, flashes round and round the gilded stage,
hiding jungles in her purse, holding on to her divorce,
and a lonely Ph.D. (XI)

Mahapatra’s melancholic meditation on independent India could be seen and felt keenly in the poem titled “Of Independence Day” collected in Whiteness. The poet regrets here the loss of “all those stories/ about the rustle of the blood/ that caught its breath when the British” put an end to our laughter and made us slaves (5-7). Although nationally independent, we are no longer free now to say anything “to our children that might displease/ or provoke them”. The ironic progress of civilisation seems to have left our basic human values topsy-turvy. In our children’s immature hands “A Rubik cube of menace, we feel,/ spins carelessly.” The fingertips of the speaker’s son “seem to hold/ little tongues of fire he’s unaware of.” There is no “Ahimsa” in him. The boy thinks that it is only our weakness which prompts one here to nurture “India’s freedom struggle” (19-26). Observance of traditional customs takes the younger generation by surprise. The older folks “surreptitiously” get “into the house and pull” their “memories of the dead in after” them. The children today understand only the language of the computer which drowns “noises of the dead.” The “increasing sound” of the computer is perhaps “the song of the earth” which harmfully distracts the attention of
the children. We have "the child’s pulse of our past" and so the speaker wonders, "how could we be strong and aggressive and free" (33-41). We, elders, are torn between our conceptions of good and evil, our traditional and Gandhian legacies. Children alone "can find a place/ outside of both good and evil." They are not influenced by the dead who "extend their hands" to govern our thoughts, words and deeds. "But the children are alarmed/ by the nude, ghastly bones." Our children have apparently no use for "the carcass of the past" which we carefully preserve and here lies the reason for the apathy of the younger generation to the ethical values that the Mahatma bequeathed to us (47-59).

In "Red Roses for Gandhi," of the same collection, the poet describes the day which witnessed the birth anniversary of the Mahatma and the fiery immolation of eight students across the nation which was liberated by the Gandhian message of non-violence. This fatal day looked "lean and naked" "like the old man" whom the poet had seen many years before. "The agonising screams of boys and girls" who used mortal violence on themselves through fire looked upon independent India as a "desolate country of black sorrows". The poet is "neither sad nor angry/ at their chosen way of leaving the world." This land is today "the country where/ sons and daughters burn in tongues of fire" on account of unemployment, poverty, disillusionment and
despair, in the wake of the nations unfulfilled dream and harsh social reality (2-43).

Metha visualises Gandhiji as standing in the street squares with his head hung in shame in the midst of all the social iniquities around him. In the poem named “Sometimes” from Bare Mahapatra, in a similar but less explicit vein conceives of “the headless” figure of Gandhi in the city square as an audible presence “like truth, unsaid most of the time”. The “People everywhere are divided against each other”. The poet refers to the faceless modern man and says, “And it is sadder/ when words come out from a face/ that isn’t there” (3-12).

The upsurge of anti-politician sentiment articulated by Lyngdoh is shared by the two poets who are seen as two of the most sensitive points of the current socio-political scenario. One may quote The New Indian Express that goes on to report, Lyngdoh’s “statement that he couldn’t really think of a politician who was committed to democracy and people’s welfare and whether he meant that, he replied, ‘Yes, I do mean it. Yes’ ” (1). The havoc wreaked on the masses of this land by politicians with their chicanery is powerfully portrayed by the two poets. While Metha launches into a vitriolic and virulent tirade against the whole tribe of contemporary politicians, Mahapatra excoriates them with less verbal vituperation but his mockery mounts up to a higher plane through his intricately suggestive words, phrases, symbols and
ironies. The former’s denunciation is more direct whereas the latter’s condemnatory fury is rather covert. Ayyappa Paniker comments on how most Indian-English poets hesitate to deal with political problems and points out that “It is difficult to write good political poetry.” It is true that one finds Mahapatra dealing with political issues “in roundabout or indirect ways” in most of his poems unlike Metha (135-136). The social maladies that the masses suffer saddens them indeed. Mahapatra in section 20 of Dispossessed questions:

Ah love, we had read so much
about you, about freedom. Was everything you did,
Gandhiji, only an act you put on for posterity?
With India, our India, barely worth raping? (20-23)

II Poverty and Vulnerability: Socio-Familial Reality

Most of the poems of Metha and Mahapatra issue out of the pangs they experience at the tragic plight of the poor and the vulnerability of women and children. They are deeply disturbed by the distress of destitute, deceived and deserted women. Longsuffering wives, jilted beloveds, harassed harlots, rustic lasses, urban ladies and victims of rape and dowry figure prominent in many of their poems.

The poems selected for scrutiny here go to prove that the two writers choose the poetic medium to record the socio-familial history for which they
register as barometers the milieus to which they are anchored. Women and weaker sections of society continue to be victims of atrocities even after five decades of Independence and indigenisation, as the latest revelations of Sivakasi Jayalakshmi before the High Court Bench in Madurai go to confirm. Mahapatra in his poem “Octave” says:

even the country’s fate after independence,
the pain that allows you to survive,
moving neither forwards nor backwards,
those tears of Odysseus that echo those cries
to his own heart to endure his homelessness.

(Shadow 6-10)

One finds that new problems have replaced old ones and new versions of colonial predicaments have cropped up. Patriarchy prevails preventing women from full enjoyment of the fruits of the freedom conferred by democracy. Peace and security still elude women back at home and in society at large. The cultural context which Metha and Mahapatra picture are regional but the themes they deal with resonate beyond the barriers of language and culture.

In “இளையோற் வெள்ளி” (“Festal Goddess”) of மேதா (Single) Metha, lamenting the plight of the poor in the post-Independent phase of the country, wonders whether the freedom gained is “darkness” or “light”, whether it is a
"burden" or "crown." The revolutionary in Metha says, "we broke the menacles of iron" and asks, "but who made of them/ a ring of gold/ and put it on the finger" (18-23). The poet is here being bitterly critical of the rich who garner the benefits of Independence. It is seen in his lines addressed to the goddess:

O Kali! You pay no heed …

to those who for you cut off their heads

and made you an offering.

You smile … only at the priests. (29-35)

Symbolically employing for the country the image of a woman who neglects her own man and entertains in her chamber outsiders, the poet drives home the painful fact that the rich hold positions of power while the poor are left at the door cooling their heels.

The socialist in Metha in “ஒரு இந்தியா என்றும் கூர்க்கும் அலுவல் விளக்கம்” (“Our India That Competes in Anything”) of his ninth collection shows the contrast between the extravagance of the Government and the poverty of the Indian student who reads about the flame of the Asian Games that would burn to the end while his own kerosene lamp is put out by his mother because of the scarcity of kerosene in the country.

The prevalence of the dowry system is constantly flayed by Metha. In “ஏழி஑ர்பனம்” (“Adoration”) of ஒன் கிரேம் (One Sky), the woman of beauty is
praised and admired for her sweetness of speech and character. But she has to fetch dowry if she is to be chosen as a life partner.

In "நிலைப்பார்வைகள்" ("Enquiries") of the same collection also, the poet metaphorically refers to the puberty of a girl and the joyful smile of her parents. The mother beautified her and the father protected her. The boys sharpened their glances. The eyes safeguarded dreams. But the elders who came made enquiries asking for the dowry in order to take her away.

Metha, in "முந்திய முடன்புறம்" ("Changed Madurais") of Bodhi Trees, again borrows the legend of Kannaki to drive home some more points. There is today an inversion of the Kannaki motif, “Only one Kannaki burnt her hometown” and the poet addressing fire asks, “therefore how many Kannakis/ would you burn in town after town O Fire” (1-7). Kannaki burnt her city only for Kovalan. “Pitiable is the tale of today’s Kannakis/ They are burnt by Kovalans themselves” (11-16). The poet is saddened here by the uxoricides he sees and reads about in this land.

In “நச்சியை சங்கமகள்?” ("Can Lamps Set Fire?") from One Sky, Metha speaks of the misery that a man’s addiction to drinking causes to the family. The poet ironically says:

Culture has spread all over cities.

Streets are full of daily

brawls that are permitted!
They are slaves of wine
on this free land. (1-8)

As they stagger drunk, what they trample on is not the ground but their own life. “They empty their bowls/ and refill them with the tears of their folks” (15-20). The poet regretfully writes:

Some human ships

without knowing the direction

flounder in the sea of wine.

How great people stay imprisoned

in such small bottles!

Let’s move on to liberate them

from these bottles. (21-33)

The poet makes a woman sing to wean her lover away from his addiction to wine. The refrain of her song is:

Throw away the bowl.

Throw away the bowl of wine.

Throw away the bowl

which makes your thought firewood

and leaves the heart sooty. (68-72)

In “நாயக்கனை பால் காதல்” (“The Story of a Walk with Legs”) of பாத்தூர் (Procession), the feminist theme tinged with revolutionary fervour is
woven into the text of the traditional tale of Kannaki and Madhavi. It begins with the lines, "The tale of a woman's tears/ because of a woman's tears/ the tale of a king's entreaty". The poet says, "It is no mere tale/ It is the 'long tale'/ of a woman's tears" (1-10). He goes on to say how the man's attention is diverted to his mistress and how his wife is deprived of the pride of a wife and even the joy of motherhood. One reads, "Even here – Still – Even now –/ Every woman her anklet breaks …/ not from her ankles but from her eyes" (138-141).

In "கூடுதல் ஓடு விளைந்தகால தீர் சுமார் அறு சீட்டால்" ("The Tale of How My Pen Shed Tears for a Forsaken Sister") of his fourteenth collection, Metha portrays the misery of a destitute woman deceived and ditched by her husband. The rich "handsome young man", Gunasekaran, like "Dushyanta" disowns her feigning ignorance of his "Shakuntala". She is sent back by his parents as they negotiate an alliance with a high-born bride. She soon hears of his forthcoming marriage to another woman and files a suit believing that she will get justice. The verdict is in her favour. The poem ends with the woman's cry:

'Where is my husband?
My husband! He is my husband!'

The young woman swells with tears

The doors of the temple shake. (285-293)
Marriage for a woman like her usually translates only into surrender and suffering, but men like him in many cases get away unpunished. In “After Fashioning a Lovely Lute ...” (“After Fashioning a Lovely Lute ...”) of his second collection, Metha likens silently suffering women to “joss-sticks of a genuine sort” and to “superb candles” and refers to their reading “tales in bed” and shedding “tears by the cradle”. They are described as “women who protect husbands from inside burkhas”. Saddened by their plight, Metha states that they are seen merely as “objects of sex” and regrets, “there is none to elevate them/ and make of them objects of adoration”. He refers to their nuptial knots as “symbols of their bonds of slavery”. One sees how “they weigh heavy, weary and wet their eyes.” When their husbands pass away, their distress as widows is worsened. He asks, “When could these entries into fire/ be done away with” (5-29).

In “Has He Forgotten Me?” (“Has He Forgotten Me?”) of his third collection Metha narrates the woeful tale of how a maiden is wooed, seduced and forsaken by her lover. The woman tells her friend how he had called her “a painting” and “a poem” and now she asks her “Why doesn’t he hug this lass/ that loses her soul” (9-12).

In “Where Does This River Run?” (“Where Does This River Run?”) of Light, one sees how a simple rustic lass living in a hovel by a river innocently asks a young man who comes up swimming where the river
comes from is duped into going with him to see its source. The naive girl is taken to the back of a solitary hut and seduced. The poem ends on a sad note:

But her question now
she puts to none.
Because – saw she that a river
from her eyes too would flow. (114-125)

It is the longing of harlots for domesticity that Metha portrays in “Shattered Dreams” (“Shattered Dreams”) of his fourth collection. He sympathises with these harlots who enter this profession just for their bellies’ sake. Their plight is vividly visualised as the poet writes:

If the mat is folded
there is hunger’s journey.
If the mat is unfolded
there is the journey of darkness
falling prey to a different hunger. (23-28)

Their life is pictured in terms of “a voyage in the sea of tears.” The poet hastens to add “no … no …/ It is the journey of a body” (13-15). The harlot’s body is compared to a boat that bears heavy burdens. The pathos of his lines could be felt when he describes harlots as “just spectators” and not participants in life. Their boats are tied by cables but what they long to be bound by are the knots of wedlock.
In “Some Questions to the Candle” of Bodhi Trees, comparing the poor peasant or labourer to the candle that burns itself out, the poet asks, “When are you going to melt others” and “When are you going to burn others.” The poet repeats the question “O Light! When are you going to turn into fire” (24-31). The poet is eager for the revolution of the masses to break out like a fire and burn out the rich and powerful who exploit the poor and the vulnerable.

Mahapatra is also highly critical of the politicians who are responsible for the poverty of the masses and the plight of the women and children. In “1992” of Shadow, the reference to the “World Bank loans” and the plight of the “Somalia’s children” and the “neighbouring temple with blood on his hands” highlight the poet’s political awareness and personal pain at what goes on around him in the world (6-8). The poet is in a cynical mood as he describes the plight of his country in “The Twentyfifth Anniversary of a Republic, 1975”. He finds that the history of this ancient land is relegated to such a low position that it “reposes between the college girl’s breasts.” The fashionable woman acquiring a doctoral degree is his “pretty neighbour” who is hollow inside and hides “jungles in her purse”. She is a divorcee (XI 3-7).

In an ironically worded poem, “Heroism” of Shadow, the poet’s vision of society after the attainment of Independence is rather gloomy. The poet exposes the emptiness of the “talk of freedom,/ freedom from want, social
injustice and greed”. This talk is held against the backdrop of “the bleeding heartland” (1-3). Mahapatra has captured in many of his poems the painful reality of life for the poor. Mahapatra is so used to seeing poverty and pain around him that in his poem Relationship he writes, “and the suffering of the world returns/ like winter’s persistent asthma/ year after year” (two 36-38).

The poet responds to current social disasters in which the poor suffer most. In “Death of a Nameless Girl in Bhopal, December 1984” from Whiteness, he says:

There has always been starvation here, man;
yes, we are used to it. This pain was new; one
of the loose ends. And obviously
sanity seems necessary. (21-24)

Mahapatra extends his vision to encompass the pathetic plight of women and the heavy burden that they have to bear.

One could see such a powerfully realistic picture of a victim in his favourite poem “Hunger” which deals with juvenile prostitution to stave off hunger. In this poem, the fisherman-father being a victim of penury, unscrupulously allows his fifteen-year-old daughter to resort to prostitution:

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 wile.
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. (16-21)

The fisherman-father finds no other way to eke out his income. By thus giving these realistic descriptions, Mahapatra does not create any emotion or passion in us, instead he makes us pity such kinds of women in society. Commenting on these lines, Niranjan Mohanty says, “... the poet has expressed many things: the father’s exhausted wile as a plea to live against poverty, the daughter’s youth, and the easy commerce that corrodes the immaculate veil of relationship” (“Dialectics of love” 246).

In “The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street” from Rain, Mahapatra vividly brings out the nature of man and the modern Indian sex worker. The men quest for communication but they always get frustrated. The nature of the modern whore is dexterously verbalised in her mechanical words, “Hurry, will you? Let me go” (41). Mahapatra in “Man of His Nights” of Life, gives a similar picture of a modern Indian harlot as, “The plump whore he has just left/ has brazenly gone to work on a new customer” (6-7).

In all these poems, though an authentic treatment is given, Mahapatra makes one see the fact that these modern Indian women are forced to accept this profession of prostitution just for their bellies’ sake and thereby they place themselves in the hands of the customers. In these three poems, the woman as
Ayyappa Paniker points out, “is passive” and “not an active sharer in the guilt; she takes to it mechanically, tired and bored, without even professional game” (125). She has little passion and her flesh is only a commercial commodity for the customers like the flesh of the goats slaughtered by the butcher whose heads the man coming from the brothel sees in “Man of His Nights.”

Along with seduced women and whores, destitute women also find place in Mahapatra’s poems. Mahapatra himself says in “The Twentyfifth Anniversary of a Republic, 1975”, “The destitutes everywhere are still my sense of guilt” (IV 7). The poem “In a Night of Rain” from Life is a realistic portrayal of the destitute woman in society, “A mist of embarrassed thoughts slowly sweeps/ the dark space at the river’s edge/ where our homeless women have put up their huts” (3-5).

The sad plight of the homeless woman with “A ten-year-old” daughter who has only winter in life is presented in “Summer” of Rain. What “the cold ash/ of a deserted fire” “Under the mango tree” seems to symbolise is the loss of her youth and hope in life. It is written:

The home will never
be hers.

In a corner of her mind
a living green mango
drops softly to earth. (10-14)
In “Bazaar Scene” Mahapatra very strikingly brings out the “poverty of fate” which he views in a little girl that steals a rotting mango from a vendor’s basket for her malnourished and crippled brother (18). It is through such sketchy but highly suggestive references that Mahapatra draws his reader’s attention to the plight of the destitute urchins of India.

“Slum” from False presents the pitiable images of slum-dwellers who really rest “on pain and plain despair” (8). “The familiar old whore” and the “lonely girl, beaten in battle” could be seen in their different pursuits. The poet’s vision of life is sombre and his frustration results in bitter anger mixed with biting irony in lines such as:

so we would go on
reading the epics in the lamplight,
sucking our mothers’ dry and drooping breasts,
watch the thin moon blend into that darkness
where gigolos and pimps and cocksuckers
jabber excitedly in a language of monstrous flowers. (Three, Relationship 26-31)

Mahapatra in “Walls” of Shadow speaks of the dreams and illusions that three teenage girls grew up with and how they were all shattered “as the ground swelled up so fast.” The poet goes on to say that they “did not seem to matter any more.” The reader could visualise how “the slow cold ache/ of
parading themselves before their prospective grooms/ came into them again” (17-24). How their youth and hope are blighted in their destitution and despair are memorably limned in these words of the poet’s question, “What is there in the hands/ when the hands can’t hold the body any more?” The poet has here in mind the misery of the masses in Ethiopia, for he asks, “What is left outside/ of the stark white clouds of Ethiopia” (48-51).

In an interview with Abraham, Mahapatra himself has aired his views on the condition of women in society thus:

Perhaps, the status of the Indian woman in our society today has gone down. It is pathetic indeed to read accounts of the degradation our women are subjected to in the daily newspapers. Cases of rape, murder, mutilation continue to fill the pages, and one sits helplessly, feeling this pain one is not able to do anything about .... I can see the pain in the eyes of women as they pass by the road every day; their eyes seem to say: we are the beasts of burden, like cattle. It is about this pain I would like to write because I can’t do anything else .... (155)

Madhusudan Prasad rightly points out, “Mahapatra dexterously deploys the images of women to zero in on contemporary social ambience, cultural decay and collapse of the old values” (103).
Mahapatra after analysing the reasons for such miserable condition of women in society, seems to blame it all on the cruel forces in a loose administrative framework and corrupt social structure. As a result, in India women are not treated as independent individuals. They become puppets not only in the hands of womanisers in society, but also in the hands of their own kith and kin. The images of women employed in Mahapatra’s poetry remind one of the collapse of old values, cultural decay and current social situations. In “Trying to Keep Still” and “Living in Orissa” of Shadow we have references to dancing “at the doors of indifferent temples”. Mahapatra is highly critical of the women who dance at the temple.

“Widow” is a poem about the lonely life of a widow who is the subject of scandal for the malicious women around her. In “Still Life” we get a glimpse of a neighbour being killed and a battered housewife seeing self-immolation to be “… definitely easier/ than death through constant beatings and torture” (19-20). In “June Rain”, he speaks of “the tragedy of chaos” which he sees around him – the rape and murder of a woman, the Establishment with its peck of lies, laws remaining unenforced.

In the 19th section of Dispossessed Mahapatra with a heavy heart writes about a man who

… knows only two ways

for dealing with a stray woman:
he rapes her

and he kills her. (12-15)

In “The Lost Children of America” from Life, for instance, there is the image of a girl who is raped in a religious place like a temple that is held sacred and also later cruelly raped repeatedly in a police station that is supposed to provide the victim with protection. He highlights the cruel fact that lawlessness has reached its zenith and cultural values have crumbled down in the dust in the present-day Indian society:

In the Hanuman Temple last night
the priest’s pomaded jean-clad son
raped the squint-eyed fourteen-year fishergirl
on the cracked stone platform behind the shrine
and this morning
her father found her at the police station
assaulted over and over again by four policemen
dripping of darkness and of scarlet death. (112-119)

Here the father is helpless to oppose the corrupt administration. Mahapatra boldly points out the pitfalls and corruptions in Indian society through the image of the woman who was raped and killed in his poem “Morning Signs”:

Before the morning paper comes I know
that Lata’s rapists and killers
have been set free, for that is how
it has always been. (13-16)

The irony in the lines, "that is how/ it has always been" gives a pungent attack on the post-Independent administration.

The plight of the longsuffering Indian housewife whose identity she misses could be seen in poems like "A Missing Person" from Rain:

In the darkened room
a woman
cannot find her reflection in the mirror
waiting as usual
at the edge of sleep
In her hands she holds
the oil lamp
whose drunken yellow flames
know where her lonely body hides. (1-9)

With this humanist view, Mahapatra's voice of cry is heard in many unanswered questions in poems like "The Twentyfifth Anniversary of a Republic, 1975", where he asks, "What is the order of life?/ The tubercular servant-girl trips over the edge of the present" (XVI 3-4). In another poem called "A Country" in Life he asks, "... why do I wear myself out/ feeling for the girls who die/ before their breasts are swollen with milk" (13-15). His
concern for the tubercular girl dying unmarried is seen in another poem called "Strike Your Secret Earth" from Waiting:

Forget the frail girl dying
slowly of tuberculosis
before the abashed, silken breasts
have swollen with milk. (19-22)

Mahapatra in "Possessions" of Shadow is very critical of our poets who "stand inside" and do not sympathise with the poor and expose social evils. They comment, "Poets will sip their tea in stupid-looking cafes/ or dangle in unknown fields/ like embarrassed scarecrows" (30-32). In several poems he sees only "The worn-out face of India" and her dumb and solitary poets have "weak eyes".

M.K. Naik says, "The first remarkable feature of Mahapatra's response to the world of external reality is that Nature per se does not seem to interest him much, for he appears to be preoccupied with the human condition for which forces of Nature often furnish apt metaphors" ("The Two Worlds of Imagery" 99). He points out that the images of disease are frequently employed when the poet tries to articulate his anguish at the social ills of the time (102).

Current social occurrences are registered with sensitivity as in the case of Metha. For instance, in "Story at the Start of 1978" from Waiting, the poet
records the destruction caused by natural calamities. Then the landmarks in the country look like “diseased pelvises of time” (19). Mahapatra has a tragic vision of life unlike Metha. In the eyes of Mahapatra, women seem to exist as a class and not as individuals. Metha makes women speak and makes them heard. But Mahapatra does not project the woman’s viewpoint so prominently. In many cases she exists without voice and name. While Metha’s woman has a will of her own, Mahapatra’s woman exists almost as a pawn controlled by the male world. His deep concern for the poor, the downtrodden and the suffering masses is patent in some of the significant images of women. These images evince Mahapatra’s humanist attitude and sympathy for the weaker section of society.

III   Humanity and Divinity: Religio-Cultural Reality

Both Metha and Mahapatra ironically bring out the incongruities between faith and practice in the current religio-cultural scenario. Both the poets expose the gulf between what people believe in and what they really practise. They, for example, think they honour Gandhiji but the two poets with biting irony point out how Gandhiji in independent India is honoured in words and hated in deeds. Women are revered verbally but they are brutally raped. Similarly faith in God fails to find fulfilment in practice as it is found to be fanatical and fundamentalist. Neither of these writers believes in any particular religious faith. Their real religion is humanity. What they on the
religio-cultural front urge their readers to do is to mind their own work and abstain from causing trouble to others. "Strew flowers on your own path;/ Why do you spread thorns on others’ paths" seems to be their question, which Metha frames in "এক প্রশ্ন" ("One Question") of his eighteenth collection (6-10). The humanist in Metha sets out to see if there is humanity behind the professions of faith across this land, while the rationalist in Mahapatra undertakes to find out if there is a divinity that mitigates the misery of humanity.

One whole collection of poems makes up Metha’s quest. It is appropriately titled মানুষ খুঁজে যাও (In Search of Man). This anthology subsumes some of his most poignant lines where he portrays interreligious feuds and communal conflicts. In the first piece "এক প্রশ্ন নিয়ে মানুষ যুদ্ধ করেছেন ..." ("A Suit Against Man ...") the poet points out how humans kill one another in the name of religion and makes God tell man in answer, " ‘It’s not for me/ but for yourselves/ you sacrifice yourselves’ " (73-76).

In a short poem ironically called "আর কোন পুস্তক আলিখিয়ানা ..." ("The Primer That God Has Not Read ..."), Metha pictures fanatics killing God himself when He comes down to look over the earth. The Almighty is asked, " ‘What religion do you belong to?’ ". God, "the Meaning of meanings" blinks not knowing its meaning (22-28). The display of religious frenzy drives Metha to write in "বিধির কার্য" ("Practice"): 
The devotees shout
and uneasy grows god.

The devotees march in a procession
but God stands aside.

The devotees issue orders
but God stops His ears.

The devotees pick up arms
and God runs off screaming. (29-44)

In a letter of 1885 to Minna Kautsky, Engels wrote that “The political tendency” in a fictional work “must emerge unobtrusively from the dramatized situations; only in this indirect way could revolutionary fiction work effectively on the bourgeois consciousness of its readers” (qtd. in Eagleton 46). But the socialist in Metha here overtly dreams of a casteless and classless society on Marxist lines and writes of the need for human solidarity in several poems. In a short poem written in a terse style, the poet portrays a flaming torch entering a garden fanatically and angrily asking a trembling plant, “‘Who are you’”. The poor plant replies, “‘I am the rose’”. With glee the flame burns down the flower and looks back. One distraught flower says, “‘I am the jasmine’”. “The blood-stained fiery tongue lengthened out/ and the jasmine was slain”. One reads, “Turning away with pride/ from its ashes/ the flaming torch arrogantly asked: ‘You ...?’”. 
Smiling that flower says, “‘I am the flower’” (7-36). The word for flower in Tamil is pronounced as “அ” (“Poo”) with a rush of air. “Astonished and gasping for breath/ the flame spluttered and fell out on the ground” (“ஏற்றஞாடு அடியாடி” [“Man Your Name”] 7-39). Metha in “ஒன்று வேளையில்” (“One Question”) asks:

You name your religion

you name your caste

When will you say

you are a human being? (31-35)

He implies here that man could overcome his social evils and gain strength only through solidarity. Divisive forces like casteism and communalism need to be shed if a strong and equitable social order is to be evolved.

In “சுப்பிரமணியன் சுப்பிரமணியன்” (“News Items within News”) Metha speaks of Rama and Babar coming back to life, and sitting under the same tree. They are determined not to disappear from the earth before restoring communal amity. Their arrival on the eve of elections upsets the calculations of politicians to garner votes dividing the voters in the name of religion. “Secret consultations” are held and “secret orders” are issued. The following morning the TV sets blare thus:

The Rama and Babar

who had suddenly made their appearance
gunned each other down.

Their bodies disappeared as soon as they both dropped dead. (63-75)

It is reported that in the communal riot following it thousands were slaughtered. The political leader makes it out to be “a foreign plot” (81). The poet thus exposes the heinous crimes committed by the leaders of political parties, who are out to create vote banks at the cost of human life, harmony and solidarity.

The poet in another poem “उपरेंद्र वदन्तीय” (“On the Threshold of Death”) predicts the responses of the Hindu, Muslim and the Christian devotees who apparently remain immersed in counting rosary beads. One reads:

Suddenly All India Radio blaringly announced:

‘In half-an-hour the world is going to be destroyed.’

The poet writes on:

Interrupting the meditation the three rushed out and ran off towards one another’s houses. (21-33)
The three strings of beads used by the three men in their prayers fell near one another on the street. They "looked at one another and chuckled" (40-41). The poet here conceives of religion merely as the "opium of the people," to quote Marx and makes it out to be an obscurantist force which perpetuates the feudal structure of society.

In "பிரகாராமா" ("Retrogression"), Metha seems to think that conflicts mostly arise out of religious differences. Wherever humans go, they tend to retire into their divisive religious doctrines. In the poem titled "ஞாயாக மாற்றாம் விளக்கலாம்" ("Lamps That Refuse to Light") Metha portrays the outbreak of communal violence and ethnic riots in the wake of differences over which lanes the chariot of God is to be taken through. The people who boast of the greatness of their religion, now begin to brag of the superiority of their respective castes. The weapons lying idle are all put to use, making rivers of blood flow. Finally the poet comments:

Now there is no one at mosques
to make the call to prayer;
There is none in churches
to pray;
In temples there is no one
to perform poojas. (100-109)
In the poem, “Self-choice”, Metha says that a man has only himself to blame for all his troubles in life. He writes:

You have made your own crosses
and complain you carry a burden.
Light comes looking for you
but you shut yourself up
and declare you are in darkness. (3-14)

The light that the poet refers to is obviously the light of reason which shows one out of the darkness of destitution, disharmony and distress.

In response to the demolition of the Babri Mosque on December 6 and the day that witnessed gun shots in Coimbatore, Metha wrote in “Even God Rejects You”:

God is great!
God is great!
You ignorant man
You smaller than an atom
Are you to rescue God?
Does he ask of you refuge?
Is it for God that you bore bullets? (1-11)

The poet tenders an apology on behalf of the human race and washes away the wounds of the victim with his tears. The poet hopes to see
“humanity” sprouting out of the blood shed by them. The poet like Buddha, Jesus and Gandhiji asks, “Can fire be put out with fire? Can hate be destroyed with hate” (78-81).

Metha is seen to be denouncing casteism in several poems. In “दक्षिणामरणी” (“Blood Bank”) a man with a casteist outlook is seen flaring up when there is a disparaging reference to his caste. Annoyed, his companion asks him:

When you met with an accident
and lay dying in bed
the hometown in unison
donated blood to you.
The blood of all castes
mixed and flowed in your body
Now tell me
which caste’s blood
boils in you? (7-18)

Echoing Jesus’ words in Matthew 7:21, “Not everyone who says Lord, Lord will enter the Kingdom of God,” Metha has written “दक्षिणामरणी महाकाव्य दक्षिणामरणी” (“Vedas Recite Humanity”). Here he narrates the parable of two men waiting for entry into Heaven after their departure from earth. An angel comes out and looks at their track records on earth. When
asked whether the first man on earth remembered God, he replies frankly that he had virtually no time for it in his seventy-year long life as he “kept thinking of humans,/ showed them affection,/ kissed away their sweat,” wiped away their tears, shared their cares and food with them as well (28-38). The angel put the same question to the other man. The man said that he had no time to think of humans. He kept thinking of God throughout. He spent his whole life in the service of God. He had no time not only for other people but for his own folks either. There was pride in his tone. The verdict of the angel was that the first man lived on earth a life devoid of delights. He is given a seat in the first row in Heaven. Without even looking at the second man’s face the angel said, “On earth this man lived fanatically/ Refer him to a physician” (83-86).

In “இறைவர் மறையுள்ள கோவால்” (“Architects of Destiny”) the poet again echoes the repercussions of the Masjid demolition. Here the poet wishfully portrays the ideal conduct of a few Muslim men who guard a Siva temple from being attacked by members of their community. The Hindu guardians of the temple are pleasantly surprised to find them here and offer to go and protect their mosque.

In “சொலை” (“Search”) Metha portrays man looking for God in places of worship one after the other, and God is seen searching for man in human dwelling places one by one. The search goes on side by side and the seasons
change from summer to winter. Finally in autumn they meet face to face and man asks God, "'Who are you'". He is asked in turn who he is. He answers, "'I am a man'". Then God enquires, "'Who do you look for / in temple after temple?'" The man is asked, "'How can you see outside/ what dwells in you?'" (24-33). When he is puzzled God goes on:

'God dwells in another man
as he does in you.
If you show man the love
you show to God
you can see God in him'. (42-51)

The poet like philosophers of old believes here that the spirit of God dwells only inside humans and that temples, churches and mosques are only dark and empty places if there is among humans no love for one another.

In "ప్రపంచ ఉదాహరణ" ("The New Way") Metha in accordance with his social ideals and vision of a new social order says that all the divisive forces are to be "reduced to ashes" for attaining social and communal harmony. In "ప్రపంచ ఉదాహరణ" ("A Treaty Is Being Signed") Metha envisions an ideal human society where there are love, tolerance and amity among the followers of different faiths. There is determination when the poet affirms, "Let us bind the hands/ that start the riot" and "Let us build the bridge of fellowship/ in order to live in unity" (33-38).
In the last lines of the concluding poem of this collection “In the Preface Written to Be Its Summation”) Metha writes:

Do not raise the slogan
O Hindus come.
O Christians come.
O Muslims come.
Give the clarion call
for humans to come united
and add to the glory of humanity. (32-39)

Metha’s is a search for humanity behind religious observances but Mahapatra’s is a quest for divinity behind the rites and rituals of humans. He is basically a materialist with little faith in conventional Christianity, to which he is a convert, and he has less faith in traditional Hindu rituals which he looks back on. In both religions he is pained to see the silence of Gods in the face of human distress and disasters.

In “Evening Landscape by the River” of Life, Mahapatra subtly portrays a scene of squalor and suffering. It is so saddening as to make one lose memory of even one’s dear departed folks, “This is the kind of sadness which closes the eyes./ Here the memory for faces of the dead never appears.” Fisherfolk live by the river in “broken shacks” with “weak roofs.” They have
their tales of woe to tell. One reads, “In a hut a six-month-old child awakes/ and crawls across the dung-washed floor/ not asking where he goes.” The destitution discerned here is only suggested. The crawling child also could be likened to “a familiar but useless ornament” like the “uncertain light of the moon” over “the abundant darkness of water.” The “light laughter” symbolises the relief the poor seek from their pangs. One visualises the local deity silently witnessing the scene from a place where “A temple stands frail and still/ in the distance, as though lost in reverie” (1-14).

In “Desire” of the same collection the poet does “Remember the mean, stiff face of that god/ in his shrine” (9-10). In another poem here, “In a Night of Rain,” the poet refers to “the river’s edge/ where our homeless women have put up their huts” (4-5). It is a place where they do not care for the smiles or tears even of children:

There’s a sound of crying in there,
of an evening jasmine being born,
the sounds of satisfaction after love’s been made.
Who cares why a frail flower raises its head
and smiles? Or when one loves
one quickens one’s death? … (6-11)

In “Greeting” of Shadow, he alludes to a “child thin as an areca palm” who goes “naively to greet/ the mute gaze of God” whom the poet “can never
conceive" as a source of the alleviation of human misery (12-14). The poem begins with the poet's saying:

At times I try to bum holes in my hands
to prove I can behave like someone called God.

It is the wish when I begin

not to see things I can't avoid seeing each day. (1-4)

In “Trying to Keep Still” he talks about the scene of destruction and scene of massacre, man’s atrocities and how woman’s freedoms are curtailed all around. The circle of slavery is drawn around her. In the silence what one perceives are man’s “bizarre demands” and the terrible act of his possession. Even the one who claims to be God is silent in the face of these iniquities:

But in secret we seem to hear again

the wailing flutes of burnt-out rice fields

the heartbeats of children who have no fathers

and the silence of one who calls himself God. (1-4)

He tells the women how they “allow to turn into puppets/ which dance at the doors of indifferent temples”. Disgusted he says, “Oh we have heard enough of men who speak like God” through the scriptures (15-17). Here he depicts a painful scene of cultural deprivation and individual desolation.

The poet has seen different forms of violence and violations of human values ever since his childhood, for in “Season” he writes:
Somewhere I lived as a child
Sometime. Where they burnt
things down too, to smoke and ash.
The violence is nothing new,
Even spring or sight of an old man,
his head between his knees.
Or the nakedness of a woman,
stripped and paraded in the street. (8-15)

These are what the poet in “Total Solar Eclipse” of *Life* terms “the disrobing
of human values/ by a rabid civilization” (40-41).

In “The Quest” of *Shadow*, the poet is in search of his lost compatriots,
who “had died a violent death/ at the hands of a God with noiseless
thunderstorms.” He goes on to “wonder why they continue to suffer.” It is
with the touch of irony that the poet refers to the annual inundation of the
land, “Yearly floods turn into a genuine poetic achievement” and alludes to
the evils of casteism and parochialism, “Even computers begin to understand
our castes and prejudices.” The scenes of assault on women flash through the
poet’s mind as he remembers “newspaper headlines.” The poet sarcastically
says, “God still looks at me, his silence deep and famous.” Turning to God,
he asks “Do I have the need to create/ another self whose laughter smothers
my fears tomorrow” (4-31).
In the poem “In God’s Night” of Whiteness, the sight of “the leaves of summer” scurrying past the poet’s window driven by “the awesome wind” reminds him of the scenes of violence and destruction caused by the “dark wind” “Back in the heart of the country” (4-8). The “burdensome silence” of the occasion with its “infectious smell of blood” and “the cry of the years in the night” was inexpressible. The poet says:

Tonight,

the shadow of my brother follows me,

bearing blood on its hooves.

My loving mother turns pale and cross. (13-16)

His depiction of divine response to the sight of “a dark wind ... bent on pushing things around” is:

In the darkness someone called God

runs his vain fingers

over the treasures in his planet:

relics that could still behave like men. (8-20)

What Mahapatra could see as a result of the religious rites and rituals conducted by the people out of the fear of the anger of Gods is only unbearable agony in the people. Therefore the agnostic in Mahapatra indicts God for the “silence”. Mahapatra invariably associates places of worship with beggars, lepers and other suffering segments of society apparently to bring out
the utter unconcern of the deities that they turn to for succour and solace. In “Dawn at Puri” of Rain one sees “White-clad widowed women/ past the centres of their lives ... waiting to enter the Great Temple”. Their eyes, it is said, “stare like those caught in a net” of despair. One could notice the presence of lepers or “ruined, leprous shells leaning against one another,/ a mass of couched faces without names” (4-12). In “Taste for Tomorrow” of Waiting, he refers to how “Five faceless lepers move aside/ as a priest passes by” “At Puri” where one could see “the crowds thronging the temple door” for taste of tomorrow’s bliss (1-7).

Mahapatra in his poem “Ceremony” of Rain, reacts coldly to the “million prayers” offered by the villagers across what he calls “the land of my father.” There is here the poet’s satirical response to “a large group of stony women in front of a shrine” who “silently sit out the whole day waiting to be cured.” “Their supernatural eye” only sees “the sad nature of themselves” inside and their outward “stares” return only to the “dry, drab weeds.” The “hawk” here is obviously associated in the poet’s mind with the victimizing priest. The sceptical poet asks, “What is there in ceremony, in a ritual’s deeply hidden meaning?” He wonders, “With what brief magic can a little life waken?” He feels that the familiar words hold no meaning and are “out of place.” The scales begin to fall from his eyes, for he feels that in such an ambience “one’s sky stumbles.” However a guilty conscience pricks him
when he touches “the sacred cold books.” But “a spasm pulls” him “from the depths of sunken sleep” and he sees how “Any cult here, triumphs for ever” (3-24).

The pain caused by disease and hunger could be seen in “A Summer Afternoon” from Burden where the reader sees “the wasted man stretched out in the hospital bed” and “Outside in the bright sun,” “five children” screaming “for slices/ of watermelon” and “Jagannath in his sheltered shrine” (5-14). It is familiar sights of suffering that makes up the matrix of Mahapatra’s poetry.

The poems of Dispossessed record the cataclysmic events of the Sikh insurrection in Punjab, the industrial disaster in Bhopal, Indira Gandhi’s assassination, the terrorist hijacking of an Indian plane and the general prevalence of violence in society. One is given a glimpse of “the torso/ looking about/ for its missing head”, “two ripped-out eyes/ shaking their tears”, “a child” looking “across its dead mother”, the father “afraid to pull the child into his arms” and “Unmilked cows” lying “stretched out in the fields” (5 10-12; 12 7-8; 23 2-7).

The poet visualises the plight of a little innocent victim thus, “The eyes are deep and hard in Leela’s sockets./ And the face looks peaceful in death” (24 1-2). Commenting on Mahapatra’s recreations of the terrible events witnessed around him Bijay Kumar Das tries to bear out the fact that “Humanity has lost its way into oblivion and hate reigns[sic] supreme,” but
Rabindra K. Swain points out how Mahapatra responds to human distress and disasters by bringing in Divinity to question the dark sky, “Must you dry up the river to hear the sands breathe?/ Is your hate of man your ultimate fate?” (The Poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra 26).

In “Grandfather” of Life the poet asks “What did faith matter?” It was to keep the wolf from the door that his grandfather had left his Hindu religion for the Christian faith and to be free of the famine in 1866. He writes, “You thought of the way the jackals moved, to move.” He goes on to ask, “Did you hear the young tamarind leaves rustle/ in the cold mean nights of your belly? He says to the man, “Hunted, you turned coward and ran,/ the real animal in you plunging through your bone” (12-22).

Mahapatra has written two poems entitled “Faith” which obscurely and rather obliquely bring out the “naked” truth that faith and its holder are like the “open night” and “the star.” The poet affirms that “no truth could be more alive/ than this” (Close 5-6). In the second poem of the second collection the poet makes it clear “How light leaves by the door” of faith and how “We plod on” with only “The masses of memory” growing and “our reasons” getting imprisoned. In a third poem called “The Faith” the poet describes “a legless cripple” cluttering “up the wide temple street” and in the next stanza he asks “What sentence of old/ moves him toward the furious wrinkled walls?” The priest of Puri is shown to be “standing in indulgent sunshine” and playing “a
small ridicule across the melting festival.” He is ironically said to be “safe in
place above a pile of hard-eyed ancestors.” The third stanza describes the poet
who climbs “down the stairs into the dark shrine” with “a frail white flower”
which is supposed to pay for his “sins and watches” (Waiting 1-15). In “The
Waiting” of Shadow the poet wonders “Would all this endless waiting of
belief/ ever change anything” (23-24).

Thus Metha and Mahapatra keenly observe the religio-cultural realities
of life around them. Metha’s is the response of a social reformer with a
socialist’s zeal. But Mahapatra’s reaction is passive tinged with irony and
pathos. Mahapatra lacks the stridency of Metha’s voice when social, political,
familial or cultural iniquities are highlighted. While Mahapatra seems to pine
away with grief, Metha burns with fury at all the atrocities seen around him.
Metha believes in the progress and betterment of human society while
Mahapatra’s social vision is essentially tragic.

May India enter a new field of battle
Let us turn into the Arjunars
that do not lay down their arms

Let the grumbles turn out to be rumbles
Let the sighs turn out to be a storm. (“பண்டய வேளை”
[“Before the Storm”], பூங்காபாலம் [Procession] 26-46)
But Mahapatra retreats into his lonely self suffused with sadness. In “The Lines of My Poem” of Bare, the poet gives us an insight into the poignancy he experiences on seeing the misery of his fellow humans and how as a result his lines have become “lame”: 

.... Where is the thought
that will make one happy.

Generations of men here
have bled from a terrible history.

Will this poem nearly wander
among the silent, standing trees
of our destiny? It is not even sure
what it is trying to run from. (21-28)

He projects the false belief of the poor and the vulnerable thus, “if anything happens,/ their dreams of belief tell them that their gods/ and their government shall take care of them” (Dispossessed, 32 60-62). Both the poets ironically highlight the hiatus between dream and reality on the socio-political, socio-familial, religio-cultural and personal planes.

IV Love and Sex: Reverie and Reality

One is justified in the assumption that there is hardly any poet worth his salt who does not pen a line on the subject of love. In his book on Mu. Metha, Ka. Ramachandran says, “The fervour of love and the fondness for the
Tamil tongue induced him to write poetry” at the outset of his career (138). Niranjan Mohanty in “Sex, Power and Beyond” quotes Jayanta Mahapatra’s candid confession, “Yes, I ruefully admit my first poems were born of love, of love’s selfishness, and of a huge self-pity like the poems of many others whom I admire” (38). Bala in his “Afterword” to Metha’s first collection of poems has said, “Love is a sentiment that transcends time, lands and languages. If it has given poetic inspiration to many, can poets refrain from singing of it?” He goes on to point out “In Metha’s love poems there are intensity of feeling and literary beauty” (15). Commenting on Mahapatra’s treatment of love and sex, Deba P. Patnaik writes, “Woman is a recurrent motif in Jayanta’s poetry – the gentle sensuality of the female sex and the tender act of love-making are so imaginatively projected that the poems acquire some kind of a quiet recapitulatory and meditative quality” (64). One can find a common denominator between Metha and Mahapatra in terms of their outlook on love when a critic like Mohanty comments, “What the poems celebrate is a curious mixture of the two: ecstasy in love and the imminent fear of being separated; dream-world of love and reality of the fleeting moments” (“Dialectics of Love” 237).

Love provokes both the poets to question its mutability. Metha in “Do You Ever Think of Me?” (“Do You Ever Think of Me?”) looks back on where the
poet and his beloved met, how they lived “like song birds” and how they “parted ways.” The poet woefully wonders:

   In the ship come goods –
     on the shore wait traders!
   The cartons arriving change places!
   Do thoughts of love change likewise?

(�魼魻 [Mind] 3-12)

Mahapatra, in a similar frame of mind asks, in the poem “Bells,” “Can love grow old and tubercular with age?/ or unbend by the contortions of constant use.” He is saddened by the fact that

   Spring freezes on the widow’s lips. These
     which rang like bells once, assume silence.
   It seems only the young have need of love:
     mad to feel and touch, always on the world’s edge. (1-6)

The transience of youthful passion makes the poet pensive. Therefore he adds, “Every poem cries the gloom; between,/ possessed, hanging about that tender need/ where a gentle touch makes the dark flood ring” (Svayamvara 12-14).

The poems penned by both the poets on love are mostly expressive of the pain of separation. Mu. Metha writes in “敖ەەڕە ەڕەە” (“The Path of Lovers”) that none of the dreams of lovers came true, “The fresh flowers that
dreamed/ of decorating the marital stage/ drooped and dropped over the coffin!” (Tear). In “Unthreaded Flowers for You”) of the same collection, the poet says to his departed beloved:

I learned to dream

only after meeting you.

Now – only dreams divulge you to me.

When you parted

I thought you snubbed me alone;

but you departed

snubbing the very earth. (88-99)

The poet tearfully wonders when his very night turns into his eyes and shed tears, he has no answer to give to his day. He wistfully remembers:

When you pleaded for a single flower,

my basket was empty.

Now while my baskets

brim with flowers,

the stars twinkle at your tomb. (106-117)

In a similar mood of painful recollection, Mahapatra in “Another Evening” muses thus:

Now this evening of October,

and in this evening you live somewhere.
I bring my face close against the mirror,
looking for you. Your absence
is a part of growing older, and this October
a time for measuring an indefatigable memory. (1-6)

It is a specially resonant and reminiscent evening. “There is no other evening,
because/ other days merely open up my heart quietly,/ letting in the cool wind in the pines” (False 7-9).

Metha in “2.9 (6 rurJ6U” (“Your Memories”) tries to exorcise in vain his poignant memories thus:

With poetic hands drain I
the ocean of memory.
But you by your ocular spring
keep filling it. (False [Romance] 17-24)

What the poet forgets to do is to forget his beloved. Mahapatra strikes the same chord as he writes in “Today”:

Memories come like the wind, and today
peers from the years: over unbridled waves
and tenacious skies, and I know
that you can never be lost
because their secret nets of pain
would always be there to bring you in ....(False 5-10)
Both the lovelorn poets thus relive the past in the present so as to assuage their pangs. There is also in some of their poems celebration of sensuality. They both bring out implicitly or explicitly the sexual facet of male-female relationship without which their love does not find completion. One could see how metaphorically Metha suggests consummation of his union with his beloved in “QwnGrrth” (“Silent Song”), “You are a letter written for me!/ Why haven’t you arrived yet?/ Can I live without reading you” (Dream) 36-41).

In “How High Your Smile” of Close, Mahapatra could be seen using similar figurative phraseology:

my life moves through you
an hour between chastity
and the craven ritual behaviour
i watch the evening wear your smile
as you and i
journey into each other
swapping rhythms
inventing the need for a reason. (1-8)

Both the poets have referred to coitus with different images in different poems. Mu. Metha’s “wp” (“Rain”) portrays a sexually starved housewife whose husband spends his nights playing cards and gambling in casinos. The
woman finally loses her self-control when a stranger at a car festival casts powerfully amorous glances at her. The poet suggestively concludes the poem, “A torrential downpour lashed —/ against her house and that jungle” (-effective [Light] 35-36). Sexual passion is pictured by Metha in terms of flood waters in a poem entitled “Where Does This River Run?” (“Where Does This River Run?”) of the same collection. Here a naive rustic lass living in a shack by a river is lured into sex by a strange young man who comes down swimming. The poet writes:

At a little distance
hidden by a hovel
when that stranger’s flood of passion
overwhelmed her
she compared for a moment
his swimming with the river’s current. (94-107)

Mahapatra in “If I am Wrong” of his first collection writes:
and if i am alone
you hold yourself alone
even though
you arch your back
like the sky overhead
underneath my earth. (II 1-6)
The other images one finds in this poem are those of “rain-pools,” “the flesh in water,” “water of flesh” and so on.

In “The Bride” of his second collection, Mahapatra describes a bride’s anticipated initiation into sex:

And, she herself, so mad and drunk
of her lone vigil, is tuned to the stealthy
opening of the door, a mammoth’s footfalls
on the floor that envelop her bones
in a common harlot’s fare,
for this moment when the bedecked bride,
as stone at touch and belled,
dreads the thunder and lets
the fierce lightning race
wave after wave through her
sun-inflamed flesh. (18-28)

Here, as M.K. Naik comments, “the state of mind of the newly married girl on her wedding night is described throughout in terms of nature-imagery” (“The Two Worlds of Imagery” 101).

It is in terms of a flower and a bee that Metha delineates the deflowering of a woman in “Has He Forgotten Me?” (“Has He Forgotten Me?”) of his third collection:
Why, friend, has the lover of my heart
forgotten me? – Has he
lost his wits after feeding on
honeyed lips?

It was a vernal flower
of freshness said he! – Today
to what flower does he
flit? (1-8)

The lines that Metha and Mahapatra seem to imprint on the mind of a lovelorn reader could be these:

The flowers of pleasures he could not pluck
The flowers blooming in his garden
are seen only as tear blossoms.
Yet his journey is not disrupted
Bearing the crosses of sorrow
walks he. (“தனனியைப்பொய்ப்பிட்டா” [“Tear Blossoms”] 8-14)

This night is quiet.

And the bleeding fit,
heroic, fumbling
into the darkness
underneath,
because

darkness

has to be lived

before it's long enough

to be unlived. ("The Farewell," Close 8-17)

**Conclusion**

Thus two regionally and religiously different poets are seen to belong almost to the same collective mental structure in terms of their social vision and poignant personal responses. Their poems bear out the view that one's self cannot be separated from one's social and historical context. In them one sees that neither poet is confined within the limits of his own personal experience. Georg Lukacs says, "A gifted writer, however extreme his theoretical modernism, will in practice have to compromise with the demands of historicity and of social environment" (477). There is in Metha and Mahapatra subjectivization of experience without negation of social or historical reality.