

Poetry
Professor S.P. Dhanavel
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Madras
Lecture 71
Jayanta Mahapatra

(Refer Slide Time: 00:14)

Jayanta Mahapatra (1928-)



- Historical and Literary Context
- Jayanta Mahapatra
- What is Poetry?
- "A Missing Person"
- "Indian Summer"
- "Lost"
- Analysis



Hello friends, we are going to deal with the poetry of Janayta Mahapatra. First, we will see the historical and literary context in which Janayta Mahapatra wrote his poems, see his view on poetry, read his poem, 'A Missing Person' as a prelude to two other poems, 'Indian Summer' and 'Lost.' Analyze them and then conclude our presentation.

(Refer Slide Time: 00:39)

Historical and Literary Context



- The Kalinga War of 261 BC
- The Orissa Famine of 1866 and Mercy Camps organized by Christian missionaries
- English missionary school education in India
- Independent India's focus on scientific temper and science education
- The Bombay Poets: Nissim Ezekiel, Adil Jussawalla, Gieve Patel, Eunice de Souza, Arun Koltakar, Dilip Chitre, etc.
- P. Lal and the Writers Workshop in Calcutta
- Jayanta Mahapatra's lonely poetic journey in Cuttack



When it comes to the historical and literary context of Janayta Mahapatra there is something very significant that Janayta Mahapatra often remembers the Kalinga War of 261, which converted Ashoka to Buddhism to propagate peace in the world. And also have to remember that the family of Janayta Mahapatra converted to Christianity when his forefathers had to go through this Orissa Famine of 1866, when Mercy Camps were organized by Christian missionaries. And because of this conversion Janayta Mahapatra's father was able to give good education to Janayta Mahapatra.

He attended an English missionary school in Orissa, which became a common practice in India. Now, after this 1947 when India became independent, there was a focus on scientific temper and science education. This is also important for us in the context of Janayta Mahapatra, because he was a student of science, became a professor of physics in a college. Throughout his life he was teaching physics. But he also got into poetry and wrote a number of poems.

At that time when Janayta Mahapatra was growing as a poet, we see the developments on the East and also on the West. In the West, we have Bombay poets, like Nissim Ezekiel, Adil Jussawalla, Gieve Patel, Eunice de Souza, Arun Koltakar, and Dilip Chitre and many others. And in the East, we have P. Lal and the Writer's Workshop in Calcutta, though it is closer to Orissa that is Cuttack in the place, where Janayta Mahapatra lived, we find that the poet Mahapatra led a very lonely life. He led a lonely poetic journey in Cuttack, a small town in Orissa.

(Refer Slide Time: 02:45)

Jayanta Mohapatra (1928-)



- A professor of physics and a poet of metaphysics
- Started writing short stories, moved on to photography, and finally landed in "inexpensive" poetry at 38
- Published in international poetry magazines and received great acclaim over the years
- Initially neglected in India but with the first Sahitya Akademi award for poetry in English for *Relationship* in 1981, he got recognized as a serious poet.

➤ **16 Volumes:** *Close the Sky, Ten by Ten* (1971), *Suyamvara and Other Poems* (1971), *A Rain of Rites* (1976), *Life Signs* (1983)

➤ **Poems:** "Indian Summer," "Lost," "Grandfather," "Hunger," "Steps in the Dark," "A Rain of Rites"



Mahapatra was born in 1928, he worked as a professor of physics in a college, but then he chose to live as a poet of metaphysics. He started writing short stories in the beginning then moved on to photography. When you found it expensive, finally, he landed in inexpensive poetry at the age of 38. He started publishing his poems in international poetry magazines, and slowly received great acclaim over the years. Initially, he was neglected in India, but with the first Sahitya Academy Award for poetry in English for his volume, 'Relationship' in 1981, he began to get recognition as a serious poet in India and abroad.

He has 16 volumes of poetry. We have just mentioned a few here, *Close the Sky, Ten by Ten*, *Suyamvara and Other Poems*, *A Rain of Rites*, *Life Signs*. Some of the poems which are popular are *Indian Summer*, *Lost*, *Grandfather*, *Hunger*, *Steps in the Dark*, *A Rain of Rites*.

(Refer Slide Time: 03:57)

What is Poetry?



- “Poetry is the stranger within oneself — the man inside one is unaware of, and the poet is almost always in the quest of finding this other one. Therefore, his questions: Who am I? Where have I come from and where is it I am going? How should I live? How can I see that whom I had not seen before clearly? Where are you, Other One? Have I no right to my death?”
- Mahapatra, Jayanta. 1992. “Poetry as Freedom: The Door,” *Indian Literature*, 35 (4): 39-44.



What is poetry, according to Jayanta Mahapatra? He has a statement in one of his essays, “Poetry as Freedom: The Door” published in our Sahitya Academy journal, *Indian literature* in 1992. For him, “poetry is a stranger within oneself.” What a wonderful definition of poetry!

“Poetry is a stranger within oneself- the man inside one is unaware of and the poet is almost always in the quest of finding this other one. Therefore, his questions, who am I? Where have I come from? And where is it I am going? How should I live? How can I see that whom I had not seen before clearly? Where are you, Other One? Have I no right to my death?”

These are fundamental questions that most people ask in their life. As a poet, he has raised these questions and he has tried to find answers to these questions in his poems.

(Refer Slide Time: 05:04)

A Missing Person



In the darkened room
a woman
cannot find her reflection in the mirror

waiting as usual
at the edge of sleep 5

In her hands she holds
the oil lamp
whose **drunken yellow flames**
know where her **lonely body** hides. 9



The first point we have for reading is ‘A Missing Person.’ It is a very short poem.

“In the darkened room,

a woman

cannot find her reflection in the mirror

waiting as usual

at the edge of sleep. 5

In her hands, she holds

the oil lamp

whose **drunken yellow flames**,

know where her **lonely body** hides” 9

It is a small poem about a lady in a dark place with an oil lamp. She is almost hidden in that light of the lamp, only the lamp knows. That is why the lady is a missing person. Perhaps, it may be understood that most of us are lost in this way, we are all missing persons. We may also remember Adil Jussawalla’s poem called ‘Missing Person,’ he has actually a volume and

dreaming still, unexhausted

10

by the deep roar of funeral pyres.”

(Refer Slide Time: 06:41)

Thematic Contrast



- Moan (**Mourn**) and Chant
- Man and God
- Surface and Depth
- Sun and Smoke
- Wife and Husband
- Sexuality and Spirituality
- Light and Dark
- Life/Love and **Death**
- Dream and Reality



This short poem on Indian Summer, has many dramatic contrasts, which are at the center of any poetic endeavor. We will start with Moan. This also can include m o u r n, that is why we have put that word in brackets, mourn and chant man and God, surface and depth, sun and smoke, wife and husband, sexuality and spirituality, light and dark, life, love and death, dream and reality. How is that such a short poem has so many contrasts between various central issues of human beings? The poem begins with the movement of the wind and the chanting of mantras or songs for gods. The mouth of India opens and many other activities happened during the summer. And these are all described; we will see some more details in the next slide.

(Refer Slide Time: 07:49)

Poetic Devices



- **Transferred Epithet:**
Over the soughing of the sombre wind (1)
- **Alliteration:** soughing of the sombre wind (1)
- **Allusion/Metaphor/Pun:** the mouth of India opens (3)
- **Alliteration:** Mornings of heated middens (5)
- **Alliteration:** smoke under the sun (6)
- **Assonance:** The good wife
Lies in my bed (7-8)
- **Metaphor:** unexhausted
By the deep roar of funeral pyres (10-11)
- **Consonance:** roar of funeral pyres (11)
- **Allusion:** "sati" in by the deep roar of funeral pyres (11)




When we come to the poetic devices, we can notice that nuances which make up this poem, we have yet transferred epithet in the first line ‘over the soughing of the sombre wind,’ sombre means sad, gloomy, the wind is not exactly gloomy, it is the poet's perception or it is the speaker's perception of the morning. Alliteration, we have in the first line ‘soughing of the sombre wind,’ sou – somber; then we have allusion, metaphor, pun in just this small phrase, ‘the mouth of India opens.’ Does this mouth of India refer to Krishna’s mouth opening to Arjuna? Or does it refer to the mouth of Indian people, the hungry people? We have this allusion and metaphor because of this double or multiple reference we have this pun, mouth of Krishna mouth of common people or mouth of the whole geography of India to the sunrise in the morning. That is how the poem becomes very rich. We have alliteration in mornings of heated middens.

Again, another alliteration in smoke under the sun. Assonance we have in these two lines put together ‘the good wife lies in my bed,’ lies - my – wife: the same sound ‘l’ is found in all these three cases. And then we have a metaphor in ‘an exhausted by the deep roar of funeral pyres.’ In the morning, we have the chanting of prayers for gods at the same time we have pyres, funeral pyres roaring of pyres. That is how we see sunrise and then in the evening, we have funeral pyres. We have sunrise in the morning and then funeral pyres in the evening. Light - life, love - life and then death in the evening. This is the kind of image that Mahapatra builds up throughout the poem.

Then we have consonants in roar of funeral pyres. The first ‘r’ actually could be alliteration, but the other ‘r’s in the middle or in the end. Then lastly, we have another allusion that is

allusion to sati ‘in by the deep roar of funeral pyres.’ Some critics have observed that the bodies of women burning in the funeral pyres may refer to the good wife, the practice of the sati in good olden days.

(Refer Slide Time: 10:35)




Rhyme, Rhythm, and Meter

Form: Free verse
Rhyme: partial rhymes; opens, middens; waters, pyres
Rhythm: conversational speech pattern
Meter: irregular meter; polymetrical
Caesura, Enjambment, and End-Stopped Lines:

The <u>good</u> wife	➤	(1+ foot
<u>lies</u> in my <u>bed</u>	➤	(2 feet)
through the <u>long af</u> <u>ternoon</u> ;		(3 feet)
<u>dreaming</u> still, un <u>exhau</u> <u>sted</u>	➤	(3+ feet)
by the <u>deep roar</u> of <u>fu</u> <u>neral</u> <u>pyres</u> .		(5 feet)

iamb: the good; **trochee:** lies in; **spondee:** deep roa



Let us see the rhyme, rhythm and meter in this poem. This is a poem in free verse, so we do not have complete rhyme scheme in this. We have of course, some partial rhymes in opens middens, waters and pyres and the rhythm of this poem is conversational speech pattern and the meter is irregular. We can at best say polymetrical, because it has I am, trochee, spondee and variations in line length.

We also have Caesura, Enjambment and End-Stopped Lines; we can see all of them in the extract that we have.

“The good wife
lies in my bed
through the long afternoon
dreaming still un exhausted
by the deep roar of funeral pyres.”

So, we have 1 foot plus; that is one syllable is extra in the first line, 2 feet in the second line, 3 feet in the third line, 3 plus one extra is there, 3 plus feet in the third line and then in the

fourth line we have 5 feet 'by the deep roar of funeral pyres.' So we have actually pentameter here.

We have mentioned the names of these various rhythmic patterns. I am, trochee, spondee and given the examples for you, so that you can understand; I am, which means unstressed stress trochee, which means stressed and unstressed and spondee means both words are stressed.

(Refer Slide Time: 12:09)

Overall Impression

- It is a descriptive poem of an Indian Summer which is oppressive for devotees, crocodiles, householders, etc.
- The morning brings a sad wind moaning while the priests chant loudly to wake up gods and the land.
- The shore-sojourned crocodiles move into the deep waters to escape from the hot sun and smoke.
- The good house wife rests on the speaker's bed in the afternoon thinking of the burning dead bodies in the ghat.
- The speaker's view of the early morning is gloomy, to say the least, perhaps suggesting that the starving people do not have much hope to fill their stomach.
- The Indian summer is then the poverty stricken oppressive India from the view of the speaker and the poet.
- The unrhymed verse, disjointed rhythm, and irregular meter reveal the inequalities in the Indian society.



Now let us see the overall impression of this poem. This poem is a descriptive poem of an Indian Summer, which is oppressive for devotees, crocodiles, householders and everybody else. It is a general climate. The morning brings a sad wind, moaning while the priests chant loudly to wake up gods and whole country. The shore-sojourned crocodiles move into the deep waters to escape from the hot sun, and also the smoke from the middens.

The good housewife rests on the speaker's bed in the afternoon, thinking of the burning dead bodies in the ghat, that is the burning ghat. The speaker's view of the early morning is gloomy, to say the least, perhaps, suggesting that the starving people do not have much hope to fill their stomach.

Even other people may not have much scope to live or hope to live on this year. The Indian summer is then the poverty-stricken oppressive India, with which Janayta Mahapatra was very familiar from the view of the speaker and the poet. The unrhymed verse, this jointed rhythm, an irregular meter in this poem reveals the inequalities in the Indian society.

(Refer Slide Time: 13:32)

“Lost”



Here I have learnt to recognize **you**
at a distance,
the evening heavy,
the half-light wandering round the room.

I've wanted to know what lulling silence
can bloom in my hands,
what pain and pleasure **your mind** can wear
through the intrigues at my fingertips.



Let us move on to the second poem we have for discussion; this is called ‘Lost.’

“Here I have learned to recognize **you**
at a distance,
the evening heavy,
the half-light wandering around the room.

I've wanted to know what lulling silence
can bloom in my hands,
what pain and pleasure **your mind** can wear
through the intrigues at my fingertips.

5

(Refer Slide Time: 13:58)

"Lost"



I watch **your body** ease off the seasons
stretched out on the stone of my breath, 10
going nowhere.

My hands move on.
Inside the lines on my moving palms,
is it time being sent back to somewhere far behind
on the edge of dream? 15
Is it that
which quietly shuts my eyes?



I watch your body ease of the seasons
stretched out on the stone of my breath. 10
going nowhere.

My hands move on
inside the lines on my moving palms
is it time being sent back to somewhere far behind
on the edge of dream? 15
Is it that
which quietly shuts my eyes?

(Refer Slide Time: 14:17)

“Lost”



And outside my hands, where,
your body keeps shrinking in space,
the first faith of some child goes wrong 20
like some defect in a mechanical toy;
yet what does it lead to?
To what fateful encounter?

Like a misplaced watch, this half-light.
Where was I when I lost it? 25



And outside my hands, where,
your body keeps shrinking in space,
the first faith of some child goes wrong
like some defect in a mechanical toy;
yet what does it lead to?
To what fateful encounter?

Like a misplaced watch, this half-light.

Where was I when I lost it?”

This is a kind of quest for something lost that Mahapatra wants to find out.

(Refer Slide Time: 14:45)

Thematic Contrast



- Lost and Found
- Evening and Morning
- Half-Light and Half-Dark
- Silence and Speech
- Pain and Pleasure
- Body and Spirit
- Dream and Reality
- Space and Time (Watch)
- Faith and Doubt
- Fateful and Happy
- Love and Death



Let us see the Thematic Contrast now between Lost and Found. Maybe temporarily found but lost very often. Evening and morning, half-light and half dark, silence and speech, pain and pleasure these two words are brought together in this poem, so we do not have difficulty in finding the contrast. These two words are brought together in the same line. Body and spirit, dream and reality, space and time, which is represented by the watch misplaced watch at the end of the poem, faith and doubt, faithful and happy, love and death.

(Refer Slide Time: 15:26)

Poetic Devices



- **Personification:** the half-light wandering round the room.
- **Metaphors:** what lulling silence
can bloom in my hands,
what pain and pleasure your mind can wear
through the intrigues at my fingertips. (5-8)
- **Metaphor:** stretched out on the stone of my breath (10)
- **Rhetorical Questions:**
is it time being sent back to somewhere far behind
on the edge of dream?
Is it that
which quietly shuts my eyes? (14-17)
- **Metaphor:** the first faith of some child goes wrong (7)
- **Simile:** like some defect in a mechanical toy; (21)
- **Simile:** Like a misplaced watch, this half-light. (24)



This poem has quite a few poetic devices. We can see something like a personification in this line, ‘the half-light wandering around the room;’ the light wandering, like a person without any kind of destination, just wandering around. We have metaphors in these four lines,

“what lulling silence

can bloom in my hands?

bloom like a flower,

what pain and pleasure your mind can wear

through the intrigues at my fingertips.”

So, this bloom and wear can metaphorically referred to some strange feelings of silence and speech or disturbed mind that the poet has.

We have a metaphor in ‘stretched out on the stone of my breath,’ breath is abstract, but we have stone which is solid concrete. So, life which is evanescent, short, the poet is able to or attempts to capture it as a strong rock or stone. We have rhetorical questions; we have many more but we have listed only two here. Is it time being sent back to somewhere far behind on the edge of dream?

Is it that which quietly shuts my eyes? When the point are so many questions like this without answers, certainly, we can find a quester. He wants to know more and more. Why is this silence? Why is this life? Why is this suffering? Why is this death, misery, poverty in himself and the people around him? We have a metaphor in ‘the first faith of some child goes wrong’ and similes in the next two lines, like some defect in a mechanical toy, and like a misplaced watch this half-light. This half-light, watch time, some vision, some kind of person, so what is this, what is it lost.? Imagination or poem, or the muse or the muse that comes through the form of a lady and it is considered to be a poem dealing with love and love for a lady our love for poem love for human beings. Love for Mahapatra himself, love for creativity. It is a beautiful poem with so many possibilities.

(Refer Slide Time: 17:54)

Rhyme, Rhythm, and Meter



- **Form:** Free verse
- **Rhyme:** No end rhymes at all
- **Rhythm:** Conversational, Introspective tone
- **Meter:** Line length varies from 3 syllables to 13 syllables; hence, irregular meter.
- **Enjambment and End-Stopped Lines:**

Here I | have learnt | to re | cognize | you
at a | distance,
the eve | ning hea | vy,
the half- | light wa | ndering round | the room.



Let us see the rhyme, rhythm and meter. This is also a free verse and so it does not have any rhyme at all. We have the conversational rhythm in this poem with a lot of introspection. That is why we have put it into perspective tone, or atmosphere. In the case of meter, we find that line length varies from 3 syllables to 13 syllables, so we can call it irregular meter. And then, we have enjambment and end-stopped lines in this extract.

“Here I have learnt to re cognize you

at a distance,

the eve ning hea vy,

the half-light wa ndering round the room.

silence and speech, evening and morning life death. Janayta Mahapatra believes in some kind of threshold, he is caught between the two, and he captures the pull or the conflict between the life that he knows and the death he does not know. The life that he understands and the death, he does not understand.

(Refer Slide Time: 19:00)

Overall Impression

- This is a lyrical poem of lost half-light/ love/ imagination focusing on the talent of lovers/poets to recognize their love/poem even at a distance.
- It is the speaker's voice about the physical intimacy of the lover and beloved, which is a strange exploration of the psychological depths of pleasure and pain and what they can do to the mind and body of both participants, especially the speaker.
- The physical body of the beloved is lost in space, which is a shock similar to what a child would feel when something goes wrong in a mechanical toy.
- Words like "my hands" and "your body" betray the sexual/mystical aspect of the love, which finally lead to the "fateful encounter" with death.
- Metaphors, similes, and rhetorical questions add to the subtlety of the pathetic sense of loss in the poem.



Let us see the overall impression of this poem. This is a lyrical poem of lost half-light, that is what we find at the beginning, and also at the end, lost half-light. Where is it? Where was I when I lost it? He asked the question at the end. This is a lyrical poem of lost half-light, love, imagination, focusing on the talent of lovers, poets to recognize their love, poem even at a distance.

It is the speaker's voice about the physical intimacy of the lover and beloved, which is a strange exploration of the psychological depths of pleasure and pain, and what they can do to the mind and body of both participants, especially the speaker. The physical body of the beloved is lost in space, which is a shock similar to what a child would feel when something goes wrong in a mechanical toy.

Words like my hands, my eyes, my fingertips and your body, your eyes - betray the sexual mystical aspect of the love, which finally leads to the fateful encounter, perhaps with the death. Metaphors, similes, and rhetorical questions add to the subtlety of the pathetic sense of loss in the poem.

(Refer Slide Time: 21:03)

Communion: For Jayanta Mahapatra



When you know where the difference is
Between the absent and present snakes,
You come face to face with a mystery
Which you can swim through but not state. 12

When you arrive at the pool of silence
Where no thoughts intrude into your being,
You are one with the spirits of the universe
Of the past and future of all corners of the world. 16
(from S P Dhanavel's *Purpose of Life* (1997))



When you know, where the difference is

Between the absent and present snakes,

You come face to face with a mystery

Which you can swim through, but not state. 12

When you arrive at the pool of silence

Where no thoughts intrude into your being,

You are one with the spirits of the universe

Of the past and future of all corners of the world. 16

I wrote this poem and published this in my second volume called 'Purpose of Life.'

(Refer Slide Time: 21:31)

Summary



- Historical and Literary Context
- Jayanta Mahapatra
- What is Poetry?
- "A Missing Person"
- "Indian Summer"
- "Lost"
- Analysis
- "one must try somehow to reach the border between things understandable and un-understandable in a poem, between life and death, between a straight line and a circle."

Mahapatra, Jayanta. 1994. "Mystery as Mantra: Letter from Orissa," *WLT*, 68 (2): 283-288.



To give you a summary of our discussion on Janayta Mahapatra's poems that we have discussed, let us recall. We have looked into the historical and literary context in which Janayta Mahapatra wrote his poems. He remembers two historical incidents, one 'The Kalinga War' and other 'The Famine' in 1866, which affected both these incidents affected the whole land. And he grew up in a Christian family, with good education became a professor of physics and start writing poems are at a late stage.

He has his own questions about what is poetry, he says, his poetry is a poetry of suggestion, not your point of statement, as we can see in Nissim Ezekiel and other poets. We saw three poems, one we read 'A Missing Person,' two, we discussed 'Indian Summer' and 'Lost' and in the two poems that we have discussed, we find the unique qualities of Janayta Mahapatra dealing with the famous or most important questions of life, what am I? Where am I? What am I doing? Where am I going to?

These are questions all of us ask, but some poets like Janayta Mahapatra, try to give some answers. We analyze them and gave our overall impressions. And then we have one more quotation here from Janayta Mahapatra; he has an essay called 'Mystery as Mantra letters from Orissa' published in *World Literature Today* in 1994. This also tells us about a central problem in Janayta Mahapatra. He says,

"one must try somehow to reach the border between things understandable and un-understandable. Things understandable and un-

understandable in a poem, between life and death, between a straight line and a circle.”

Life is like that; it is not a straight line; it is not a circle; it is a mix of the two and what is that in between we have to understand. Let us see some references now.

(Refer Slide Time: 23:40)

References

- Bery, Ashok. 2016. "Imagery and Imagination in the Poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra." In *A History of Indian Poetry in English*, ed. Rosinka Chaudhuri, pp. 299-312. Cambridge University Press, New York.
- Mahapatra, J and Abraham. 1997. "Jayanta Mahapatra: In Conversation with Abraham," *Indian Literature*, 40 (4): 149-157.
- Perry, John Oliver. 1986. "Neither Alien Nor Postmodern: Jayanta Mahapatra's Poetry from India," *Kenyon Review*, New Series, 8 (4): 55-66.
- Prasad, Madhusudan. 1984. "Caught in the Current Time: A Study of the Poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra," *Journal of South Asian Literature*, 19 (2): 181-



Hope, you will be able to get some of them. At least the ones published in Indian literature, certainly all of us can access through our 'J Store database.' Hope you will be able to read them and appreciate more of Janayta Mahapatra's poems. Thank you.