Chapter - II
Theme and Technique

Since the major theme of my thesis is to evaluate Jayanta Mahapatra in the context of the modern Indian poetry, the technique that he has adopted in developing his theme is to be thoroughly discussed. Though in the realm of modern Indian English poetry, Jayanta Mahapatra is a known voice, he stands face to face with a complex world. So, in course of time, his poetry comes to be a product of his interaction with today's world. As a result, he is often labelled as a difficult, complex and obscure poet. But his candid argument is that – "[...] If, contemporary life is no longer what it was, say, twenty-five years back, can one expect the same content, the same form, the same substance from contemporary poems?" (Mahapatra85). In fact, he is a pathfinder of a new genre of poetry which undertakes a poetic journey where both the content and the form enjoy an equal emphasis. Mahapatra’s poetry is of an exploratory nature and in an interview, he once remarked:

My suggestion would be to read the poem three times – or may be six times – over. And not to get the meaning word by word or line by line but to get a general feeling out of the whole poem. And if there is something in the poem that touches a reader, that would be nice. I mean, it is not necessary that one should understand the poem in its entirety, its totality. If the poem evokes a response, if it moves the reader, then it has done its deed. (Published in Tenor, March 1992)

Mahapatra is a prolific poet. His evolution as a poet is closely knit with the successive books of verse. For him, poetry is the piece of an art that demands lifelong chiselling to achieve a quality of permanence. He therefore loves experimenting with language, poem
after poem, in an attempt to experience inwardness with it. The ardent practice with which he handles English enables him to capture the poetic flow. Since his advent in the poetic world, Mahapatra observes his poetry to have undergone a constant change, every time encompassing a more extensive domain of emotive adventure. His poems, which can hardly be paraphrased, transmit a new experience. It is a kind of self-discovery which is manifested in the poet's frank statement:

I started writing late [...] When I began, I suppose I was more carried away by what the English language could do; I was so much obsessed by the feel for words, their sound qualities. It was a wrong thing perhaps, this craze for language, and hence my first poems were in a way attempts in which the language left the ideas of the poems behind them, lost in the depths of words. But as the years went by, and I went on to publish more, finding out what my contemporaries in other countries were writing, my notions of poetry kept changing. Today I see that the idea behind the poem is slowly beginning to surface, and my poems are perhaps being more direct ones. But I am in no position to talk about my poems. (Jayanta Mahapatra, in a letter to Pushpinder Syal, dated 3rd May, 1983)

Mahapatra has brought in a revolution into Indian English poetry. There was an elemental transition, a conclusive swap from the prevalent trend, for his poetry comprised of "a strong stand on language", "new modes of expression" and "the ideas of the self".

Jayanta Mahapatra's refashioning of the predominant practices in the field of Indian English poetry renders it quite difficult a job to oblige his poetics within any definite category. It is a peculiar poignancy that marks his poems. This is what we get from the epigraph of Mahapatra's most ambitious and successful poem *Relationship*, the cue of which is derived from Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself*:

36
I am large,
I contain multitudes.
I exist as I am, that is enough.
If no other in the world be aware, I sit content,
And if each and all be aware I sit content. (Epigraph of Relationship 7)

It is an assertion of the panorama of life, proclaiming the theme-song of the existence of beings. Naturally, the thematic concerns of Mahapatras's poetry are multifarious. So, in our attempt in the critical evaluation of Mahapatra's poetry, it is impossible to restrict his poetry to any particular theme or one ruling idea. As described by Gray Corseri “It is fugue-like in construction, repeating and amplifying theme after theme, images, symbols, melodies[...]” (181). He lives in a personal world of his own, probing deep within the internal vista. In an attempt to specify the characteristic trait of Mahapatra, Keki N. Daruwalla aptly concludes: His is a poetry of the isolated, rather than the alienated self, a poetry of silence and solitudes, a poetry in which energy is not expended in the narrative but in contemplation. (17)

An attempt to assess the poet's journey from his experimental first volume Close the Sky, Ten by Ten, towards a mature expression of poetic experience in the seventeenth volume Random Descent, proves to be a challenging march. Intended to probe the passionate romantic self, the first two collections, namely, Close the Sky, Ten by Ten and Svayamvara and Other Poems proclaimed a hesitant but determined start of a newcomer, obsessed with form and language – the dominating themes pertaining to loneliness, sexual love and personal relationships. This formative period was followed by a confident shift from the abstract to the concrete and a considerate awareness of the man and milieu finds articulation in the following volumes. A Rain of Rites, Waiting and A Father's Hours juxtapose the subjective and the objective, the inner and the outer worlds, centering round
the theme of the poet’s rootedness in the myths, legends, culture and tradition of his
native land, the theme of the poet’s relationships – the despair arising out of his inability
to establish an effective relationship with his parents, friends and society at large.
Tortured by feelings of doubt and uncertainty, guilt and agony, it is the regenerating rain,
that penetrates the lives of people like a joyous ceremony, which helps him transcend
time against the timeless, the present against the past, waking against dream. ‘Rain’, as if,
permeates the poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra and the poet has no hesitation in admitting “I
think I have always written one poem. That is rain” (Jayanta Mahapatra in conversation
with R. K. Swain) (Swain 77). The poet’s parched existence in a decaying world makes
him look at rain for the desired renewal. In an interview with Rabindra K. Swain,
Mahapatra explains what rain signifies to him:

There are two things which connect human beings: what is above and what
is below. The sky is above you and the earth beneath you and anything that
connects earth and sky is rain. It is a bond you cannot miss. It has a
process itself. It is a link. Therefore, rain is a linking process, and so, the
very act of your living (Swain 44)

Having drawn nourishment from an agrarian country, Mahapatra is fully alive to the fact
that rain – the animating, revitalizing natural phenomenon – which flushes the arid land,
affects also the inhabitants extensively. It is a land of blind ritualistic practices and
beliefs, where people tenaciously try to follow their unwavering way of life, while the
downpouring rain penetrates their lives, trying to bring about a renewal with its
sacramental touch. Such an artificial existence guided by concocted conventions can be
made congenial for human habitation, after it has been cleansed and purified by the rain
drops. But for Mahapatra, the raining torrents, supposed to sustain life, bring only sterile
thoughts of renewal and regeneration. Rain emerges in the poet’s mind as a manifestation
of emptiness and vacuum, similar to the hollow, monotonous customs of the unthinking people. V.A.Shahane clarifies the proposition: Rain, for Mahapatra, is thus both a ritual and reality — ritual of purifying oneself as well as the reality of seasons, the cyclical change in the Indian year, in Orissa’s wet and fertile landscape[...](147).

The poet’s involvement with rain results in the creation of a huge bulk of ‘rain poems’ not simply sparkling a train of reflections in the poet’s mind, but also constituting a valuable level of his poetic achievement. The pattern of sin and redemption which stir the imagination of the Christian poet makes him approve of the purifying role of rain which not only washes off the earthly sins but also drains the gall into the all-absorbing ocean — a wide representative of the merciful, forgiving God. Rain, which embellishes, fertilizes and vitalizes his homeland Orissa, is a positive welcome:

The sky’s face expressionless.

An oriole call echoes away in the sullen grayness,

the book of earth throbs with the light of things.

A pond heron floats warily in a rain pool.

Its face a mask, it pauses for another look around.

Grass everywhere is huge and moves forward to kill. (*Burden of Waves and Fruit* 7)

Rain animates the entire landscape which ‘throbs’ with life. A monsoon day also reminds the poet of the heartless existence in an ‘aimless’ society where ‘plagiarized smiles and abstract talk convinced ourselves’:

At dawn when rain scratches against my skin

I hear again that familiar beat which did nothing

but merely quicken for someone’s presence,
and I hear the silence of today

in its song of dead refrains: (*Life Signs* 42)

The rain drops make the poet nostalgic and a retrospective look at the past makes him realize the futility and artificiality of modern life. But such a moment of dejection is illuminated with a ray of hope when rain streams down to cleanse the blemishes:

* . . . . . The rain

has come like an organized movement,

like a long tongue of tireless priests

that will not fail to lick your palms

of guilt and atonement.

The sacred crows reach into their glassy skins,

spreading their wings

with clumsy, sardonic persistence,

drowning out the progress of the rain’s logic,

the pressure of clean, transparent water (*Waiting* 45)

The clean and transparent rain water is undoubtedly a rain of rites which evokes the past, reflects the present and predicts the future. But rain, synonymous to life in the dictionary of Mahapatra, capable of drowning the sinful act of the amoral world, makes the poet pose a relevant question. Is rain capable of giving back the aboriginal purity which man has lost? No, the rain brings no fresh air for the poet and the void finds expression thus:

* The rain I have known and traded all this life

is thrown like kelp on the beach.

Like some shape of conscience I cannot look at,
a malignant purpose in a nun’s eye.


What holds my rain so it’s hard to overcome? (A Rain of Rites 10)

It is a different kind of rain that no more drenches his torrid mind, fails to act like a balm and ‘breaking away into light/ before it reaches its objective’. The dichotomy existing in Mahapatra’s concept of rain finds its resolution in the fact that rain, which links separation and union, gloom and joy, despair and hope, past and present, is above all the harbinger of a better tomorrow, for though much is lost, all is not lost. Rain, ‘the clear, wise eyes of water, running’, arrests the reality of the present state of being:

Watching behind the wall, I see
it play over people, piled up to their silences.

It creates an impression of vastness.

It quietly opens a door. (A Rain of Rites 11)

Locked in a vast world of hushed entity, it is the regenerating rain which opens up the door of racial memory – the only refuge in an ‘endless desert’. Rain not only makes the poet hark on ‘compelling’ memories –

All night I have waited for the rain to end,
the forbidden memories ringing, compelling
footfalls among the ruins, ...(A Rain of Rites 24)

but also ruminate on some critical philosophical aspect:

. . . who knows
what’s dying underneath
a growing blade of grass?
Or what habit palpitates
inside the dark pit of love:

art, ceremony or voice that lies

under my aimless hearing of the rain? (The False Start 13)

Rain fails to search out an appropriate answer. The world which is engulfed deep
within oneself is the real world. The poet’s search for a voice of humility continues under
his ‘aimless hearing of the rain’. Through a realization of the wasted present, it is possible
to construct a rich future:

Rain stands on the margins of my time,

a discovery, like theft,

making me careful how I lay the hour down,

looking at the trees growing too large

for my little yard, filling with lurid light,

and I hardly see spring coming in. (Burden of Waves and Fruit 48)

But the ironical statement simply indicates that the wasted picture of winter is a forecast
that spring is not far behind. Rain, the life-giving force for the sensitive artist, he is sure,
will not cast him down. For the poet it is ‘that substance which makes up my life, those
blurs of vague light that pulsate with the days’ (Mahapatra, in Journal of Literary Studies
edited by P.N.Das, 44):

In the end

I come back to the day and to the rain. (Life Signs 48)

A discussion on this major theme remains incomplete without a note on the perennial rain
that perpetually drops on Mahapatra’s poetic world, enkindling his imagination
throughout the year and throughout his life. In the June rain, the poet ‘trying hard/ to give
darkness and light an organic unity’ and ‘I write my futile poem’, strikes upon a very crude reality:

...vague benevolence of mine

that means little more than an unwillingness
to say those words that the tragedy of chaos demands.(Shadow Space 30)

The poet feels to be out of tune in such tragic circumstances of an unpredictable world. But, quite contrary, the rain pouring down from a July sky, silently rouses the desire for sexual passion:

Rain that falls silently in a July sky,
catching in your trembling skin

pearls of fire,

wet pigeons’ voices on the naked ledge,

a hand longing for love in the dark – (The False Start 31)

Again, in a time of winter rain, the poet ‘learn(s) to smile’. Today having reached the winter of his life, the world seems to have a much softened look, having come to terms with the existing state of affairs:

Today why does the north wind lack the rage

of the conquerors of our land? . . . (Bare Face 18)

Ultimately, it is the season of the old rain when the poet, knocking on the doors of decrepitude, can hear the chariot of death ‘hurrying near’:

This is the season of the old rain,

always with much to answer before time is done

with decay and death...(Burden of Waves and Fruit 27)

His bare shoulders are now ‘like the shape of a deserted park bench in the rain’ (Burden of Waves and Fruit 52). The poet looks forward to the rain to act as his eye opener, to
help him wisely get to the bottom of reality with the dream of setting up a lovable and enduring future:

...And now, it carries one away,
the seen miracle in those eyes, closing and opening,
revealing neither sorrow nor hope nor loss
and cutting down the fruit of my silent season. (Burden of Waves and Fruit 27)

The False Start undertakes contemplative sojourns back and forth in time, a metaphoric and symbolic quest of the poet for the meaning of self and reality. In the midst of countless words, it is an element of eloquent-silence that permeates the poems, dipped in the essence of time and eternity. Taking the form of a long modern poem and winning for him the prestigious Central Sahitya Akademi Award, Relationship embarks on a fanciful pilgrimage in an endeavour to understand his own world and the world without.

The blissful stones of the ruins of Konarka remain a dumb witness to the constructive and destructive role played by time. It is exclusively a participation in the past which would enable the poet to surpass time and death, asserting the life force. Once again the poet feels anguished of breathing in a degenerating world, robbed of human sensibility where agony, despair and absurdity reign supreme and things past have lost their excellence. Life Signs depicts the poet’s ceaseless search for meaning of life in the various signs of life teeming the landscape of Orissa. The thematic concern of the poet lies in the voicing of the condition of human loss and how man is gradually becoming bereft of all spiritual and emotional affluence. He is now forced to resign to the painful and indifferent present. Dispossessed Nests records a switching of both locale and tone where one can hear the cry of a disintegrating world. The chaos and horror dominating
contemporary life is captured in glowing terms through the tormenting recollection of the country’s recent tragedies – the barbarous killings in Punjab and the massive gas-tragedy in Bhopal. The volume arrests the grievous outburst of a sensitive poet who feels to have been shocked and betrayed by a violent and rowdy community. With the succeeding collection *Burden of Waves and Fruit*, Mahapatra’s poetry gains uniqueness and clarity.

Mahapatra’s most enterprising long poem, *Temple*, following Indian tradition, registers the spiritual perception of human suffering to be the only path of resurrection and redemption. He sounds somewhat feminist when he chooses the suffering of woman to be its theme. A woman represents the divine force ‘shakti’ – one who can create as well as destroy – as highlighted through the sufferings of the eighty-year-old Chelammal, having taken recourse to suicide being driven by hunger and loneliness, and the twelve-year-old young girl being gang raped and murdered. The plight of the Indian woman assumes a mythical dimension symbolizing a country suffering under the weight of hunger and poverty. It is the rising to action of the Putana lying asleep within the suffering individual, the eruption of a sleeping volcano, to arrive at the ultimate consciousness of ‘staying alive’. *A Whiteness of Bone* registers the poet’s anxiety and pain at the existing state of chaos and disorder lying veiled behind both the rural and urban scenario of the country. He stands face to face with the challenges of this everyday world disturbed with cruelty, violence, poverty and hunger, with people remaining confined within the boundary of their adjacent trivial concerns. Thus the persisting theme of this collection is the daily life of an average Indian against the backdrop of a country torn by mindless bloodshed. *Shadow Space* plays in the midst of darkness and light meditating on life as observed by the vibrant poet.

The shadow of old age looms large on the ageing poet and the pathos concerning the socio-political goings-on is articulated in silence. Mahapatra’s recent book of poems
*Bare Face* presents with fine insight and clarity the existential dilemma of the mundane life with all its uncertainties, vulnerabilities and inescapable destiny. The poet embarks on a kind of soul-searching and his troubled conscience makes him realize that it is the string of historical relationship that binds the self and society together. Apart from dwelling on matters of the past as well as haunting personal memories, the saint-cum-stoic poet continues to meditate on such burning social issues as poverty, decay, sufferings, political betrayals, matters of disillusionment and the apathy of the privileged. He feels that the poets alone are able to redeem this bleak and bare picture by assuming the moral courage of Gandhi who could speak the truth fearlessly. The last volume of Mahapatra, *Random Descent*, organized in three sections, once again chisels out poetry from the pain and terror of the landscape around him, only to reflect the guilt and uncertainty of his innerscape, from which there has been, since the beginning, no escape. Walking through the corridors of silence and loneliness, his ceaseless endeavour to unravel the unrivalled Oriya tradition continues to unmask the brutal truths of present day living. Couched in his own not-very-easy reading style of language, the latest volume, both thematically and stylistically poses a happy provocation for the readers.

Jayanta Mahapatra is caught in the currents of this contemporary world. His day-to-day experiences govern the choice of concurrent themes appertaining to matters demanding serious consideration. 'Hunger' emerges as Mahapatra's key theme, enabling him to dig out an authentic picture of the milieu. In his mind's eye, 'rain' and 'hunger' are analogous:

It's rain again. Going on and on all day.

Like hunger. You would think this country has nothing but seven hundred million bellies.

No, I haven't closed my eyes... (*Burden of Waves and Fruit* 29)
In this context, it would be pertinent to consider what M. Tarinayya has to say regarding this conceit:

[...] the unexpected comparison between 'rain' and 'hunger' gives us a jolt[...] Rain, the ancient symbol of fertility appears to the poet as anything but life-giving. Monsoon rain and hunger, both elemental – one of impersonal nature and the other man-made and of the human body – are both paradoxically ever present realities in India. It is the second of those two realities, hunger, as though it were impersonal like the incessant rain which the foreigner sees and hears about and hence the poet says that Kazuko Shiraishi who is in Tokyo, one of the world's technologically and scientifically advanced metropolitan cities, 'would think that this country has nothing but seven hundred million bellies.' (61-62)

With wide-opened eyes, the poet sees hunger all around and seven hundred million hungry bellies bellowing for food. But such a humane consciousness of the crux of everyday life, finds root deep within the poet's psyche. Hunger bears an inseparable link with poverty and destitution and the resulting crisis lay like an irrecoverable wound torturing the psyche of the Christian poet. Struggling with his own spirit, Mahapatra composed Grandfather with the notes 'Starving, on the point of death, Chintamani Mahapatra embraced Christianity during the terrible famine that struck Orissa in 1866'. It was hunger which drove the poet's grandfather to embrace Christianity and get distanced from the ancestral Hindu religion – a sore never to be healed. Hence poverty left a permanent stamp in his very being and pleading for the helpless grandfather, the poet asks:

\[\text{Did you hear the young tamarind leaves rustle in the cold mean nights of your belly? Did you see your own death? . . . (Life Signs 19)}\]
This burden of the indelible mark of hunger which he has to shoulder all his life, equips him with such compassion that hardly do we find a representation of hunger escaping Mahapatra’s eyes, unnoticed. Driven by social consciousness, he draws vivid pictures of hunger – a grim reality of today. Mahapatra gives a detailed description of poverty and crippled survival through the ‘helpless looks’ of women workers and lepers, all of whom are ‘trapped like a leaf in a basin of water’ (*Life Signs* 39). Hunger creates a wound in the heart of the poet and he paints a cheerless picture of the world starving, crying and dying. They live a wounded life, immersed in darkness. The poet’s sensitive ear can catch the inaudible cry of the hunger-stricken men, women and children:

Perhaps it would be best
to discover it, sometime,
and show it to all the world.
Perhaps the child knows it, sacred relic,
growing up with the helplessness and the generous tears.

We have been hearing voices through the night, (*Life Signs* 3)

The poet’s feeling for India is deep-seated. It is through the establishment of roots in a land of poets, rich with art and culture and the dawning of a racial consciousness, the poet achieves a feeling of consummation with his race and tradition. The roots of Mahapatra’s poetry find nourishment from the acceptance of life which fuses the past and the present and in turn heralds the future: Now I stand among these ruins, / waiting for the cry of a night-bird (*Relationship* 35). The poet’s origin lies in a land of silence where the mystery of living is stored in the engravings of the ancient stones. Stone, emerging as the ‘lingam’, depicts the people’s idea of Lord Shiva, the latent power and source of all
creation. An awareness of the necessity to bring the past back to life, makes the poet invoke the stones – whether they be ruins of temples or the phallus of Shiva:

there I stand, close to the stone,

trying to smear it with blood

to give it life, (Waiting 23)

The fleeting time tears man away from the rich tradition, the root of culture, leaving him bare with an unidentifiable identity. With such a state of being, man’s only refuge lies in ‘the phallus of enormous stone’:

and yet my existence lies in the stones

which carry my footsteps from one day into another,

down to the infinite distances,...(Relationship 11)

Meena Alexander explains the relevance of stone in Mahapatra’s poetry: Stone is crucial to Mahapatra’s cosmogony. It was there at the beginning. It is the penetrable permanent. He inhabits an earth where monuments of stone crumble and crack, yet survive in the same realm as human beings, the glory of stone glimpsed momentarily by consciousness (42). In a poem entitled The Stones, its import is justified in such lines as:

Stones, whose eyes have had no expression in them

Stones, like governments, who have no honour at all

Stones, whose long arms easily batter and kill (Random Descent 47)

With the passage of time, the glory and pride of the age-old stones have been defamed. But, it is the stones which will continue to remind us that ‘we haven’t lost our minds’. Thus ‘we will let them live’ since amidst the holocaust around us, the stones only retain the mystery of survival. Truly speaking, stone stems from the earth and draws sustenance from it. Naturally, it is the stone – the poet’s consciousness of the self – which will unite him and establish his roots with the vast world:
At the touch of stone
the immensity becomes your own: gods, fathers, sons,

binding into earth, becoming one and centre. (A Rain of Rites 13)

The stones of the temple help to recover the past and reunite the poet with his origin and source. It is the issue of identity that needs to be established in the face of the cruelty of time which engulfs man and renders him indifferent to both the glories and suffering of his ancestors. But the poet's journey, back and forth in the unfathomable flow of time, makes him realize that he is 'pinned to the stone' (A Rain of Rites 13) wherein lies his existence, his self. The ancient stone, in which the age-old myths of his land lie buried, bring forth a racial memory and consciousness, assisting in the creation and recreation of a world smashed by time. Time plays a paradoxical role—it heals the wounds caused by life's sufferings and helps man realize the mystery of death through an acceptance of the timelessness of time, which is nothing but understanding life better. In the words of P.C. David, Mahapatra's concept of time has much in affinity with that of T.S. Eliot:

Eliot finds all time 'unredeemable' and for Mahapatra it is something inescapable. He is detached from his perspective of time; but for Mahapatra time carries a sense of urgency, a feeling of helplessness at the thought of not being able to escape from the instant which possesses him and perhaps becomes an instant of reckoning, bearing with it a consciousness of the final test of life. (252)

Time is eternal and destines one to the silence of the graveyard. But it is the perpetuity of the moss-covered tombstone which affirms the inevitability of death:

isn't it death again
that brought you your meanings of life
and then guided you back to it? (The False Start 75)
It is the poet’s acute concern with time that makes him measure death with the silence of stones:

And who would not sharpen his limp present on stone,
who would not take a few steps
into that garden that sleeps with dreams in its flowers (*Burden of Waves and Fruit* 56)

It is the silence both within him and without, which the poet accumulates and internalizes to defend him from the realities around by uniting dream with reality. Intensely aware of the elusiveness of silence, Mahapatra ventures to measure silence with the antiquity of stones, the myth of sleep and the cleansing effect of rain. In an interview entitled “Inner View: N.Raghavan talks to Jayanta Mahapatra” published in *Tenor*, the poet explains the fact thus:

Silence is a sort of idea in my work, which may come as a revelation, and perhaps it will come [...] as a result of living simply [...] not aggressively [...] and the mind begins to flow like water. Or perhaps silence is an opposite pole to this: I mean there’s always something eluding one in life [...] and that something I have never been able to find, even in whatever I can call my own [...] like a wife or a son [...] let me call that my silence. (60)

It is a world where ‘the voices of old waves drift into silence’. But still it is on the ‘crutches of silence’ that Mahapatra’s poetry gains a fearless tempo, as it opens for him a vast world of intimating quietude:

It creates an impression of vastness.

It quietly opens a door. (*A Rain of Rites* 11)
The journey of the poet from the ‘fugitive root’ to the ‘flashing tendril’ can come full circle only when the guilty conscience gets rid of the fear of the past and learns to concentrate the past on and prospect the future through the present:

Time faces me; and there
like the lurking madness in a tyrant’s eye
is the whim of another day,
dark wings shut and unmoving in the blue.
This day is an instant which possesses me,
from which I cannot escape; . . . (The False Start 15)

Jayanta Mahapatra’s greatness as a poet rests not simply on his wide ranging themes but also on the skilful handling of those themes. He lays great emphasis on the technique of a poem. It is poetry of evolution where the poetic self fluctuates between the traditional and the modern, taking recourse to multiple themes, yet never really changing. But in an effort to express the inexpressible, the form or technique employed undergoes innovations and alterations. Treading the path of risky exploration, Mahapatra’s craftsmanship finds expression in his structuring of a poem, encompassing significant criteria like diction or sentence construction, sound, rhythm and rhyme. His use of the language – though foreign – manifests the growth of the poet from one volume to another:

Being essentially of an exploratory nature, his poetry moves from a random pattern of words towards a more rigorous discipline exercised in the structuring of individual poems. (Syal198)

Mahapatra lives in a world of words, diving into the depths of which provide him with immense pleasure. His reliance on language in general and words in particular, is explicitly spelt out when the poet says:
When all else has failed, 

the poem’s words are perhaps justified. (Life Signs 34)

Deviating from the prevalent trend of systematically patterned poems heaped with grave contents, Mahapatra traverses the way of indirection playing with words and language marking his prominence among the Indian English poets.

From the very introductory volumes, Mahapatra discloses his fondness for words and sounds as best revealed by the Eliotian epigraph of the first collection: Our words have wings. Characterized by the pattern of short lines, Mahapatra’s initial poetry throws grammar into disorder either by dropping verbs or omitting punctuation marks, but keeping the ear open to sounds which enable him in the linkage of words. For the poet it is the experience that matters. It is the fleeting emotions which typically fit into the snappy, disjointed lines. Mahapatra proves him to be an experimentalist in congruity with the new poetry emerging in the later half of the 1960s exploring the conflicting world of the unconscious. The disconnected and vague structure of the early poems gradually attains accuracy and spontaneity. A detailed analysis of two poems representative of the two halves – the former and the latter – of his poetic career, clarifies the transformation of the cheerful unconcerned explorer gaming with words to the mature artist who measures the sad music of the heart through the creation of a worldwide panorama. Here is a complete poem from the first volume:

**WOMAN**

Even

when she is

Even

when she is not  (Close the Sky, Ten by Ten , poem no. 44)
It is explicit that the poem is composed of two fragments, where two contrary clauses, devoid of complements, run side by side, unable to extricate any undisputable semantic possibility out of it. The technique employed in the course of handling a foreign language is the propagation of infinite echoes coupling the thoughts and feelings together. Mahapatra tosses with the language as well as the syntax. Drifting from the sphere of predictable logic, Mahapatra, as Eliot calls, prefers treading the path of ‘the logic of imagination’:

[... ] he loves to juxtapose the concrete and the abstract, the vague and the clear, the idea and the emotion, and that he always tries to adventure in the dark, exploring the penumbra of consciousness [...]. (Desai117)

Thus it is through a juxtaposition of the opposites, a fusion of the contraries and the application of a ‘unified sensibility’ that Mahapatra’s poetry matures and advances. Mahapatra’s early poetry, no doubt, thrives on certain linguistic techniques. But, over the years, the enthusiasm lending vivacity to his former poems gives way to a mood of pessimism, although managed with superb maturity and masterly craftsmanship. Some lines from a poem Woman in Love of a later volume would illustrate the point:

And if on the endless blue waves of your body
someone leaves a boat, a touch,
it would only drift about, like a child asleep,
tired after the day, (The False Start 24)

Gifted as he is with the finest of imagination, Mahapatra transcends all other Indian English poets through an unusual exploitation of the reserves of the unconscious using the surrealist techniques. It is an exploration of the poet’s inner world, connecting the self with the composite oblivion of the country as a whole. There is an unusual calmness and a certain meditative quality about his poems. The external is portrayed
through certain unrelated pictures, which either ironically or dramatically present the sorrow and remorse tearing the poet’s mind:

And yet, awed by the forgotten dead,

I walk around them: thirty-nine graves, their legends

floating in a twilight of baleful littoral,

the flaking history my intrusion does not animate. (*The False Start* 70)

In fact, Mahapatra’s is the poetry of self-questioning. He is a sensible artist whose poetry not only displays the functioning of a receptive and flexible insight, but also changes form and shape with the passage of time. His candid statement runs as follows:

Today, I would say that my poetry suffers from such endless questioning […] which man is after […] (*The Illustrated Weekly of India* 30). The trick of asking questions is employed as a tool, used judiciously to expose the feelings of his heart and his identity as an original Indian English poet whose consciousness about his poetry and the people around undergoes a process of constant renewal. Question form is a prevalent technique which marks the poet’s probing into the doubts and predicaments of a conscientious mind – puzzled and indecisive – floundering in a maze of unchanging life. Whenever the poet runs the risk of confronting an attack from the external world, he takes recourse to the use of a first person pronoun which weaves around itself the protective cocoon-like covering of self-questionings. In this context, it would be pertinent to quote a few lines from an essay, “Poetry of Self-Questioning: Jayanta Mahapatra”, by Rabindra K. Swain:

The self-questionings are the ribs of the body of Jayanta Mahapatra’s poetry. Many of his successful poems are crowded with those silent questions, or questions otherwise silenced by the quiet withdrawal or refusal of the poet to answer in what follows as further bewilderments: (358)
In Mahapatra's poetry, questions are often piled upon questions to construct a poetic world of his own where he would live along with his pleadings, in the hope of a better future. A vital question which, time and again, ignites the poet's guilt-ridden mind is: Are you a Hindoo? (A Rain of Rites 22). Such a nerve-racking question disturbs the poet's very being, the answer of which he tries to find out through a silence which, with its deceptive placidity, pours out the lava of a speculative mind kindled with the dilemmas and disorders of modern existence.

Ignoring the conventional patterns of literary usage, Mahapatra proves his mettle by creating his own artistry—form, vocabulary etc. Questioning the impotency of 'a God who boasts of a higher form of algebra' (Random Descent 69), his doubts and misgivings, couched in prose pattern, emerge out as a volley of questions:

> What can I fear? Is there anything to tell you that's true? Your God, for instance, who you thought had brought you ecstasy once? Do you still believe in a god who has further plans for you? (Random Descent 37)

Loss of faith in the supremacy of God becomes evident in the degradation of the 'g' in 'God' from capital to small letter within two lines.

To conclude, Mahapatra's poetry registers the development of the poet and his understanding of the things abounding the world around him also undergoes constant changes. It is therefore quite natural that the themes of his poetry would not remain the same forever but change with the changing contours of life and time: My themes in my poems have changed, some of them. I am keenly aware of the world I live in today; (Zadrozny 149).

In an endeavour to extract meaning from the fragmented existence, the poet tries to define humanity in his own terms, the themes shifting from the desolation of personal experience to a more diligent and compassionate appreciation of life. Such a diversion
from the extremely personal to more objective musings is a significant step forward, implemented through innovative techniques of fusion, providing a new drive to modern Indian English poetry. In the words of Srinivasa Iyengar, Mahapatra’s poetry, his work and vision combine what is best in the romantic and mystic tradition of Tagore and Aurobindo and the modern tradition of Ezekiel, Ramanujan and Parthasarathy.
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