

# Contesting the Grand Narrative : A Critical Reading of Jayanta Mahapatra's Poetry

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Mahapatra is nurtured by the organic world of his surrounding and he is firmly rooted in the soil and setting of Cuttack which is a microcosm of the macrocosm India. Mahapatra's heart reaches out to the poor women workers who toiled hard to maintain their livelihood.



Jayanta Mahapatra

The aim of this paper is to show how Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry contests grand narratives and centre stages the interplay of various mini narratives. If India is considered as the macrocosm then Odisha becomes the microcosm in Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry and this paper makes an attempt to reveal the various layers associated with Odisha in his poetic oeuvre. Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry is extremely rich, evocative and powerful and the poet refuses to believe in the validity of any grand discourse or narrative. The Indian novelists writing in English have been more or less preoccupied with grand discourse or narrative of nation, identity, nationality etc. and contemporary Indian English novelists like Salman Rushdie, Shashi Tharoor and Kiran Desai have dealt with grand narratives in their respective creations. Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh have exhibited an extraordinary anxiety to depict India in a large canvas in novels like *Midnight's Children* and *The Shadow Lines* that also reveal their consistent engagement with concepts like nation, identity and nationality. Compared to these stalwarts, the Indian English poets have maintained a low profile and the poetry of Nisim Ezekiel, Jayanta Mahapatra, Arun Kolatkar and Agha Shahid Ali have exhibited an awareness to bring to light a few particular mini-narratives in their poetic work. Ezekiel had given priority to Bombay in his poetry, Mahapatra has been consistently preoccupied with Odisha, Arun Kolatkar with Maharashtra and

Agha Shahid Ali had immortalized Kashmir in his poetry. Though the central argument of this paper is derived from theoretical assumptions, yet there has been a sustained attempt to maintain consistent engagement with Mahapatra's poetry.

Both postmodernism and post colonialism have been preoccupied with mini narratives and revealed a concern to give voice to the socially, politically and economically oppressed lot. Post modernism is a specific literary and cultural movement that swept the shores of Europe during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and subsequently consolidated its position within the academic realm by 1980s. Postmodernism has often been viewed as a thorough departure from modernism or a phenomenon arriving after the demise of modernism. But looked at from a critical point of view, post modernism is neither a total break away with preoccupations or concerns of modernism, nor it is a radical movement logically followed by the death of the former; rather post modernism critically re-examines the central ideals of modernism as it also questions some of the major ideas of the modernists. The modernist valorized concepts like progress, civilization, enlightenment etc., but the post-modernist questioned the validity of such 'grand narratives' in a post-war and post-Holocaust European world. As Jena-Francios Lyotard convincingly argues in his seminal work *The Postmodern Condition : A Report on Knowledge* –

“Simplifying to the extreme, I define post modernism as incredulity towards meta narratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences; but that progress in turn presupposes it. To the obsolescence of the meta narrative apparatus of legitimation corresponds, most notably, the crisis of metaphysical philosophy and of the university institution which in the post relied on it.” (Lyotard 1979, XXIV)

Lyotard's comment had stimulated the intellect of a generation of readers, critics and academicians across the world to think a new. In fact, Lyotard's argument so convincingly signaled the demise of grand narratives that literary and cultural activists appropriated his powerful theory to meet the challenges of their respective disciplines. In this context Tim Woods succinctly comments in his major book *Beginning Postmodernism* –

“In other words, knowledge in the post modern era can no longer be legitimated or sanctioned according to the great 'narratives' that have shaped western knowledge to the date, like notion of progress embedded in Marxism, or the release from unconscious trauma harboured by Freudian theory. Indeed, Lyotard regards such narratives as violent and tyrannical in their imposition of a 'totalizing' pattern and a false universality on action, events and things. (Woods 2010, 20-21)

According to the tenets of postcolonial theory as espoused by Homi K. Bhabha, there are two types of representation– the pedagogic and the performative and it should be taken into account that these two modes of representation take place in the context nationalistic discourse. The theory of nation and nationalism becomes grand-narratives and within the domain of post colonial theory and critics, there are a few critics who instinctively distrust such fanfare about nation that threatens to become a grand narrative. The concept of one grand nation tires to subdue other mini narratives and some of the post colonial critics have challenged such theorization. The great narrative threaten to marginalize the mini narratives and in this context John McLeod argues –

“It is through the performative aspects of nationalist discourses that difference returns from within to challenge the homogeneous nation with its unified people and myths of origin, as the marginalized people of the population are granted an opportunity to intervene in the production of the nation's representative of itself to itself.” (McLeod 2007, 119)

Post colonial criticism/theory enables one to come to terms with the marginal voices which otherwise cannot articulate anything because of the domination of grand narratives. Post colonial criticism questions the validity of western notion of progress, civilization, enlightenment and it provides a convenient scope to re-examine nationalist history anew. Post colonialism has found fault with colonial historiography and many post colonial writers and intellectual their own histories and the history of the nations putting aside the dominant and oppressive colonial history. In the wake of sub-altern studies, intellectuals and writers like Ranajit Guha, Dipesh Chakravarty, Partho Chatterjee, Sumit Sarkar, Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak, Shahid Amin and others have attempted to re-write Indian history from an insider's perspective. Gayatir Chakravarty's seminal essay 'Can the subaltern speak' eloquently argues the need for giving voice to the socially subjugated, oppressed and marginalized people. But post colonial critics have often shown a tendency has resulted in the marginalization of the subjugated voice. In this context Elleka Boehmer argues--

"Post-structuralist and /or post colonial critics, as Ajja Z Ahmed has argued, tend to address 'Third World Literature' as a coherent field of knowledge, defined by unitary forces of history, such as nationalism or anti-colonial struggle." (Boehmer 1995, 246)

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Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry brings to light the subjugated and oppressed voices and he always makes an attempt to contest the validity of grand narratives in his poetry, instead he gives priority to the depiction of Odisha as a microcosmic locale in his poetry. Jayanta Mahapatra does not write for professional reason because writing for him is not only an aesthetic pursuit, but also a means to remain alive in a vibrant way. He has exhibited an awareness regarding the value of space in poetry and for him, Odisha symbolizes the past, present and future and it is precisely in this context one can argue that he, as a creative artist has dealt with mini narrative of Odisha in his poetry. For a poet language is not merely an instrument to write but also the very essence of his/her identity. For a poet the clash between speech and silence enhances his/her sensibility and Mahapatra's own remark in this context is appropriate--

"And I would say we are only faced with a silence which words have brought us ultimately to all the words we thought were grand exercises of imagination, fusing the imaginary with reality. This silence is not just a stock character of mystery, or a knowledge that is always provisional." (Mahapatra 2004, 22)

Mahapatra struggles against this silence and continues to write poems of high aesthetic merit, his poems bring to light the deplorable plight of ordinary individuals, the misery and agony of common people, the acute poverty that taints sacred human relation, the hopeless condition of the socially underprivileged and the erosion of human values. Mahapatra was born in Cuttack and grew up in a lower middle class family he had his upbringing in a narrow rural community. Mahapatra's poetry exhibits an extra ordinary desire to depict Odisha in the midst of chaos, poverty, physical and spiritual degeneration and Odisha is not merely a space/place in Mahapatra's poetry rather Odisha turns out to be a significant trope for him.

Mahapatra gives importance to ritual in his poetry and in *A Rain of Rites*, he talks about it --

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.

The poetic persona here talks of an ordinary encounter with rain and this occasion works as a catalyst for creating a mosaic of images to bring to light the dark mood of the speaker. It is an intensely appealing subjective poem where an individual's response determines the texture and structure of the poem. Bijay Kumar Das rightly points out in this context –

“The landscape of place around the poet is the parameter of his life and faith and perhaps unalterable as his own body.” (Bijay Kumar Das 2001, 9)

Jayanta Mahapatra puts emphasis on the description of the so called minute entities of nature and human life that is often neglected by the other Indian writers writing in English. Mahapatra is not bothered about the description of grand narratives, he is rather enamored of small entities which he depicts through the piling up of a few striking images.

Swan sink wordlessly to the carpet  
miles of polished floors  
reached out  
for the glass of voices  
There are gulls crying everywhere  
and glazed green grass  
in the park with the swans  
folding their cold throats

Both postmodernist and post colonial critics distrust grand narratives and give voice to the socially oppressed as they depict the deplorable plight of poverty stricken common people who lack the basic essentials of life. In *Hunger* Jayanta Mahapatra makes an ordinary fisherman the protagonist of the poem; that fisherman is virtually a non-entity in a greater context of Mahapatra's fisherman reminds one of William Wordsworth's the leech gatherer and the solitary reaper. Mahapatra does not merely reveal his sympathy for the plight of the poor fisherman; he also makes the readers feel for the fisherman who does not hesitate to offer his own daughter as a prostitute to mitigate his hunger. The poetic persona is awestruck when the fisherman makes an abrupt and candid offer--

I heard him say: my daughter, she's just turned feel her. I'll be back soon, your bus leaves at fifteen... nine. The sky fell on me, and a father's exhausted wife. 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 poet talks about two different types of hunger in this poem– one is physical hunger and the other is sexual hunger. The poet also provides a vivid picture of poverty of the fisherman in this poem that brings to light a typical concern of both the post colonial thinkers and the post modernists– the concern for the marginalized and oppressed.

In the flickering dark his lean to opened like a wound. The wind was I, and the days and nights 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.

The concern for the simple and the 'small' helps one to situate Mahapatra in the assembly of those Indian English poets who do not display any anxiety to come to terms with grand

narratives. Mahapatra talks about “Sad houses,” “small screams,” “boat” and “lake” in his evocative poem ‘Hands’ which brings to light his fundamental concerns a poet.

As a boy I learned to come in  
by the back door. Sad  
houses now, clean and leaning  
against one another , full of sleep.  
My old rag elephant is  
smothered with small screams.  
From the dark surface,  
waving like grass –  
when the last boat crosses the lake.

In “The Abandoned British Cemetery at Balasore”, Mahapatra challenges the grand narrative of history and expresses his sympathy for the alien soldiers who died meaninglessly. The poet does not want to disturb history, he simply watches “the ruins of stone and marble” “any yet”, he is “awed by the forgotten dead.” Postcolonial critics clamor for the need to revive historical memory and to retrieve the voice that had not only been subdued, but also stifled.

The speaker of the poem mourns the death of common soldiers and he also laments the loss of identity that was caused by the war as a large number of soldiers died without being identified properly. The war caused havoc and it also led to the spread of disease and the poetic persona feels disgusted with the machinations of the Empire which is expressed in the following lines –

Of what concern to me is a vanished Empire?  
Or the conquest of my ancestors’ timeless ennui?  
It is the dying young who have the power to show  
What the heart will hide, the grass shows no more.  
(The Abandoned British Cemetery at Balasore)

Similarly “the cries of fishermen” disturb the poet in “the captive air of Chandipur on sea” and he listens to the “music of what the world has lost”. G.J.V Prasad rightly points out about Mahapatra,

“This transcendental poet is also a poet of Odisha... This is clear in all his poetry and even more so in *Relationships*, his epic attempt to write a long poem which would embody the myths of his culture– the history, mythology and legends of Odisha.” (Prasad 1999, 97)

In Jayanta Mahapatra’s poetry the subjective “I” becomes more important than the fate of a nation, he is the poet of individual subject experiences and that is why he can see the sky growing “lonelier with cloudlessness”. In all these poems of Mahapatra the locale is Odisha and he repeatedly digs the native soil to bring out the essence of his creativity. In the poem ‘the Vase’, the poet brings to light the conflicting realities that take place on an ordinary day and he provides an almost graphics description of these passing images –

But each day  
we watch the sifts come and go,  
watch the still – slender, leasing where  
who shuffles down the crowded road and finds out  
that the middle – aged ma surreptitiously following her.

Mahapatra is nurtured by the organic world of his surrounding and he is firmly rooted in the soil and setting of Cuttack which is a microcosm of the macrocosm India. Mahapatra's heart reaches out to the poor women workers who toiled hard to maintain their livelihood. Mahapatra depicts the toil of four women labourers mending a road at two o'clock in a hot summer afternoon.

As four women workers rule the hot tar  
On to the pitted face of the road.  
Soon, it will be late in the afternoon and their  
the mangled lepers will shuffle along, going home,  
their deplorable looks. (Again one day walking by the river)

Mahapatra depicts the plight of an old woman who can barely walk and the authentic picture of real suffering soften the hearts of readers. The following lines from the poem "Bazaar, 5 P.M Odisha" brings to light Mahapatra's compassion for the suffering lot.

An old woman prostrates herself  
to the day's last sun  
the crawling mass of people on its knees  
carrying her upward, through a tight suffering  
that fells the sun, measuring  
the darkness break out of her shrouded shrine.  
(Bazaar, 5.P.M. Odisha)

Puri occupies a pivotal place in Mahapatra's poetry and the poverty and plight of the leprosy patients is effectively brought out by the poet in the following lines –

At Puri, the crows  
The one wide street  
lolls out like a giant tongue.  
Five faceless lepers move aside  
as a priest passes by.  
And at the streets end  
the crowds thronging the temple door,  
a huge holy flower.  
(Taste for Tomorrow)

The poems 'Dawn at Puri' and 'Main Temple street, Puri' Mahapatra again reveals his consistent preoccupation with common incidents, subjects and dejects. In 'Dawn at Puri' he talks about the sad plight of the widows and leprosy patients.

her last wish to be cremated here  
twisting uncertainly like light  
on the shifting sands. (Dawn at Puri)

From the above discussion it becomes transparent that Mahapatra as a poet contest the validity of any grand narrative and instead gives priority to the foreplay of various mini-narrative which is a continuous concern for both the postmodernists and post colonial critics.

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