A major factor in the evaluation of a literary text is to see how effective it proves in making it vibrant with suggestion. One has to realize that the literal meaning of words, which build up a text, in many cases, prove inadequate to convey what a poet really wants to drive at. A word has the potentiality of exploring diverse meanings and it is in this exploration of the scope of a word lies the charm of poetry. Thus a poet suggests a meaning what he is unable to state by literal meaning. It is undeniable fact that the soul of poetry lies in suggestion. This ambivalence in discourse is what determines the artistic quality of a poem. So the excellence of a poem lies in its suggestive power. To put it in the words of the famous critic F.W.Bateson:

[...] poetry is not concerned with what words mean but with what they suggest. A good poem apparently should mean very little while suggesting a good deal. (19)

The present-day poetry in English, be it modern or postmodern, functions effectively to sustain the right level of poetic creed leading to suggestive poetry. But in order to sustain suggestion in his poetry, a poet requires to be aided by some elements, which would bring in the meaning of the poem, be it literal or emotive or socio-cultural. Jayanta Mahapatra proves to be ardently committed to this tradition of poetry which considers suggestion to be the determining factor in the critical appreciation of any poetic excellence. Suggestion operates as the defining characteristic of Mahapatra’s poetry and his unambiguous acknowledgement of the contribution of this trend to poetry is expressed thus:
When a poem expresses everything fully, completely, no scope is left for
suggestion. And suggestion runs at the root of [...] poetry. (*The David H.
McAlpin and Sally Sage McAlpin Lecture 12*)

Hence, his preferred manner of utterance is that of suggested meanings which are always
fresh and charming. There is a profusion of imagery and symbols in his poetry which not
only cover a very wide range but also flow into his pen, most naturally, corroborating to
be integral to the central idea of a poem. At this point, it would be pertinent to refer to the
remark of the poet himself:

[...today's poem utilizes a number of images and symbols to form a
whole, leaving the reader to extricate himself with the valid meaning or
argument from them.[...]this, [...] is true of much of the poetry I have
written. (Mahapatra 85)

The reader takes the pleasure of a poetic journey through images and symbols, in this
distinct form of poetry, which, Mahapatra prefers to call 'a new Surrealism'. His
imagery—well designed and organized—plays a major role in conveying his experience
to the reader. Perhaps the poet had come under the sway of the Imagist movement,
propounded by Ezra Pound and supported by T.S. Eliot, developing an inclination
towards foregrounding the images of a poem with utmost precision.

Critics often brand Jayanta Mahapatra as an obscure poet, who is unable to
communicate his message to his readers, an opacity inherent in his poetry, putting an
impediment to the poetic experience from reaching the reader. But a critical analysis of
the images and symbols employed by Mahapatra clearly reveals that the poet is conscious
of his obligation to share his experience with his readers. In a bid to interact with the
reader, he is careful enough to drop in bits of connective tissue here and there, some kind
of comprehensible associationist logic helping the reader to thread images into tangible
patterns. The present researcher aims at substantiating the fact that what is misinterpreted as obscurity in Mahapatra is actually a deliberate attempt on the part of the poet to install the readers with an interesting task—to embark on some sort of a mental exercise to connect disparate images and attempt to express symbolically the inexpressible.

Mahapatra's poetry is the experience of a powerfully disturbing pleasure, which is shared by both the author and the reader alike. The poet is in a process of constant quest but the museum of images and symbols decline to concede any conclusiveness. The poet distinctly states his position concerning the pattern of imagery embellishing his poetry:

[...] perhaps I begin with an image or a cluster of images; or an image leads to another, or perhaps the images belonging to a sort of 'group' [...] The image starts the movement of the poem [...] but I do not know where I am proceeding in the poem or how the poem is going to end. (Letter to M.K. Naik, dated 16 April, 1983)

There is a trajectory of images in Mahapatra's poetry. Nature imagery forms a significant constituent of Mahapatra's reciprocation to the outside world. A poet, obsessed with the human state of affairs, he exploits the natural forces to serve his purpose. Landscape is his destiny which gets outlined in the form of concrete images, calling to mind a troubled inner consciousness. In the use of a suggested image, a word loses its literal meaning in order to communicate something more. A natural element suggesting human predicament operates as follows:

The wind was I, and the days and nights before. (A Rain of Rites 44)

The setting of the poem indicates that the wind is the harbinger of hope for the fisherman and his daughter. The narrator in the poem grows into not only a customer of the flesh of the destitute daughter of the needy fisherman but also a ray of hope for them, a life-giving force to enable them to subsist a few days more. The poet's sensitivity to the elements of
nature finds response through interplay of visual and auditory images. Thus the sensuous ‘indian ink/ everywhere’ (Close the Sky, Ten by Ten, poem no. 15) portrays the veil of darkness shrouding the entire ambience at nightfall, while ‘the smells flowing like rivers’ (Close the Sky, Ten by Ten, poem no. 13) corroborate the eluding nature of our aspirations. When nature gets delineated in terms of human experience, the outcome is such a striking image that authenticates the poet’s emotive involvements. The benignity of nature conspires with Mahapatra’s subtlety of thought in fabricating images as ‘the petals open like stiffened muscles/ of your belief’ (Svayamvara and Other Poems 1) or ‘roses nervous and abandoned/ strain on their umbilical legs’ (Svayamvara and Other Poems 35), implying the difficulty in communicating the delicacy of love.

Jayanta Mahapatra is adept in expressing the anguish of modern people through some pallid images. ‘The dense jungles’ inhabited by disease, horror and stagnation are infested with tigers whose ‘eyes are glowing red / like virulent boils of pox on dead women and children’ (Relationship 11), portraying a painful consciousness of the present, pitched in darkness. But life always proves to be the same old story as living continues in the thick of diseases like malaria, leprosy, asthma etc. Hence ‘the suffering of the world returns/ like winter’s persistent asthma/ year after year’ (Relationship 13). The devastation brought about by ‘the savage storm’ of 1978 has once again brought us face to face with the reality that in ‘this mouldering country’, our indifferent way of life, devoid of any change or development, is no better than ‘the groaning ruins’ which emerge as ‘the diseased pelvises of time’ (Waiting 56) driving us all to our fatal end. The poet acknowledges that such attacks of ‘asthma and constant migraines/ have abraded the goodness in my heart’ and the diseased life need to be given up in preference to a healthy life of happiness and comfort. His remembrance of the lepers crowding the Jagannath temple at Puri has left an indelible impression in the poet’s consciousness.
Hence the Oriya poet's preoccupation with leprosy becomes perceptible in his choice of imagery. On a summer night, the poet broods over the dishonest expectations and activities of the grocer, Ram Lal, and the very notion that with the 'cow-fat flowing in Ram Lal's veins' he 'would build with pride/ a new temple, / and gift slabs of white marble to the limbless', 'angers the bogus leper in my head' (Waiting 27). The thriving of such evil spirited beings 'on the rickety limbs of the poor' is undoubtedly 'flouting the dread of disease'. At present we bear the tradition of the 'red leper group' (Swayamvara and Other Poems 18) and the 'grief of loins/ dragged/ by leonine faces'. In this malady-prone age, 'the earth rolls/ from one world to the next' apathetic to 'the urine and pus', 'the round clots/ of blood/ bubbling out of/ the unborn', the lonely poet ready 'to call loins sacred' and all such listlessness is owing to the fact that 'the fingers/ of compassion/ drop away/ as bananas frozen'. We are bound to come to terms with this diseased world and reconcile ourselves to the 'shameless fevers/ whose viruses tear the skin like paper' (Relationship 32). Thus the frequent use of images of disease plays a vital role in conveying the contour of the sickly life of modern man.

Jayanta Mahapatra embodies a synthesis of the Muses of science and poetry. With Physics being his profession and poetry his passion, it is quite natural for him to employ images chosen from the world of science, an art which gains maturity in the hands of the scientist-poet. In this age of crisis when infinite gloom, fear and loneliness have reduced the present to a gnawing emptiness, the poet describes man's restricted view of the world in terms of a scientific image:

the rules of our song
that can only move back and forth
like a galvanometer needle
between the zero and the hundred of gloom. (Relationship 24)
Mahapatra's poetry also offers images drawn from the very source of living—the household—which through a stroke of the poet, transcend from the physical plane to one of metaphysical and heavenly insight. Of the variety of domestic imagery employed, the imagery of a house along with its different components and attributes seem to reign supreme. In his essential search for a perfect house, an attempt is made to '...close the sky/ with a square ten by ten/ the roof essential/ hides the apocalyptic ideal' (Close the Sky, Ten by Ten, poem no. 17). The roof, apart from being an 'essential' domestic component ensuring the security of his house, is also a barrier restricting the free flow of light into his life. This man-made society roofed by an awareness of evil, a sense of injustice chokes the breath of the poet turning it into iron:

Awaking at night, I always return

to the black world

beyond the raftered roof and the perfumed bough

where a lonely moan for justice

hardens my breath into something

like the posture of iron.

...  

Darkness from shadows under the roof and leaf, (Life Signs 38)

The darkness and suffocation generated under the roof of this mass-made society rouse a sense of existential anguish in the poet's mind. His yearning for light only results in greater darkness and disappointment. Another significant constituent of a house—the door—appears quite often in Mahapatra's world of imagery. Positioned at the onset of two infinitely incompatible worlds, the door provides admittance to either or both of them—the outside world of dread and the inner world of liberty. The image of door has
its roots running down to his childhood days, which becomes evident from his essay of the same title:

(The door) served both as a refuge from the terrors of the outside world which mutely went on to lock me in, offering me no escape. It became both a haven and a prison, and my mind positioned itself both inside and out [...] There is always something very final, very secretive about doors. (Mahapatra’s “The Door”)

This finality, this secrecy of the door comes back to the poet again and again, opening a little and shutting again, deepening the sense of mystery that permeates his poetry. Torn between the dilemmas of making a right choice, the poet writes:

Between the fear of losing you

and the losing

this body

of your words

opens and shuts doors

into

that time waiting behind (Swayamvara and Other Poems 22)

The door image continues to shut behind the unknown mysteries:

... it keeps me shut to an inexplicable grief,

with those walls of virtue which have given the door its last laugh, (Random Descent 30)
The poet's mind as like the closed door, refuses to open up 'the terrors of sleep', the 'tortured distance of memory' representing the dark caverns of the human psyche which remains unfathomable.

Amid the varied imagery employed by Jayanta Mahapatra, it is his animal imagery which happens to be the most conspicuous. Here matters are characterized in animal terms that contribute a gripping quality to the images—a reverse strategy of shocking the readers into attention. With the clock ticking by, the two wheels of the cycle of time—the creative and the destructive—continue to rotate, in the face of man's ensnared situation amidst mortality and imperfection. To depict such an impotent human circumstance, the poet resorts to an animal image:

The clock,

stabbing in a cobra's tongue across the air, (Relationship 23)

The lifeless thing is assigned with an animal peculiarity to delineate the miracle of living. The poisonous sting of time constantly hassles him with the consciousness of time and death. But 'an unknown bird/ brushing past with a flap of wings' helps the poet counter the sting. The poet-traveller is now all set for an imagined flight beyond time to a far-extending life. Distressed by the debasement around, the poet snipes at the cruel authority of the crafty priests, swarming the temples, whose meaningless words of worship swallow up the fear of the innocent god-fearing people:

a priest's butting nose

explores the silent waste of fears. (Waiting 5)

Exploiting the image of a pig, the poet brilliantly portrays the nature of a priest's vocation in this modern world. Sometimes the poet exploits animal imagery to sketch the dismal entrails of the social psyche. Describing the state of affairs on a day of total solar eclipse, he depicts the crisis of our times through animal behaviour:
And cautiously the crocodile
pushes its long snout from the deep water
like the fearsome Brahmin priest in the temple, (Life Signs 22)
The image of the crocodile strips off the recesses of the Indian mind that adheres to ignorance and despondency.

Firmly rooted in the tradition of Orissa, his motherland, Jayanta Mahapatra’s imagery divulges his strong cognizance of the cultural-religious life whose palpable presence can be felt in the typical pattern of images. In the words of Dilip Chitre, it is ‘the spiritually narcissistic and semantically elusive attitude of the elite Hindu mind’ (81). But such an irresistible impulse also shows a repulsive trait, an involvement which he both accepts and rejects. At times the poet discovers in the ‘faint stars’, the ‘mantras of survival’ (The False Start 48). But soon he dissents his own conviction, which gets pronounced in such appealing images as ‘time flutters like a prayer-flag/ in the dispersed belief atop an abandoned temple;’ (The False Start 15). The poet is suspicious about the reliability of both time and theology. His poetic self responds involuntarily to the ritualistic beliefs and religious practices, sneering ‘the coarse crows’ which ‘perch upon the shoulders of bronze/ and stone/ like crafty priests looking handsome and mysterious/ in the counterfeit glow of light’ (A Father’s Hours 19) and dispensing with ‘the one wide street’ that ‘lolls out like a giant tongue’ (Waiting 6). It is the poet’s unending search for the mystery of the un-understandable which takes the shape of ‘a huge holy flower/ swaying in the wind of greater reasons’. Such use of images gilded with a quality of mystery, assist to transform the paucity of our knowledge concerning the day-to-day realities into deep-rooted myths, possessing the canting authority to swallow and purify the invulnerably faithful human minds. But there arrives such unexpected and singular moment of revelation in life which leads man to divine consciousness. Mahapatra reveals
his occasion of eternal illumination amidst the sea of people swarming to drag the chariot
of Lord Jagannath in the famous Car Festival at Puri:

The giant chariot jostles like a toy
in a million hands:

and in the frail red veins of retinas

spiders of light linger like cores of blessings;

watching, my body soon splits open like a cob of corn. (Waiting 32)

The spiritual depletion of man from god’s benevolence, suggested through the ‘drifting, helpless children when they are lost’, is made up through his redemption with the help of
the Lord’s blessings. The poet appropriately utilizes the image of the corn to present this
unique moment of enlightenment and atonement. His imagery, its strength and appeal,
rests on a stable balance of the poet’s marvellous and visionary participations that insist
on the reader’s willingness ‘not only to go into the poem but into the process and the
thinking which makes it’ (Raghavan 61-62).

Jayanta Mahapatra utilizes the symbolic mode in poetry, attempting to lend a
comprehensible touch to that which is inconceivable, to put into words the indescribable.
The symbols operate not only by providing an impetus to the poem but also relate the
poet’s essential being with the world outside. It is a stylish refinement of expression
through language, furnishing ideas which contribute in bolstering his perception and
origin to his milieu. The open-ended symbolic expressions, though personal at times,
unfold a mythic consciousness drawing the contours of his poetic being. The journey of
Mahapatra, the symbolist, can be traced back to the title of his inaugural volume Close
the Sky, Ten by Ten. He confines himself to a sequestered ‘ten by ten’ world of his own—
a visionary world—where the sky serves as ‘the roof essential’ (Close the Sky, Ten by Ten, poem no. 17). The imagery involving the sun and the moon play a very vital role in Mahapatra’s poetic process. Thus the memory-evoking sun serves as the mode of comprehending the relationship of the poet’s self with reality and with the land of his being. The moon, being the reverse, symbolizes the lofty ideals harboured by man which can never be realized, the life which devoid of any righteous commitment, has been completely wrecked. The poet’s profound feeling of hopelessness sounds clear:

What humility is that which will not let me reveal the real?
What shameful secret lies hidden in the shadows of my moon? (The False Start 50)

Such self-questionings help the poet to analyse the decrepitude of the outer world with no assistance from any quarter of life and ultimately procure shelter in the lyrical world within. The ‘growing moon’ however symbolizes a genuine father-son relationship that the poet took pleasure in his childhood:

These nights of the growing moon
fill us with the feeling of good; (Relationship 14)

It is this filial cognizance that helps him to acquire his relationship with his land. Water, the elemental symbol, reveals Mahapatra’s comprehension of the timeless saga of life and internalization of its undying verities. River, the water-related traditional sacred symbol, has died out for the sensitive poet. Dispossessed of the ability of emancipation and purification, the simplistic river, it seems, can no longer elevate man to an inspired state. Instead, its ceaseless flow has become synonymous with the eternal tragedy and misery of the diseased human existence. This dead river sluggishly carries the silt of centuries which will not allow the life boat move:

the silted boat that will not move;
tamed temple god, this river,
sluggish centuries curled away from its bone, (Life Signs 6)
This archetypal symbol—the river—like the ineffectual rituals, lay bare the dead tradition where ‘all intention’ has died and dried up like the river water. Generation after generation, the river echoes the same tale of desolation and loneliness. It is therefore symbolic of the voyage of life which is never to come to an end:

I am the water in my father’s eyes. (Waiting 11)

Probing into the heart of the symbol, the poet contrasts the rootless existence of the present age with the rich tradition, myths and culture of the past, as represented by the phallus. Man has lost all adherence to his heritage and this relationship, in the opinion of the poet, has to be restored. The poet recourses to the task of giving birth to his poetic ‘temple’ which is again symbolic. Set up on the pillars of the various concepts of Hindu mythology like ‘shakti’, ‘moksha’, ‘dharma’ and ‘karma’, Mahapatra’s temple is conceived to be the body of a woman. A temple, with all its mystery, enchants us and so does woman, the incarnation of ‘shakti’.

Jayanta Mahapatra is a poet of a private world, one of an intimately personal landscape. His images and symbols thus have their origin from the tradition, mythology and down-to-earth realities of his country and his very being makes him declare:

In a country drugged with its image,

I only find my way in metaphor: (A Whiteness of Bone 63)

Treading the journey of life, the poet’s ultimate goal is to overcome all adversities of existence and rest peacefully in the silence of his poetic world. And the bridging of the journey of life with the poetic journey is to be engineered by his rich associative language—the images and symbols. Mahapatra confesses that his poetic journey is to proceed “through symbols and allusions to encompass the human condition” (Mahapatra 84) that will lead him to a world of eternal joy. The clarity of the hidden flow of his mind which originates from a ground reality finds its outlet in his cryptic imagery. The metamorphosis of the world of experiences into obliquely suggestive symbols is equally commendable. The originality of the craftsman finds a brilliant expression in the images and symbols.
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