moving as pointed out by Heisenberg. So also I know of nothing for certain in this world.” (284)

It means that every fact of the experiential world can be interpreted in terms of ideas. The things that appear to man as real are nothing but the materialized forms of ideas. Ideas seek materialization in sense-experience. The mind keeps vague, abstract and indeterminate ideas which strive to assume real, concrete, individual shapes. This is made possible by perception. The mind, in its turn, selects some of the items of the outer world for concretizing its ideas. And the item which has now become a concrete object of sense-experience is the external meaning of the idea. The outer world is, therefore, the reflection of the inner world of idea. The sense-experience gained at a moment is one of the many possible perceptions of an object. It may be true that other perceivers might perceive the same object at the same moment, but their sense-experience might be different from each other. This leads us to the idea of uncertainty and want of complete determination which is turn implies that no one’s world of sense-experience can be ultimate reality. It means that perception is only a quest for reality though it is impossible to attain total reality. The world of reality conceived by man is a shadow of his own ideas, emotions and beliefs. Mahapatra observes:

Poetry that is Indian in essence does take us beyond ourselves, bringing us face to face with the self on the other side, revealing suddenly the mirror opposite of the idea that has gone to make the poem. Once again, this is a coming together of opposites: like, for instance, good and evil, which can only carry themselves as ideas or exist because one has meaning only in relation to the other. (283)

If an idea is there, it must exist as a pair of opposites. The mind can only think in terms of these possibilities. Mahapatra reveals how a poem works itself out in his mind. “For me, a poem is knit together by an inconceivable silence. Silence which is an intangible substance of which words are but manifestations; words which can build the poem from a silence and to which the poem must eventually return” (283). And a poem is always made in one’s imagination, and the poem itself becomes the idea. He further explains about the core of his poetry, “When I write a poem around the idea of silence,
then perhaps the whole poem is my silence. I use this silence as a myth, and use different symbols and metaphors as they suit my own experience” (284).

The poet tries to know his roots with the poetic consciousness. His poems reveal that his roots lie in two worlds which merge into one, because they are, in the ultimate analysis, one at the moments of objective-philosophical-metaphysical cognition. S.N. Prasad remarks, “He has roots in the real, organic world of our social existence. And he can also see his metaphysical roots in an absolutely objective cosmos” (22). In this context, Moutushi Chakravartee points out, “Physics, Philosophy, Psychology and Poetry coalesce, transforming Mahapatra’s personality from a teacher to that of a creator” (27).

The physics discipline helps Mahapatra feel conscious of the truth that the perceiver and the object of perception become identical. Mahapatra identifies himself with the object perceived. The poet, the perceiver and the poetry (the object of perception or the creation of his mind) become identical. The poet creates a new reality beyond ‘materiality’ of physics, it is meta-reality born of the spiritual interaction between the self and the ultimate consciousness. His poetry becomes a quest for identity and belongingness. The poet identifies himself with the place, tradition, culture, myth, religion and time. And a sense of indeterminacy nags him towards this quest for identity.

The feature of loss of identity within the culture lingers in the Indian English poets. Each poet endeavours to grope for retrieval of identity in the cultural mores of the land through one way or the other. R. Parthasarthy persists in his efforts to probe his identity in the lost Tamil culture and the Tamil language as he surmises that his long stay in England has severed the bond with his culture and language. A.K. Ramanujan, an exile, thirsts for an identity and endeavours to establish it through familial relationships. Nissim Ezekiel, alienated from his original Jew culture, seeks to pitch his identity in the immediate environs of Bombay. Shiv K. Kumar finds his identity by bringing in the contrast between East-West cultural encounters. Arun Kolatkar looks for identity through his pilgrimage to Khandoba by the way of skepticism intermingled with an urge for tradition. And Kamla Das with her freedom of mind thunders against the male domination and the use of English language in a restrained way. She seeks her identity in the Indian culture rather unusually. Monika Verma, another woman poet, establishes her
identity through deep social concerns. Many other poets employ different modes of thought and ideas to gain identity.

In the case of Jayant Mahapatra, the identity-crisis arises out of his alienation, loneliness and aloofness from the milieu of Hindu tradition and culture. It prompts him to think that he is in no-man’s island. His Christian culture bears the brunt of the loss of identity among the prevalent rituals, legends, tradition and culture of Hindus. He is thus twice removed from his immediate surroundings – first, he was born into a Christian family in a predominantly Hindu society and second, he wrote in an acquired medium, English, which was considered not adequate to encompass the cultural spirit of his native land. But the poet by his indefatigable efforts strives to retrieve his lost identity by writing on themes related to such stark realities of India as hunger, myths, rituals, sexuality, spirituality, the self and eternity. His poetry, whether describing the locale, its environs and landscape or the relationship of his self to his land, attempts to reflect an awareness of this milieu. It aims at analysing and evaluating the form and vision of his poetry in the perspective of the locale, in terms of the images drawn from the geographical, social and cultural sources of his native land. His poetic vision is, thus, profoundly shaped by the ambience of Orissa evidenced in temples, architecture and sculptures. The place with all its ethos and myths, its lives and beliefs, superstitions and transitions has been the governing factor of Mahapatra’s perceptions and vision.

It is through the English language that Mahapatra strives to retrieve his identity by the means of poetic art. Born and brought up in Orissa, he might have written in his mother tongue Oriya. But he has firm hope and belief in the exploitation of the English language. He affirms that his feel for English words and their sonorous music has affected his temperament and vision.

An indepth study of Mahapatra’s poetry reveals him to be a philosophical humanist in the trinity of “religion”, “culture” and “time”. His ‘religion’ is a belief in humanistic values, his ‘culture’ represents refinement of those values, and time-consciousness signifies the complexity of experiences of life and also the present as an interminable extension of the past into future, which is deeply rooted in the past. Moreover, Mahapatra uses certain images and symbols in his poetry like death, darkness, past, silence, door, etc., which become the recurrent motifs of his poetry. The recurrence
of these motifs, as well as their thematic repetitiveness give unity and significance to Mahapatra's modes of perceiving an experience rooted either in the reality of the external world or the interior landscape of his poetic imagination. His poetry manifests his struggle with word structures to create a meaning. Often a thought or an image or a mood starts him on his poetic voyage. He is led into a whirlpool of disturbing and recalcitrant realities in search of significance and meaning. The quest for appropriate alternatives – to transform his suffering and pain into pregnant images and metaphors – forms the nucleus of Mahapatra's constant pursuit. The nature of this exploration is a mystery even to him also.

His poem “The Indian Eye” from Close the Sky, Ten by Ten offers an insight into this problem of Mahapatra's poetic mediation. In order to understand the poem, we need to look into the socio-religious background of giving alms to the needy and deserving which is considered a sacred duty. Beggary exists in India in many levels and forms. No doubt, it is mostly a social evil, but we cannot turn a blind eye to the fact that beggary has its sanctions in religious beliefs and practices too. Legend has it that even Lord Shiva had to go begging in retribution for having plucked one of the five faces of Lord Brahma. Ascetics and Sadhus live on charity: the begging-bowl is an inseparable part of their lives. At the same time, we must not forget that beggary has been turned into an easy and profitable profession now by inherently indolent people. In olden days it was not uncommon for the students after having completed their studies in the Gurukulas to approach their affluent merchants or kings for help to payoff their gurudakshina and if the donor, for whatever reasons, was not in a position to render help, felt miserable. Mahapatra is perhaps alluding to this age-old tradition, when he writes, “if you part with a coin, you'd reap a solid million”. The poet's sympathies and his impotent rage tear him apart. Now, beggary is degraded under the cover of a “safe paralytic tradition”. The tradition has now become paralytic losing its once religiously sanctioned function, whereby the society supported the intellectuals and the holy men. Ironically, it also represents the plight of beggars who are dependent on charity and live like parasites. Even the donors have lost their nobility of heart and soul. Hence, charity is practiced often to cover up the illegal means employed in amassing wealth and gaining popularity. A corruption of tastes and commercialization of cultures is what “The Indian Eye”
registers. If we look with our eyes wide open there is always a “fear of contamination”. If we shut our eyes, we begin to introspect, see within ourselves, and perhaps realize that the “large wild India eye is covered with hungry decomposition”. What we see as social realities are nothing but an external manifestation of their very degradation, and what is worse, the very sources – tradition and culture – from which to draw inspiration are dried up beyond redemption. However, the alternative may be to “turn to the wall and cry”, hopefully perhaps, for a revival and rejuvenation of our vital energies to sustain our moral rectitude.

Jayant Mahapatra invests his symbols with multiple meanings by compressing the images even when he deals with a concrete situation like for example, a beggar in a train, which is a common enough sight in any part of India. The miserable plight of a blind beggar in a “guzzling train” is depicted in the poem titled “Blind Singer in a Train”, through a series of densely textured images, which reinforce his tragic situation without the slightest melodramatic element.

The images used in the poem clearly indicate a sense of helpless entrapment forever, which constitutes tragic irony of man’s destiny in a cruel and unkind world. First of all, the man is blind – a physical handicap for which he is not responsible. Loss of vision has confined him to night and without his bamboo stick he cannot move about. Hence, he is “rooted to his night” like a tree, with no hope of ever moving away from the engulfing darkness. A blind man’s constant support is his bamboo-stick and he comes to increasingly depend on it. Jayant Mahapatra coins a new compound word “bamboo-stabled man”, which suggests that the blind man gains his stability by his stick and his plight is no better than an animal tethered to a pole in a stable. The animal’s well-being depends on the nature of its master whether he is kind or not. A beggar is doubly handicapped because he is at the mercy of his fellow-men and the philanthropic, the generous and kind-hearted are not found everywhere. He has to try to locate a kind soul amidst a thousand hostile faces “who turn (their) cultured heads away” at the sight of a beggar. This is an example of compression of images, which is Mahapatra’s favourite technique. This image is taken up in the second stanza where “the faded stick’s tap of hope” is faintly heard in a moving train which is a “packed box”. It is not the hope that is faded but the very stick that supports the blind man is “faded”. Then how can there be a
better tomorrow for the millions of those who are condemned to permanent drudgery and dependency for no fault of their own? The “prim dawn-light” rushes past them as they have only terrible looking hollows for eyes – a gift of small pox. Light and all that it represents is forever stolen from them, so also their future, as their “pox-hollowed eyes” stare blindly into a vacant tomorrow:

“Cultured heads” – loquacious academicians or grandiloquent politicians who hold heated discussions on all aspects concerning human civilization – form only “a spirited caste” and turn their heads away when confronted with a real problem, because they have never experienced the trauma of living a dreadful and a hopeless life. They are “undamaged”! Thus, a blind-beggar’s burden of despair that lasts a life time remains outside the experience of “cultured heads” who are expected to guide and shape the destiny of the nation. The dynamics of social behaviour thus get reflected in Jayant Mahapatra’s poetry, that too without being explicit. It points a finger towards the self, making him answer the most vital question: Am I not partly to blame for all this? Incidentally, this question also stares the reader in the face demanding an honest answer from him. Jayant Mahapatra’s poetry leaves the matter at that without ever giving his answers or solutions. Thus, Mahapatra avoids the dangers of a propagandistic approach saving his poetry from the pitfalls of a sloganistic reduction by oversimplification. This seems to be the most significant characteristic of Mahapatra’s poetry in general. It imparts strength and objectivity to his poetic vision and shows its masculine nature.

Man has been worshipping the Life-giving-Principle of Nature as a token of his gratitude and respect and Sun is the giver of life. In the Vedas, there are many hymns in praise of the sun-god. Thus, sun-worship is indeed a celebration of Life-giving-Principle. Oblation to the sun is done by taking water in the cup of joined hands, then lifting them up over one’s head and powering down the water as from a stream, while chanting mantras in praise of the Sun-god for the “harvest of survival” one has received in abundance!

When a man prepares to pour oblations, the “orange sun” is reflected in the water of his cupped hands, looking almost a captive and the dawn appears to shy away in the tiny hands that hold the mighty sun. But as soon as “the water runs down”, symbolic consummation of Prakriti and Purusha is achieved. The mighty Sun is then back in his
grand chariot drawn by seven horses (symbolising seven days of a week) and everything is bright once again – "The dawn suddenly is normal again". This magical transformation is nonetheless vivid and charming. The use of scientific term – "supersolvent" for water has a special significance: the Life-giving-Principle is held in high reverence through oblation to Sun-god using equally life-sustaining water-principle by a deft use of the adjective as noun. Thus, the complementary role of the Earth and the Sky, Prakriti and Purusha, is revered hoping for their fruitful union. This suggestion is further reinforced by "the static body" of the worshipper in a state of full concentration: "static" is not a state of immobility but of deep contemplation, which results in "fevered praise", suggesting a state of high excitement and exaltation of body, mind and spirit in unison. Here, the pathological connotation of the word "fever" is silenced to echo exactly the opposite – a state of vibrant exaltation.

What make Mahapatra's poetry special are the poet's honesty and a serious concern for his craft. He seems to constantly re-examine and re-assess his writings as no other poet perhaps does. For example Mahapatra confesses: "When I reread the poetry I have written, I find many of the poems confused, made up of abstractions which fail to connect with the reader. This is especially true of my earlier work" (16). Humility, humbleness and honest confessions are the hallmarks of masculinity in Indian context and Mahapatra's unassuming ways show him a truly masculine as a man and as a poet. In the context of his candid admission above, one can infer that Mahapatra's poetry is addressed to a discriminating reader a sahrudaya – who is willing to take pains to encounter the experience held captive within the structure of the poem. The readers' own experience should guide them to unravel the mysteries of Mahapatra's poetic creation. Thus, in Mahapatra we see a generous invitation for reader's involvement in the experience of the poem and its re-construction.

In the poetry of Jayant Mahapatra, the primacy of reader-response is as much valid as the primacy of the text itself. Mahapatra's poetry does not give any message to its readers in the form of a well-phrased witticism. Instead, it makes the reader look inwards, question himself about life, its significance, uncertainty and so on leading him to a process of personal discovery. This indeed is the greatest strength of Mahapatra's poetry because the process of self-discovery makes one more human, humane and
humanistic which, in fact, are various facets humanism and true masculinity and femininity are also synonymous with humanism. His poetry, thus, sees beyond the superficial existence. In order to sustain the eternal quest of man to understand, the self has been a recurrent theme in his poetry throughout. Moreover, his poetry makes every attempt to achieve cohesion in the expression of the transcendental and elusive experience through concrete, visual images with multiple suggestiveness.

The co-existence of Life and Death, Absurdity and Meaningfulness, Good and Evil — a pair of opposites — bears a tremendous significance for the poet because one has meaning only in relation to the other. Mahapatra justifies this pairing of opposites as the reality of this Universe: "... a sense of perfect whole is experienced through a synthesis of opposites, through and action, cause and effect, through the androgynous principle of ardhanarishwar (half man, half woman)" (36). Our religious symbols offer conclusive evidence to the manifestation of this duality in Nature: for example, goddess Durga is worshipped in her dual role of creator and destroyer; man-woman relationship is a classical example of the duality in Nature which is complementary and when segregated, each is incomplete and unfulfilled, but together they create the world.

This paradox continues to dominate the conscience of the poet. Mahapatra is painfully aware of the co-existence of paradoxes which he tries to depict. Just as a magnet has south and north poles at the extreme ends of the same magnet bar pointing to opposite directions, yet inseparably united in a strange way, Mahapatra’s poetry communicates the pulls of unresolved opposites. From concrete to abstract, from the ruins of history the temples of Konark to the glorious past, his probing spirit wanders lonely with a singleness of purpose the meaning that would lead to self-realization.

Jayant Mahapatra uses certain images and symbols like death, darkness, past, silence, door, etc. in his poetry which become the recurrent motifs of his poetry. His poetry is held in closer relationship by the recurrence of these motifs as well as by their thematic repetitiveness, which give unity and significance to Mahapatra’s modes of perceiving an experience rooted either in the reality of the external world or the interior landscape of his poetic imagination. His poetry is an attempt to relate himself to his environment, to the socio-cultural milieu of his land – Orissa and its history, both ancient
and modern. His poetry defines his ways of belonging to what is contemporary in society and what is permanent and elusive in the eternal flux of time.

Death is a recurring, dominant theme in Mahapatra’s poetic world. The treatment of death deserves close attention because it is unconventional in the sense that the poet neither celebrates death nor abhors it as something to be dreaded. Though fear of death manifests on certain occasions, it is never treated as anti-life or even as a means of escape from the dreariness of life. Death gives meaning to life, because in the absence of it, the beauty of life cannot be felt. The significance of life is sandwiched between Life and Death. Fear of death guides one back to life, to live more vigorously and more meaningfully. The metaphor of moonlight is very striking. Moonlight is invisible during day time, yet it exists. Similarly death, until it manifests, is there continually about us, a reality to be acknowledged even before it is experientially felt. Death and life are not two different unrelated abstractions. They are not only complementary but one has the significance only in relation to the other, and together they complete the cyclical process of Nature. The poet is aware of being a link in the endless flow of time and cycle of births and deaths. Death is not the ultimate end. It is the beginning of a new cycle of life.

Since time immemorial, man has always been puzzled by death and a strong desire to gain power over it manifest in his quest for permanence, either through religious practices or the Arts or even the sciences. Of course, recourse to religion gives him the necessary impetus since it belongs to the realm of the Metaphysical, which transcends the barriers of time, space and sometimes even logic. It is strongly believed that the pull of the earth binds man to the cycle of birth and death. Gita stresses the complexity of the web of birth and death, in a greater sense, as the law of universe, which is binding on everything save Brahaman the Absolute. In order to conquer death, man must free himself from the pulls of earth.

Mahapatra is not advocating spiritual salvation by denouncing this world; instead, by the deft use of the image of waves he only stresses the near impossibility of such an attempt to rid oneself of the clutches of death. Moreover, the reality is that death gives meaning to life. In “Absences” the poet conveys that in the absences of death, we would not be in a position to perceive this phenomenal world as we do now. Even the common things would be bereft of their beauty and significance and may look grotesque if death
did not exist. The duality inherent in man is one of Mahapatra’s major concerns. However, his probing into the mystery of death as an inevitable, unavoidable and inescapable end of life and all that life represents, becomes more significant when compared to his contemporaries like Keki N. Daruwalla Deba Patnaik and A.K. Ramanujan. In fact, death is a major theme in contemporary Indian poetry in English in general.

Darkness is another major symbol and the world of Mahapatra seems to be dominated by “unrelieved darkness, shadows and inertia”, where “light” comes painfully without brightening the atmosphere. In fact, for Mahapatra, darkness has a great deal of psychological import as he grew up in the dismal darkness of his not so-happy childhood house surrounded by tall deodars which instilled strange fears in him. The memory of his unsympathetic and non-cooperative mother, moving about with an oil lamp in her hand in the listless darkness of that house only intensified his fears further. Thus, darkness became an early childhood fixation in Mahapatra’s life, which projects onto his poetry almost as a neurotic obsession, symbolizing the fear of the unknown, uncertainty, a sense of entrapment and a host of other negative feelings. For example, in “Iron”, Mahapatra says:

A pain for the slight light at dawn
Assails me: dark earth,
Behind me still follows the darkness
Darkness from shadows under the roof and leaf
What branches of the dark will guide one home? (10)

This all pervading darkness makes the poet acutely aware of himself, his limitations, frustrations and failures. He can see through darkness into the abysmal corners of his soul wherein lie the dreams, aspirations as also the dark designs of unexplained guilt, fear and his inherent sexuality. The following lines from “A Country” in Life Signs amply illustrate this point:

When darkness falls
the old speak of the past with sleepy voices;
my ears tremble when I hear their tales.
I look at their faces, and their eyes are dead as stone

127
Here is my world, and it makes me dream as a child;
yet why do I wear myself out
feeling for the girls who die
before their breasts are swollen with milk? (29)

The darkness in Mahapatra’s poetry, thus, represents the unfulfilled man, yet it is only darkness he wants because it throws light on what he has lost both as a poet and a man. The projection of this despair is, of course, without self pity. But because of the contrasting emotions, darkness actually remains unmediated, or its mediation takes place only at the level of imagination. Darkness thus becomes the poet’s meditative ground, which directs him to look inward, the way people often see closing their eyes in a mood of deep contemplation or prayer, focusing their whole attention on one single aspect of their meditation. Mahapatra offers a wide spectrum of darkness for introspection, providing diverse points of view. This is the reason why Mahapatra’s poetry does not have one single dominant mood, motif or theme. Herein lies his versatility and vitality as a poet.

The basic idea behind the creation of all great art is to enrich life by giving meaning and purpose to the existence of man. Mahapatra too has tried the same in his poetry through his encounter with the past, the past of once glorious Orissa. Mahapatra strongly believes that man is but a link in the Time-continuum and the present is only a fleeting moment of the past. Hence, this part is an inseparable part of our lives. Mahapatra strongly believes that his present is only an extension of the past, and his contemporaneity has its roots in the part which is not lost in time.

Thus, in Mahapatra, the past loses its remoteness and with this realization the poet ponders over the essence of the past, its mysteries, myths and rituals which have survived till date. There is a constant attempt to relate the two worlds the past and the present in order that each may trigger a response, together forming an unbroken continuum.

A significant aspect of Mahapatra’s poetry is that he does not glorify the past, nor does he revel in the present. The cultural and social past of Orissa and Mahapatra’s individual past are intricately connected with each other in his poetry. Past thus becomes the shaping influence in Mahapatra’s poetry, which gives the present an urgency and a sense of relatedness and belonging only with the past. His present is doomed by
unrelatedness to relate with the external world because all such attempts end in pain and a sense of hurt. This perhaps compels him to dwell in the past and see the present and future as time continuum, thus wiping out the categorisation of time as past, present or future. This provides him with a philosophical framework to work out his dilemmas and ground them against the sequence of passing time.

Silence is also eloquent in the poetry of Mahapatra. The reverberating silence is rendered qualitative because it guides both the poet and the reader to meditate on the quality of human life. Hence, silence is not a state of speechlessness but becomes creative and meaningful.

Silence, thus, becomes the landmark of an integrated Oriyan sensibility. Jayant Mahapatra voices this silence forcefully. He expands its scope by infusing his personal sense of loss, despair and agony, which conveys his estrangement from the cultural matrix of the Orissa he desperately tries to relate and belong.

Silence, in the poetry of Jayant Mahapatra, represents what is lost in a culture by the onslaught of modernity and also the mystery of the past. It also reflects what cannot be repossessed in the flux of time.

Seasons are cyclical, i.e. change, growth, retreat for a while, and renewal is automatic in Nature. Mahapatra does not seem to accept the consequences that flow from the metaphor which is basically cyclical renewal. Obviously, this is not true of rural Orissa, where the constantly changing cycle of seasons decides the life-style of its people. But we have to remember that Mahapatra is not a meteorologist, but a poet who reflects the value system of a simple, rustic life-style wherein widowhood, with an irrevocable finality, seals the fate of a woman beyond redemption and beyond hope. A sophisticated urban feminist would certainly refuse the premise that there is no life after widowhood, for some it could even be a beginning of a new life after widowhood; for some, it could even be a beginning of a new life free from societal constraints. But in the context in which Mahapatra’s poem is placed, it does not admit of any such possibility. It may be easy to accuse Mahapatra as the patriarch of status-quo, but the reality is that this is an instance which clearly proves how truly Mahapatra identifies himself with the ethos of his land—Orissa.
We know that the temple at Puri is a living moment of a culture and also the epitome of religious beliefs. It also represents the mysterious and the inexplicable in the history of human civilization. And the vast expanse of the sky seems to hold the key to this secret, yet, man is not allowed the grace to unravel that mystery, because the sky is crippled and supported by “crutches of silence”. This maiming of the sky is highly symbolic as it points to the gradual erosion of vitality in the culture of that bygone era and its weakening power to support and sustain because values enshrined in that culture. But fortunately the sky is not altogether incapacitated. It can still limp, hanging on to its crutches. Mahapatra builds up this contrast of loss and hope, through intricately woven symbols. This collage presents a plethora of encounters with one’s own existence and experiences. Mahapatra explores the nuances of such an encounter because this sky over the Puri temple wields an inviolable authority on the life of every Oriya.

The fact is that the centuries of beliefs, traditions and rites are all inseparably linked with it. In our understanding of the history, there is always an element of elusiveness which escapes us. Mahapatra uses an unconventional symbol— Silence— to represent the inexplicable which always remains a part of our racial unconscious and of course, an involuntary inheritance. Of Orissa, Mahapatra’s strength lies in his profound understanding of the socio-cultural heritage of the land of Orissa from times immemorial to the present day.

Orissa, thus, forms an integral part of Mahapatra’s poetry, both as a specific cultural entity and as a typical part of India. Two aspects of Orissa seem to have had a dominant influence in shaping Mahapatra’s poetic sensibility— firstly, the eventful historical past; and secondly, the all pervading presence of religion with its roots buried deep in the mysterious tribal culture and the seemingly unchanging life-style of the Oriyas in general, which is, by and large, dependent on agriculture. Therefore, in Mahapatra’s poetry what we often encounter is the permanence and changelessness of a society, which draws sustenance from age old tradition, myths, and legends.

As a sensitive poet, Mahapatra identifies himself with the tradition around him. He is haunted by tradition as he haunts the tradition. Explaining his views on tradition, Mahapatra observes:
I seem to be pulled by the tradition. Tradition might represent many things such as history and myth, the suffering of others. I intend to imagine; but which evidently is real to me. Tradition could not simply be the movement which has been happening all along; it could be related to the grief of others, the struggle to find out life in another way. And poetry for me, does try to redefine tradition. I realize this would seem a little unclear, but in a way tradition pursues me as I pursue it myself. (18-19)

The poet also affirms his staunch belief in myth and religious motifs drawn from his immediate surroundings. They naturally come to him and become a way of life. He explicitly expresses his conviction in this respect as:

Orissa is a religious place. We have a number of festivals going on throughout the year. And one can’t shut oneself away in one’s room and write about something else. What I mean to say is that one doesn’t have to—these things (myth, symbols and religious motifs) come about on their own. I don’t have to strive or do these things deliberately. Myth is there, history is there, and myth, history and rituals do become the stuff of poetry. Because that’s the way of life in Orissa and poetry is a way of life for me. (60)

Jayant Mahapatra skillfully makes use of myths to give a wider appeal and a cosmic touch to the eternal problems of mankind, by moulding the mythological symbols into new forms and placing them in contemporary context. Myths operate at two levels—social and cultural—in his poetry. At either level, myths undergo a metamorphosis to bring into focus the present degradation and debasement of human life and its consequent loss of enduring quality. In the modern context myths are stripped bare and they serve as poor travesty of their original rich symbolic suggestiveness. Hence we experience the deglorification and sometimes even the debunking of myths in Mahapatra’s poetry. The Ganges, the most sacred river of India, is believed to wash away the sins of people and thus purify them, while it always remains unsullied is only a myth, because now the Ganges itself has become impure and defiled for all to see. So in Mahapatra, the Ganga is no more a spiritual purifier. The last rites to the dead performed on the banks of the Ganges, the ever burning funeral pyres at the ghats and the devout Hindu’s last wish to
disperse his asthi (bones and ashes) after his death in the holy Ganges – all these for Mahapatra, become “decorations” to the Ganges: and its banks are shrouded by mysterious rites and chanting of mantras directing and guiding the souls in their ascendancy to heaven. In “Our Imprecations”, the poet alludes to this as:

The mouth is empty.
Yet there is the River
it catches, unaware:
a Ganga
decorated with histories of ashes
like a mist of enchantments. (8)

Hence, the poet deftly turns the ashes of the dead into “histories of ashes”, which suggests the individual history of every dead person and also the diverse histories of countless generations which paid their homage to the Ganges in the belief of cleansing their sins for attaining salvation are discounted by the decisive verb “decorated” and cures the reader as well as the poet of any illusion regarding the Ganga’s mythical powers or significance in the present day.

Further, Kali, the mother-goddess, in “Our Imprecation”, appears in her fierce and ferocious incarnation as Kali, who throws out the destructive “Lava of horror” (8). Her “mouth” is “ulcered”, an indication that the bleeding, lacerating wound will consume human civilization at large like wild fire. Kali is set out to destroy not only the Evil which she is believed to accomplish, but indiscriminately everything as she herself is diseased in the mouth. As a result chaos, lawlessness and a terrible destruction is let loose on mankind; man has lost his capacity to love and even his dream is a “loveless museum” and at the end, driven by “cosmic greed” man also turns violent against his own kind, thus aiding his goddess in her mission of reckless destruction. If Kali is subject to “ulcers” in the mouth, man cannot escape a similar plight, which visits him almost with a variance, striking a death-blow by sucking away all love from man’s world leaving him.

Thus, the divine power— Kali— appears here not as Protector but as Destroyer. The Creator has turned the Destroyer and the hunting spree will go on without respite. So, there is no rejoicing in the mythic past which has lost its magic, and the essence is replaced by superficiality.
Likewise, in *A Rain of Rites*, Goddess Durga herself has become one such dead-weight bringing no benediction. During the festival of Durga Puja, people carry the day image of the goddess more by habit than unstinted devotion, to the accompaniment of drummers “hammering on the deep stillness of the valley.”

“Hammering” indicates man’s inner restlessness and his desperate need to break the monotony of boredom even at the cost of disturbing the serene quietness of the valley, producing a terrible numbness of senses. So both at the cultural and social levels, myth has ceased to be functional in the traditional way. Hence, the contemporary reality now defeats the age old beliefs and practices. Over a period of time, the defilement of what was sacred and derangement of what was natural has come to be accepted complacently without producing any qualms in man’s consciousness. In *Svayamvara and Other Poems*, Mahapatra depicts this deplorable situation with the calm acceptance of a man who is resigned to his fate.

Jayant Mahapatra shatters the mythic image of India through his realistic portrayal of our society in its stark nakedness. He also stresses how we have come to sympathise with the deviants and how tacitly we approve of, even perhaps appreciate, their ways. The ability to discriminate between right and wrong seems to be inoperative. Hence our loss is indeed great. We have become powerless, silent spectators of “the disrobing of human values,” unable to draw sustenance from age-old myths. The poet holds himself answerable to the unpardonable apathy to the human suffering and deprivation for which, at one time or the other, we are all direct but mute witnesses. Nothing moves us, not even death, as we have become desensitised in the process of living our self-centred lives.

Mahapatra confronts his poetic self to own his moral responsibility for the misery of “drowned girl”. And the voice of his conscience seems to chide him for moving about “as though nothing had ever happened here”. Mahapatra knows the bitter truth the endurance of suffering in the daily struggle for survival and existence renders anyone selfish, insensitive and callous to the needs of other fellow human beings. This dehumanising effect of poverty, hunger and deprivation is indeed deplorable. There seems to be no hope even for the future generation to restore dignity to the human person as the children have become “destitutes” and turned beggars and they “hang around the
temple "in the hope of getting some food but sadly what they are destined for is only "luncheon leftovers from city picnickers". Even to claim this, the children have to "shoo away the flies"! All this shows the concern the poet has for the poor and the destitute and his heart goes for them. He regards himself also responsible in one or the other way for this sorry state of affairs. It shows his humanism.

Jayant Mahapatra’s ability to interrogate his own self is also seen in his long poem *Relationship* where in he deals with the Myth of Origin, i.e. myth of origin of this Universe and the myth of origin of man on this planet. Howsoever intelligent or advanced man may be in his thinking and technological accomplishments, his efforts in unraveling the Myth of Origin have at best remained only conjectural. There exists a series of missing links in the experimental verifications of the multiple hypotheses man has put forward. But the crux of the matter lies in the fact that while a scientist may be interested in the scientifically demonstrable aspect of the issue, poets have been equally concerned with the philosophical implications of such a quest and their relevance to man’s life. Man has been eternally confronted with such questions, as *Who am I? Where have I come from and where am I going to?*

Such a persistent self-introspection is characteristic of Mahapatra’s poetry. Ability to ask questions to one’s own self is the height of self-effacement in the quest for identity which only makes a person more humable, humane and human. The hall marks of masculinity in Indian context.

Even as Jayant Mahapatra grows more humble and humanistic owing to self-introspection realize as he does his own limitations, yet he has the mental strength and courage to question the efficacy of Lord Jagannatha. In *Relationship* he does not gloat over the glories of Lord Jagannatha, nor is he concerned with the temple spiritual implications or the mystery cult of Jagannatha in absolute terms. In fact, the poet in Mahapatra is guided by a different logic – the need to be human is important in a poet than in anyone else. So the guiding force of his poetry is a pervading sense of involvement and a humanitarian concern for the welfare of the people. When Mahapatra sees stark poverty around him and the starving children crying for the slices of watermelon on a hot summer afternoon, the poet becomes indignant about the divine indifference of Lord Jagannatha, who becomes virtually the dead wood He is made of,
because of his inability to alleviate hunger and suffering even in His own land. In “A Summer Afternoon”, Mahapatra scoffs at “the atrocious innocence of Jagannatha” who turns a blind eye to all the sufferings, especially of the children.

Mahapatra questions the compassion and kind-heartedness of Lord Jagannatha. He wonders whether his huge eyes are fake because they look vacantly without seeing. This shows that Mahapatra is not blind to the social realities. He does not deceive himself with an easy excuse of Fate or Karma to ease his conscience seeing his people suffer. Mahapatra scoffs at the Lord in the face as it were, moved deeply by the sad plight of the children. Unlike His image, these children are fully formed and their hunger is as real as the blood flowing in their bodies. Limbless, shapeless and grotesque as He is, how will He understand the needs of those who feel the hunger in the pits of their stomachs? Then it is a myth that His compassion reaches all, without discrimination and without prejudice. Mahapatra’s poetic self refuses to accept such a grotesque Being as the saviour of mankind and as a redeemer of human miseries. Mahapatra says:

Around me was sickness and hunger, the sufferings of people from malnutrition and disease – terrible form of disorder of the universe that made me question myself on the goodness of God we had been taught to believe in. And so I felt unable to reconcile these two affirmations – that God is the sum of all perfection, and that the world of ours, with all its imperfections was created by Him. (Times of India 2)

Jayanta Mahapatra is a keen observer of his surrounding and creates poetry out of contemporary situation. He encounters everyday reality with the insight of scientist and portrays it with the objectivity of a true artist. At the same time the poet in Mahapatra feels agonized and anguished about life of the poor. The poet’s anguish is palpable as he dwells on poverty, hunger, exploitation, violence, terrorism and degradation of morals in public life. He portrays the predicament of human life and judges social issues from the humanistic point of view. In his poetry Mahapatra strives to identify himself with the problems of the suffering humanity and in his sincere commitment to society he emerges out as a true humanist which manifests his real masculinity.

As a humanist Mahapatra’s heart goes out for the women folks who have to bear the inhuman and cruel consequences of poverty, exploitation, violence and social evils
like dowry. “In the Autumn Valleys of Mahanadi” and “Learning for Ourselves” from *A Whiteness of Bone*, the poet expresses his disgust when the morals of society at its lowest ebb.

In these lines the poet alludes to the atrocious and shameful social evil of bride-burning by the greedy in-laws for the sake of securing more dowry. In fact, nowadays the dowry – deaths are on the rise and have become unfortunately the modern counterparts of the equally abominable and cruel *Sati* system of the past when a widow was, often forcefully, consigned to the flames of the funeral pyre of her dead husband. A mother’s heart always hear “the piteous screams of the daughter burnt to death” and naturally sleep eludes her as she is overpowered by grief and the mother’s choked throat swells in painful remembrance of her daughter’s cruel fate. But who cares? The custodians of law and order- the police and the government – do not bother even if more similar crimes against the hapless and the helpless women are perpetrated and because of loopholes in the judicial system the culprits go scot-free. With no fear of law and persecution the cunning culprits become more and more relentless and ruthless in their barbaric conduct under the dead weight of avarice and greed.

Likewise, rape is yet another heinous crime that is perpetrated on women and worse still, culprit most often goes unpunished. The poet powerfully communicates the fear, pain, anguish, the helplessness, the shame and the agony of a rape victim with the vivid analogy: “the trembling in the eyes of cows we see / being led meekly to the town’s slaughter house”. The poet seems to convey that the cow’s miseries end at the slaughter house but a rape victim is condemned to live with her burden. What is more shocking is our general apathy, callousness and our insensitivity towards human misery that overwhelms the present day society. Similarly, in “the Lost Children of America”, Mahapatra alludes to another similar shocking incident where the high and the mighty evil-doers go unpunished.

Hanuman is one of the most popular and celebrated Gods in the Hindu pantheon who epitomizes *brahmacharya* – the state of strict discipline and total self-control over natural urge. But nothing can be more tragic and ironical than the rape of a fisher girl in the precincts of the Hanuman Temple and, that too, by the son of the temple priest who has gone modern deviating from the traditional role and piety expected of his lineage.
The victim of rape is a fisher girl who belongs to a low caste in the social hierarchy and wronged by a man of the high caste. As a result, the girl’s meek protests go unheard. Not only this! Even the police station where protection and safety is expected turns out to be a sinister place like the temple. There also the unfortunate girl is assaulted repeatedly by the four policemen – the so-called guardians of law and order in society. Mahapatra thus portrays the pitiable plight of woman in society and laments over the dehumanisation of collective psyche and loss of moral values.

Jayant Mahapatra deeply feels for the plight of Indian woman in a tradition bound society who has to bear the burden of her womanhood in utter loneliness, helplessness, humiliation, deprivation and deplorable degradation. His poems like “A Missing Person”, “Hunger”, “The Whore house in a Calcutta Street”, “30th January 1982: A Story”, and “The Twenty fifth Anniversary of a Republic: 1975” reveal the pain and anguish of the poet over the realization of human (read woman) predicament entrapped in the complex web of societal restraints which act as serious constraints on the choices open to an individual to lead his life in accordance with his personal preferences & predilections. In such a set-up individual’s freedom is crippled and sacrificed at the altar of social obligations which dictate his / her fate. Mahapatra’s poetic voice becomes sad and heavy when he delineates women’s condition.

In “Hunger” the poet describes how poverty and sexuality play havoc in the life of man and woman debasing them to sub-human levels. Mahapatra poignantly and poetically narrates the shocking instance of a poor father prostituting his girl-child, hardly out of her teens, luring a prospective customer in casual, business-like manner: The poem is quoted in full for its gripping account:

It was hard to believe the flesh was heavy on my back.
The fisherman said: will you have her, carelessly,
trailing his nets and his nerves, as though his words
sanctified the purpose with which he faced himself.
I saw his white bone thrash his eyes.

I followed him across the sprawling sands,
my mind thumping in the flesh’s sling.
Hope lay perhaps in burning the house I lived in.
Silence gripped my sleeves; his body clawed
at the froth his old nets had dragged up from the seas.

In the flickering dark his lean-to opened like a wound.
The wind was I, and the day and night before.
Palm fronds scratched my skin. Inside the shack
an oil lamp splayed the hours bunched to those walls.
Over and over the sticky soot crossed the space of my mind.

I heard him say; my daughter, she is 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 (The Lie of Dawns 46).

The poem “Hunger” is a telling and touching commentary on the compulsions and consequences of stark poverty which forces a father to sell his daughter. The fisherman is nervous and restless, perhaps it is the first time he is trading his daughter for flesh. He is perhaps unable to reconcile himself to the bitter reality and his helplessness prods him on the unpleasantness of his atrocious act. Yet the father in him prompts the fisherman to caution the customer being rude to the girl-child. The fact that she still is a small girl is stressed by the line “she’s just turned fifteen”. And the father’s concern is registered in these lines: “Feel her, I’ll be back soon, your bus leaves at nine.” In fact “Hunger” is “a profoundly human document”, which contains within itself the stifled cries of countless innocent victims who fall an easy prey to situations, driven as they are by terrible hunger to become the objects for satisfying the hungers of the flesh. Between the two hungers, these unfortunate man and woman lose all their dignity as humans living like mere shadows dragging their burdensome lives from day to day. They are forced to resign to their cruel fate with no hope of ever seeing a better dawn. Thousands of men and women are unfortunately condemned to endure this demeaning life.
Another interesting aspect to be taken note of in the poem is that the protagonist too is a victim of hunger, i.e. his own inherent sexuality which forces him to seek pleasure in the ramshackle hut of a poor fisherman. The protagonist too is in a dilemma as to whether he should proceed or retreat. His moral world crumbles heavily on him. He feels that “the sky fell on me” and realizes that “Hope lay perhaps in burning the house I lived in”. Yet he follows the fisherman, unable to restrain himself and “inside the shock” two hungers confront each other each as powerful and compelling as the other. Both the protagonist and girl are victims of their respective hungers: both are losers: the protagonist loses his moral certitude and the girl, her chastity. And above all, human dignity becomes the first casualty in the whole process which shatters the self-respect of an individual. This is no less destructive and damaging to the human person than an attempted suicide.

“The Whore House in a Calcutta Street” exposes the hollow world of prostitutes, their degrading existence which compels them to sell their bodies as wares to the customers. The protagonist suffers from moral hesitancy but the same inviting business like tone tempts the protagonist. The protagonist thinks that he can “learn something more about women” in the whore house whereas the prostitute goes about playing the tricks of her trade in the typical hard tradition of their business and “does what she thinks proper to please” the customer without being moved by any feelings. For her, every new customer means only more business.

The whore cannot afford to have any sort of emotional involvement either with the customer or with the act. That is why, she is impatient and hurries the customer through the act of sex – “Hurry, will you? Let me go”. The sex-act becomes unsatisfying as the whore offers her body as a ware and not her heart. She tricks the customer into a quick organ and the protagonist walks out of the house more frustrated, disappointed and ashamed of himself.

The poem, thus, deals with the pains and agonies the prostitutes suffer in their everyday life while confronting the cultured society. It is a big question that comes up then what exactly does one mean by “cultured”. Does it mean a pseudo-sensibility of a socio-cultural reality? Or does it signify an inevitability of the human materialism? Mahapatra does not answer any of these queries but portrays an essence of the carnal
pleasure as also the stark reality of society which deprive these individuals of their
dignity and worth as human beings. Writers like Mahapatra deserve praise for putting in
hard efforts to give women the identity they deserve, especially those who been
victimized for the carnal pleasure of the human materialism.

Jayanat Mahapatra describes the plight of not only these ostracised women but
also the general conditions of women who are exiled at home. Whether as a wife, a
daughter or a mother in a male dominated society they are silent sufferers in every
relationship. But her role as a wife is really taxing. The woman as a wife is alienated
from the freedom that she enjoyed before marriage. She doesn’t get a physical happiness
from her husband and she struggles to overcome the physiological and psychological
loneliness, which is the only present condition and part of her life. Mahapatra depicts her
loneliness in “On Most Nights”. It is really very painful that a woman is compelled to be
alone and she suffers loneliness not only at social but emotional level as well. In a
patriarchal society, the woman can never truly have the liberty and freedom, especially
when she becomes a wife.

Marriage, homemaking, child rearing and maintaining the traditional etiquette of
the family define the role of woman in the prevailing culture of patriarchal society. A
male-dominated society fails to feel the pathos that the women undergo for maintaining
her responsibilities being imposed upon them in the name of traditions and culture. In our
society women exist with sacrificing their dreams and desires. Mahapatra as an
experimentalist poet never fails to portray the woman who is trapped in the crude
domination of the chauvinistic man. He portrays the women who have been neglected by
the patriarchal society throughout their lives with perfection. Mahapatra gives voice to
the unuttered voices which always have powerful communication in silence. He
endeavours to give them a social identity that the women in Orissa or for that matter in
India, deserve. As a sensitive poet and a humanist he tries to unfetter the shackles that
have been tied around a woman restricting her liberty in the orthodox patriarchal set-up.

Jayant Mahapatra’s poems dealing with the treatment of women in a tradition-
bound male-dominat ed society present him as a humanitarian and a strong supporter of
anti-hierarchal structure that can facilitate a healthy web of life free from domination,
control and exploitation. However, a close reading of Mahapatra’s poetry shows that he
speaks not only for the women or a particular section of society but his poems articulate problems that concern society or a nation as a whole. As a modern, post-colonial poet he ‘connects’ himself with the world and realizes that he should be aware of what’s going on around him: the poverty, the greed, the unnecessary violence, the cruelty, the injustice, the sexuality. Mahapatra depicts the baneful social realities with a high degree of objectivity which saves his poetry from cheap sentimentalism. The poet laments the loss of moral values and observance of birth and death anniversaries of our great men and martyrs as a ritual without imbibing their teachings. In “30th January, 1982: A Story”, Mahapatra obliquely refers to the heinous assassination of the apostle of non-violence, Mahatma Gandhi. The poet laments that little has changed in the attitude of the people who have remained, rather grown, passive, selfish and parochial in their deeds and thoughts. People in the postcolonial India have jettisoned the ideal of non-violence and compassion Gandhiji practised and preached. The poet expresses his deep shock at the people’s merciless slaughtering of cows and goats. The loose, conversational tone of the poem symbolizes the lack of concern about moral values. The poet identifies himself with the bleating goats and pours out his heart felt agony. The poet lays bare the evil nature of man. He inheres primordial characteristic and feels prone to killing mute and innocent animals and fellow-beings.

The poet brings about a contrast between the good and the evil. Good is symbolized by mangoes in the poem while evil is represented by human beings as they inherit it. The people feel restless until an evil deed is committed. Evil, thus, plays a vital role in society. It was the root-cause of assassination of Mahatama Gandhi. However, the poet laments that Godse killed Gandhiji physically and only once but we murder him everyday many a time by brazenly discarding the teaching of Mahatma Gandhi. The poet thus lays bare the hypocrisy of our people who pay only lip service to Mahatma Gandhi’s ideals of truth and non-violence but do not practice these. It is really a sad commentary on the attitude and character of Indian people and as such the martyrs’ blood has not redeemed our nation.

The brio of Mahapatra as a poet lies in his concern for the poor, the wretched, the destitute and his ability to create poetry out of the contemporary social reality. His poems appear to reveal an increasing concern on the part of the poet with contemporary reality
with all its political connotations. From the preoccupation with timeless myths he has extended his range of interest to include reality. The poet bares the sordid reality of the country and blames the politicians for all the mess. He condemns them for their sham and hypocritical conduct as they hoodwink the masses. The problems of casteism, superstition, communalism, corruption, hunger and poverty stare in the face of the nation even after sixty years of independence. Yet our political leaders are busy participating in the celebrations of inauguration of new postage stamp as a token of paying homage to a great leader for his services to the nation or unveiling some statue. He condemns the political class for their flamboyant extravagance and ostentation. The poet sincerely believes that until and unless the lot of the poor people is ameliorated, all such acts of releasing a new postage stamp are futile and meaningless. The poet condemns the leaders for their panache appearance on such occasions even as the country is overwhelmed with famished faces. The world of hollow man is barren and spiritually sterile. Mahapatra finds his surroundings as well as the whole country rendered barren and sanguine by the political leaders who are bereft of the spirit of altruism. They hoodwink the masses and befoul them making a fetish of installing statues of worthless leaders on the cross-roads. The leaders are busy in celebrations amidst poverty and destitution. Mahapatra blames the politicians for this unhappy state of affairs. He has the guts to criticize and condemn politicians for their nefarious and criminal activities. Mahapatra is, perhaps, the first poet to take up cudgels against the political leaders. The poet's genuine concern for the well-being and welfare of the people is seen here. He expresses his angst and anguish over the degeneration of moral values in public life which has also despoiled the image of the country in the comity of nations.

Jayant Mahapatra also portrays the whole ambience of violence and destruction that seems to have engulfed the various parts of the country in the name of Khalistan, Naxalism and secessionism. The poet is shocked to see the green fields of Punjab turning into the killing fields by terrorists aided and abetted by our immediate neighbour Pakistan and politicians trying to derive political mileage over the gruesome deaths of the innocent persons. The poet expresses his sense of horror and shock in "Bewildred Wheatfields: Section 1". The poet delineates Punjab, once the granary of India, as a land of bloodshed and violence. Death is all-pervasive and the land which once was brimmed with
overflowing rivers has now turned dry because of brutal killings so much so that, to the poet, even moonlight seems to be shrouded in inhumanity. With the broad daylight gruesome killings becoming the order of the day in Punjab the poet feels that humanity has lost its existence as he says in “Section 7: Bewildred Wheatfields.” The wonders whether he can find a humanitarian in Punjab. He thinks that such a man may exist in dream only. The poet unequivocally says that humanism and a humanitarian are conspicuously absent from the scenes of blood bath and mayhem. Mahapatra seems to be critical of the self-styled progressive, secular and democratic intellectuals and human rights activists who, as this research scholar vividly remembers, instead of condemning grisly killings of the innocent people, had started to say that violence has come to stay in Punjab and the people will have to learn to live with it and themselves went missing from the scene of gory killings when Punjab was on the boil.

Mahapatra feels worried and grieved over the inexplicable and ruthless violence and injustices in the present times. The horror of events like the Bhopal gas tragedy, the Gulf war, the Kalahandi starvation deaths, and the rise of Naxal movement owing to lopsided development shakes the poet. In the disastrous Bhopal Gas Tragedy of December 1984, in which thousands were gassed to death, the poet profiles the death of five year-old Leela to bring out the colossal waste caused by this criminal negligence that claimed innocent and helpless victims. As the sky darkens with the toxic fumes, Leela asks if the sky is blue and dies. Leela, aged 5, was victim number 569 and the biographical details that parenthesize her young life take the incident out of the realm of nightmare into the harsh light of brutal and insensitive reality. Thus the drama of death and destruction goes on which makes people all the more callous and desensitised. Mahapatra also deals with the problem of Naxalism, a socio-political issue that raised its ugly head in the 1970’s, but, of late, has assumed frightening proportions in its spread and sanguinariness. The young generation opts for the bloody path of mayhem and violence against injustice and oppression and the poet writes in “A Country”:

Why am I hurt still by the look
in the hand of that graceful Naxal girl
who appeared out of nowhere that winter,
holding a knife as old as history? (The Lie of Dawns 51)
The poet feels dismayed and dejected in “A Country” where “hunger keeps growing”, a girl dies of starvation before “her breasts are swollen with milk” (51) and out of hunger a girl turns Naxalite. The poem is an attempt by the poet to come to grips with the prevailing disturbed conditions of revolutions, protests, suffering and injustice. He realizes painfully that the age-old myths have brought no succour to the hungry and suffering in the post-colonial India. In an attempt to find an answer to the grave Naxal problem the poet admits that he has become lopsided as his intellect fails: “in the fiery violence of a revolutionary / my reason becomes a prejudiced sorrow / like socialism” (51).

The poet is dismayed at the leaders’ nonchalant attitude towards the sufferings of the poor people. In Trying to keep still”, the poet remarks metaphorically:

Crows keep flying through fitful air
but the spaces are empty, nothing fills them any more
Time has lost its hands, trying to keep still
Like damp clouds widows deaden the light of the sun (86)

The poet identifies himself with the poor, the hungry, the down-trodden who are the victims of the present socio-cultural and politico-economic system. The poet is anguished over the stark reality that hunger is still dogging thousands of people even after half a century of independence. People are leading a woeful life. Such is the plight of postcolonial India and the poet questions the stony “silence of one who calls himself God” over the sufferings, sorrows and sanguinary atmosphere all around:

But in secret we seem to hear again
the wailing flutes of burnt-out rice fields
the heart-beats of children who have no fathers
and the silence of one who calls himself God. (86)

Mahapatra’s knowledge of native language of social process fits into the literary axiom that the chief function of any genre of literature is to reflect with meaning the totality of contemporary human conditions. Mahapatra emerges a true humanist in his poems and in his humanism lies his masculinity in its true sense which stands for justice, peace and humanity.
From the foregoing commentary, it is evident that Jayanta Mahapatra emerges truly a postcolonial poet as he focuses on the non-West or its cultural other with an interdisciplinary approach without being contained within the binaries of ‘us’ and ‘them.’ He also questions the stereotypes like the oppressor / oppressed and uses poetry as a literary exercise to erase the inferiority instilled into the native minds by the psychological damage done by colonialism to the colonized people.

As a postcolonial poet, Mahapatra is a keen observer of contemporary life and situation. He minces no words in describing the start socio-political realities and tries to come to terms with reality, a la Nissim Ezekiel. He candidly portrays the country and the world around him in realistic terms as he sees life steadily and in totality. Hunger, poverty, violence and lawlessness in contemporary society seem to disturb the poet deeply. As a true postcolonial poet, he reflects on the same kind of injustice and violence in other countries of the world like Somalia and Nicaragua. Postcoloniality is, as Leela Gandhi says elsewhere, another name for globalization. If the hunger in Somalia disturbs the poet, the half starved children of Kalahandi (a district in his home state of Orissa) make him sad and depressed. The agony abides and he describes the gloomy conditions in a matter of fact tone in his poems. The poet is concerned with the fate of humanity at large.

The colonial past haunts the poet to no end. In postcolonial theory, the hostile history refers to the colonial past, which haunts the post-colonial present. The colonial system and laws are still in operation as we have inherited the British Administrative and Judicial system.

The process of deification is also a part decolonising the native mind. In India to deify Gandhi means decolonising the Indian mind. Hence, Gandhi becomes an integral part of post-colonial literature. Gandhi has become a living example of non-violence, truth and righteousness. Mahapatra tries to create a contemporary myth out of Gandhi in his recent poetry. In mythicizing Gandhi, Mahapatra realizes that one can be authentic as a writer or poet by going back to his or her roots. In his own case, Mahapatra wants to decolonize himself and his culture so that he can be original and authentic as a poet. Thus, if creating new national myths is a part of post-colonial writing, Jayant Mahapatra can truly be called a post-colonial poet. He joins the long line of his illustrations.
predecessors—M. R. Anand, Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan, Chaman Nahal & Nissim Ezekiel who have written eloquently about Gandhi. In fact, Gandhiji himself can be treated as a post-colonial writer because of his oppositional nationalism.

Mahapatra's poetry is worldly and full of events. As a humanistic poet, he writes about what happens around the world—poverty, starvation and human suffering. The concern for humankind and especially for the poor and suffering people is unmistakable in his poetry. He writes poetry to make people aware of the contemporary situation. As a poet with deep poetic sensibility he sees into the heart of things and makes his readers feel for the suffering masses. Therein lies his strength and greatness as a poet and we know greatness and strength in a poet are the mark of his masculinity.

In sum, one can safely affirm that the reading of Mahapatra’s poetry is sort of voyage into one’s own self, a personal discovery that provides us courage to cope with the environment around, face unequal society and encounter social evils. His poetry helps an individual to come out of his trapped situation and motivates him to relate himself with external landscape and explore the possibilities of creating a promising tomorrow. This unique trait of Mahapatra’s poetry coupled with his ability to write about indigenous tradition and culture thereby establishing an identity independent of the coloniser in the recent history makes him one of the foremost post-colonial poets in the country. To induce a kind of empathy with the contemporary life, successful decolonization of poetry and making it a vehicle for the expression of Indian landscape and above all, his ability to create a new English idiom of the other English that has imparted a local habitation and a name to post-colonial poetry are the marks of the strength of his poetry and therein lies his masculinity in the real sense of the term.
Works Cited


