Chapter - III
Theme of Love with a Difference

The vast canvas constituting the corpus of Jayanta Mahapatra’s poetry encompasses the poet’s life-long endeavour to establish an enduring bond between his two selves – within and without. Life is beset with the complex knots of modern existence. Mahapatra’s poetry makes an attempt to untie these tangles of life and living. In doing so, he has resorted to the all-encompassing influence of love. So, the theme of love receives a practical handling in the hands of the poet, and thereby provides life with sustenance. Hence the poet of life and the poet of love reconcile together without any emotional exaggeration. Mahapatra prefers to stand apart from Ezekiel’s misanthropic treatment as well as Kamala Das’s nauseous handling of love. It is love with a difference.

Conventional criticism grades Mahapatra as an excellent love-poet, yet not to be regarded as one of the highest order. But the truth lies in the fact that for the first time Indian English poetry had been gifted with an unconventional love-poet who introduced love as an ethical presence in a sex-haunted world. It is indeed a unique presentation, where love and sex, instead of being compartmentalized, are treated as two sides of the same coin, exposing not only the multi-dimensional facades but also the vulnerability of interpersonal relationships. A comprehensive study of the theme of love in Mahapatra’s poetry is sure to reveal how a delicate and yet a realistic touch tinges it with a distinct colour.

Love, with all its mysteries, provided Jayanta Mahapatra with the creative impetus, rousing the Muse within him, which the poet very humbly admits:

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 whom I admire (Mahapatra, Introduction to his poems in “Youth Times”, 10).
The extreme gentility and composure shown in the projection of love theme provide the poems with a sense of propriety and humanity. It never appeals the base human instinct by degrading it to the level of vulgar physicality. What Mahapatra tries to do is to strike a balance between sensuality and spirituality, the body and the mind. It is a passionate yet restrained manipulation of the subject, a “creative indirectness of approach” (Mahapatra 47) which combines love and sex into a unified whole. Love, many a time charged with sexuality, is garbed in such metaphysical abstractions that the sexual urge loses its edge only to lead it to be blissful. An undercurrent flows deep within, subtly suggesting that the true essence of love lies in its purity, a consummation of the man-woman relationship.

Jayanta Mahapatra, a poet immersed in Indian sensibility, is conscious of the transience of human life – the ultimate triumph of the soul over the perishable body. Thus for the poet love evolves not out of the body, but of the soul, desiring to establish a bridge between the two. In a world where corruption and discontentment reign supreme, it is love that adds meaning to life. The poet is sure that the pure joy of love is capable of compensating all that is lost. Delving into the depths of the essence of love, he discovers that love, like poetry, can never ‘grow old and tubercular with age’ but can remain ‘unbend by the contortions of constant use’ (Swayamvara and Other Poems 16). For Mahapatra, there lies a close affinity between the body and words – both of which are the means of correspondence. Hence a woman and her body and an experience of the overtures of love give expression to the genesis of poetry. Such a contention of drawing an analogy between sexual love and poetic creation is obviously a bold departure:

Between the fear of losing you

and the losing
this body
of your words
opens and shuts doors
into
that time waiting behind

I attempt to fit mine
in words
that never belong to me (Svayamvara and Other Poems 22)

Vacillating between doubt and hope, the poet tries to fit the heart and the mind within the framework of his poetry. To him the concept of love and poetry is instinctively creative by nature. The variety in Mahapatra’s treatment of the theme of love finds illustration when the passionate act of love verges on to a creative activity. Here passion and poetry are metaphorically blended together:

the walls join themselves
to two chairs
a tumbler beside the bed

...with the wave i carry my body

having made love in successful way (Close the Sky, Ten by Ten, poem no.23)

The poet sketches here the picture of two lovers engaged in passionate love. But the joining of the walls carries greater significance than merely hinting at physical union. It is also the process involved in the poet’s figuring out a poem where the interior and the exterior merge to take the form of a united whole.
Mahapatra evaluates love from different perspectives which remains mostly unfulfilled. No matter how much openly and honestly he speaks of love and sex, the unavoidable truth is that every intimate love relationship is bound to end up in nothing but loneliness. The most effective way of perceiving the passionate moment is through silence. Thus even while celebrating physical union in conjugal life, the poet realizes solitude to be its only inescapable outcome:

You walk over
to me without a word,
in the innocent
trimmings
of your clean nakedness.

. . .
When my body closes
at last
the tinsel is gone.

You leave me
no words.

A plain sadness that
I trust.

You are kind. (*Swayamvara and Other Poems* 37)

Apparently, the poem seems to be a commemoration of the euphoric moments of marital life. The husband is quite satisfied to possess her. But the needless recognition of the lady’s kindness, ‘You are kind’, makes the reader develop qualms about the credence of the husband’s ‘trust’ in the ladylove. For what ultimately passes on to him as the remnant of the nuptial knot is ‘a plain sadness’. The love poem underscores the absence
of words, which is otherwise congenial only for the accomplishment of a love activity but powerless to bless it with eternal bliss. The poet’s conviction sounds more pronounced when the so-called ritual of the coming together of lovers suffers the catastrophe of an evasive tranquillity – a loneliness, no better than a routine ceremony:

sitting together quietly is a ritual

looking at the stars

....

the quietness is no solace to our shoulders

hunched over the distant stars

even this holds the promise of noise (Close the Sky, Ten by Ten, poem no.27)

The lady love, though a down-to-earth and tangible reality, continues to be a baffling enigma for the lover, while the ‘stagnant silence’, an ironical yet speechless commentary on the decadence and helplessness of man-woman relationship. Still the dominating romantic self of the poet carries on with the affair of love. Being fully conscious of the fallacious nature of the body’s business, he nevertheless desires to derive pleasure out of the physical:

Again tonight

as before,

without

the need;

the white right
to lay blame

on your flesh. (Close the Sky, Ten by Ten, poem no.37)

In the poems of Jayanta Mahapatra, love often remains largely unrecognized. The paucity of participation between man and woman and the outcoming frustration are to be
compensated through the coveted sexual consummation. Disclaiming age, the poet proclaims a Yeatsian exuberance for life and yearning for love:

She is where you have followed her
and where her floating panting space
covers up your declivitous time

You could if you would not
press your own skilled ghost
against her tumbled heart (A Rain of Rites 48)

In fact, the picture of conjugal relationship, as painted by Mahapatra, is quite catchy. The typical Indian concept of a wife who is not only devoted to the husband but also an embodiment of faithfulness and decorum, also suffers the same destiny as that of the general lot. We visualize the married woman to be a sacrificial and suffering victim in the hands of the husband, for whom she is no better than a sex object:

In the dim oil light
a man looks at the girl he had once married.

And something in a woman’s eyes tempts confessions
from her husband as they stretch out to sleep.
A time never lost, rising as a mist, that floats
upon the consciousness; (A Rain of Rites 38)

It is ‘in the dim oil light’, a dream-like atmosphere, that sexual intimacy takes place between the husband and the wife, compelling time to float ‘upon the consciousness’. But however romantic the love scene, one need to make the bold ‘confessions’ and unveil the truth – that in a man-woman relationship, the fair sex is ordained to be an object of carnal
need for the male. Mahapatra’s expertise in handling the love theme, which marches off the beaten track, is revealed time and again in poems of different tastes and colours. While analyzing love existing in marital relationship, the poet quite sincerely calls up the image of woman as a ‘sati’:

The good wife
lies in my bed
through the long afternoon;
dreaming still, unexhausted
by the deep roar of funeral pyres. (A Rain of Rites 35)

Jayanta Mahapatra’s poems dealing with the theme of love are different because of their earnestness and complexity of thought, which make the common look uncommon and the uncommon sound common. Otherwise they are songs sung in praise of the heart – the abode for the coexistence of elation and apprehension. At one moment there is the delight of union while the next moment is darkened by the anxiety of conceived separation. On the one hand there is the gladness of requital while on the other hand the grief of refusal and disloyalty. Again the pleasure derived from love is immediately transformed to the foreboding of decrepitude. Mahapatra’s high sensibility detects and records in the form of the love poems, this mutation of life’s observations – how they waver between interminable fantasies and the ineluctable tomb. The poet takes pains to colour the poems with such dignified distress and grief that the aura of artistic beauty is felt everywhere. Mahapatra excels in the presentation of feelings torturing a love-sick heart. Like any common human being in love, the poet-lover is eager and impassioned to conquer love’s kingdom. Any breach of relationship between him and his lady-love is beyond imagination. Tears run down his face, expressing the sadness of his heart:
Unloved, undeterred
by the movement of your own world
I close my eyes
to find myself alone,
in a vision of glaciers, cold and aloof and barren
on the roof of my unending night.(Love Poem : Youth Times, Feb.1, 1980, 11)

Even the very ‘vision’ of living ‘unloved’ is death for the lover. Negation of love is as good as being cast away amidst ‘glaciers’, ‘cold’, ‘aloof’ and ‘barren’ – secluded and agonized. Absence of love is like going through an ‘unending night’ to which ‘I close my eyes’. The poet is ever guided by the formula that love equals life. For the poet, love is an invaluable asset, which he is not ready to part with, at any cost.

The poet’s longing for his loved one, who is missing, drowns him in a pool of sorrow where there is no trace of his individuality. Engulfed by ‘indefatigable memory’ and the resultant ‘grief’, the lover feels to have been overcome by a sudden sensation of ‘growing older’. He turns apathetic, unproductive and sterile as he senses ‘the beating of an October heart’ devoid of greenery and fertility. For the poet, this is the season of depression and gloom when the colours of spring have faded out while the gaiety of nature called back. In a moment of lamentation, recollection of the precious moments of lost love seems to be the only source of solace. The image of the lady love as a manifestation of passion, quietude and mystery, working deep under man’s skin is beautifully described by the poet-lover:

It’s fine to stick to one’s guns, i’m sure,

I know your obvious vulgar tactics;
You do not smile
except when your committed feathers
have broken away
from your foundered thoughts
among my ribs. (*Close the Sky, Ten by Ten*, poem no.41)

It speaks of the incompatibility of man-woman relationship. No matter how frankly the lover declares that he is ‘a man of honour’ and ‘our talk is high’, he never ceases to complain regarding the existing lapses. Mahapatra often utilizes reminiscence as the vehicle for redeeming the bygone moments of love. His profound reflection transports the past to the present:

Today? . . .

. . .

Ignore it? Can one?

Memories come like the wind, and today
peers from the years: . . .

. . . and I know

that you can never be lost
because their secret nets of pain
would always be there to bring you in ... (*The False Start* 15)

The sadness of the lonely poet becomes evident when he recollects the ‘memories’ of the days before, in an endeavour to arrest them in the ‘secret nets of pain’ and recreate them as affairs of ‘today’. That his ladylove ‘can never be lost’ is the assurance which wins back joy and happiness to his otherwise cheerless life. No one can ‘ignore’ the existence of ‘today’ and so for the poet, to whom his beloved has been, is and will
continue to be a constant source of inspiration. The poet, advancing the years of senility, is curious enough to retreat to the fervent, compliant and amorous days of love:

Can I look into the wild growths of your eyes
and recover the slender slants of light
the suns of desire have lost through the years?

Here is my last sadness. (The False Start 20)

The beloved is looked upon as the means to ‘recover’ ‘the suns of desire’, rejuvenate the passion that ‘have lost through the years’ and therefore recoup ‘the slender slants of light’ of the warm days left behind. The absence of the beloved fills his heart with dejection. He feels to have been forsaken but not defeated. Though old age has reduced his limbs feeble and passionless, he still treasures the irreplaceable fortune of love in his very life and existence. It is the sincere belief of the poet that he is sure to triumph in love and life by emerging ‘victorious’ and winning over his ‘last sadness’.

Love is dominating as well as demanding – something which adds savour to it. Mahapatra’s love poems are sincere revelations of the corrosive nature of love and the intense agony that is born out of it. His way of undergoing the pains of love is to retire into his own self and look for salvation through self solace:

A feeling disturbs me when she sleeps.

I am one with the audience,
foolishly sleepless,
thinking for tomorrows,
the absurd wish
to surround her in the aura of roses.
However,

I will not let her feel that absence,

whose dark roots

are scrabbling for poetic sacrifice. (Svayamvara and Other Poems 30)

In a striking manner the poet describes the insecurity and distress ‘scrabbling’ the lover as he passes ‘sleepless’ hours beside the ladylove who sleeps quiet instead. He ‘foolishly’ ponders upon the next day’s separation. The concealed depression and disappointment gnaw away his heart but he is confident not to share it with the beloved. He is ready to cope with it alone. The romantic quality of Mahapatra’s love, finds expression in his pining for the past – remembering his ladylove and regretting that the affable days are never to come back again. The miserable state of affairs in this obscure world breed severed relationships. Mahapatra’s trust rests on love which is capable of bracing man against all antagonistic and provocative constraints:

You are the slow growth on stone

that forces me to climb

when I want to go down,

and to go down

when I know I must climb.

You are the immense sound

that takes questionings and embraces

off my difficult ears,

you are the gradual change and decay

that is caught in the corners of my guilt. (The False Start 79)

A critical assessment of Mahapatra’s treatment of love remains incomplete without having mentioned the purely sensual acts of love or better to term lust. The
presentation of this sort of a perverted picture of love is undoubtedly not without a purpose. His deep-seated sarcastic undertone is clearly audible. All throughout his poetic career, the poet is haunted by the image of a whore, which lay bare an authentic picture of the sex-hungry male dominated Indian society. The poet describes the power of sex which adds tempo to life:

When the windows shut down on your cries
my hands quiver with the glances of my thousand eyes
as your long eyes touch my paid-out pain
and i revenge the presence from your presence (Close the Sky, Ten by Ten, poem no.6)

The sober description of sexual consummation deserves appreciation. The use of the whore image to satirize the dreadful degeneration eating into the ideals of human beings, is beautifully represented in the following lines:

The prostitutes are younger this year:
at the police station they’re careless to give reasons
for being what they are.

And the older women careful enough not to show their years. (A Father’s Hours 18)

The poet’s sharp sense of irony and satire is expressed as he describes the dried-up existence in a bleak world, where coarse sensuality is rampant. The down-to-earth picture of the brazenness of the modern life is simply nauseating. The nervousness and expectation of the persona suffer a severe bang as the frivolity of the sensual act in a whorehouse is laid bare. The graphic presentation of female sensuality provoking the man’s entrance in a whorehouse and the resulting sense of shame and guilt is a rare specimen to be found in the realm of creative writing. The well defined depiction of the
present-day floozy peeps from every nook and corner of Mahapatra’s sensuous poems as in the description of ‘the plump whore he has just left / has brazenly gone to work on a new customer’ (*Life Signs* 18). The picture of a girl converted to a whore by the sex-hungry jackals of the society is even more telling – ‘A girl’s wanton laugh / suddenly shatters the silence. / A flame of evenings. / “Smell here,” she says, / lifting up her arms to her companion, / “the strong scent the man used.” (*Waiting* 34). The most realistic portrayal of a woman – a sexual victim of the cruel social forces – deals with prostitute sex. A fifteen-year-old daughter of a fisherman, a victim of penury and prostitution, brings about the poet-cum-protagonist’s self discovery. The poet’s uncompromising and acrimonious description of the sexual act fills us with a sense of disgrace and embarrassment:

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. (*A Rain of Rites* 44)

Standing on the shore staring at the ceaseless flow of the river of human sadness, he realizes that ‘sometimes I am incapable of love’ (*Random Descent* 75). In a loveless world, torn with brutality, the romance of the little girl’s hand ‘is made of darkness’ and ‘her raped body’ renders him incapable of shouldering ‘the weight of my guilt’ (*Random Descent* 63). In Mahapatra’s world of love with a difference, physical love dies but the psychic communion becomes deathless as has been in the history and tradition of our ancient stones:

Seasons pass, and she becomes stone.

Love can break and still keep its promise.

It can borrow a dawn and haunt it through time. (*Bare Face* 28)
The woman who wanted to be loved, having failed to find so in this ‘ghosts of love’ is sure to find everlasting consolation in the sacred and ageless stones.

In fact, Jayanta Mahapatra has taken the risk of delving deep into the ocean of love only to discover that it does not always look so blessed and ecstatic as it has always been described. On the contrary, it is coloured with varied shades – both happy and sad. The poet thoroughly explores the human psyche which gives rise to the separate approaches of love – may it be union or separation, acceptance or denial, vanity or humility, lust or sanctity, sex or sexless. Life is a tale of myriad experiences and so is love – both of which lend nourishment and significance to each other. Deba Patnaik, an eminent critic, observes Mahapatra to be essentially a love-poet and there can, in this regard, be no contradiction. The ‘difference’ which marks his love poems also enables the readers to understand his outlook on life, ‘[…]offers a sort of relief from the uncertainties one has come to expect of life […]’(Parthasarathy 59), uplifting Mahapatra’s love poetry to a more acceptable level.
Works Cited


Mahapatra, Jayanta. Introduction to his poems in “Youth Times” (Special number on the Poetry of Love, Ed. Pritish Nandy), Feb. 1, 1980