

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INTERNATIONAL CENTRE
ISSN:2321-3108

SCEPTICISM AND PREDICAMENT OF HUMANITY IN JAYANTA MAHAPATRA'S POETRY

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ABSTRACT

Scepticism is the questioning attitude towards knowledge, facts, opinions, beliefs accepted as facts. Modern scepticism which undertakes to doubting given religious beliefs, lays stress on scientific approach and evidence. As a physicist poet, Jayanta Mahapatra upholds scientific rationalism. With scientific frame of mind he interrogates faith, a way of life and sometimes a whole tradition. He criticizes indifference of society to the suffering humanity, blind adherence to religious dogmatic beliefs and ruthlessness of tradition. Many of his poems bring forward a questioning note informed by a scientific outlook, agnosticism and cynicism. At the same time he strikes the eternal note of human predicament in his poems. He portrays the misery of his fellow men and women and a considerable part of his poetry is dedicated to projection of pathetic condition of women. There is an undercurrent of deep pathos in his poems.

KEY WORDS: Scepticism, scientific rationalism, dogmatic beliefs, agnosticism.

Article Info

Received on :10/03/2015

Revised on: 22/03/2015

Accepted on: 28/03/2015

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Scepticism is the questioning attitude towards knowledge, facts, or accepted beliefs. This doubt as to the truth of something is basis of scepticism. Modern religious skepticism which undertakes to doubting given religious beliefs highlights on scientific and historical methods or evidence. Jayanta Mahapatra, the poet is a rare combination of physicist poet; his cerebral cortex is physics while his mental make up is poetry. The poet, the maker comprehended the ground reality of life, the law of life, the physics of living and his knowledge of physics shaped his poetry. He took to writing poetry in his forties when most other poets would have been a success story. Yet, he was not late for his poetic journey. In poem after poem

Mahapatra explored Orissa. Today he is a voice of Orissa.

Jayanta Mahapatra is a regional poet. To dab him a 'regional poet' is to overlook the sensibility that shaped his mind. It is safer to say he is a representative poet from Orissa with an Indian sensibility. His poetry is shaped against a mythico-historical background. It is Cuttack Bhubaneswar, Puri forming his literary landscape and particularly Cuttack is the cradle of his imagination. Catching the boat of time the poet floats on the drunk sea from Chandipur to Chilika and the story of life of common folks in his poems. His poetic journey is a journey to recognize the Hindu world. The reflection is that of an Indian poet in the vein of a modern poet. Jayanta

Mahapatra is a modern and a contemporary poet in the sense that he reflects on a spectrum of contemporary issues that crop up in today's realities -- human relationship, dream, existence, past and tradition, society, art, culture, spirituality, conservation of nature's flora and fauna etc. The sensibility is essentially Indian. In the words of critics like Viswanathan "Jayanta's sensibility is both Indian and modern; and his response to Indian scene is authentic and credible." This paper attempts at tracing a note of scepticism apparent in the poems of this great Indian poet. Mahapatra also strikes a note of humanism in delineating a predicament of humanity in his poems.

Recurring themes in Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry are nothingness, existentialism agnosticism and, of course, faith and doubt. A poet with scientific bent of mind Mahapatra seeks to know the truth. He writes:

Thinking to escape his belief
I go to meet the spectre of belief.

He looks askance at faith, a way of life and a tradition. This note of scepticism is informed by his training as a physicist and a sense of isolation from the dominant cultural mores and manners. From his grand father's side he was a "Rice Christian" (In time of terrible famine and starvation the family took shelter in a Christian mission and in the process accepted the new faith). Christians in Cuttack are a small community unique on their own. Being born in such a miniature community the poet feels isolated from the dominant cultural belief, manners and mores of the Hindus. A sense of isolation and scepticism and rings through his poetry probably issues of out of this biographical fact. This would help to explain the poet's attitude to wards culture and tradition. His response is authentic, something that is expected from an Indian. To recall the words of critics like Panikar:

Mahapatra's concern of the vision of belief and loss, dejection and rejection are typically Indian.

Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry is a pondering interrogative poetry. He interrogates faith, a way of life and sometimes a whole tradition. "Dawn at Puri", a poem from Mahapatra's "A Rain of Rites" describes the last rites of a woman in the cremation

ground of 'Swargadwar' in Puri. There is an oblique hint at the popular Hindu belief that Swargadwar, the sacred city is a gateway to heaven. The speaker pays homage to his dead mother being consigned to flames as it was her last wish to be cremated here. The poem opens in a discordant note:

Endless crow noises
A skull in the holy sands
tilts its empty country towards hunger

The skull is suggestive of anonymity and conventional 'memento mori'. It evokes the hunger of an entire country. The next image is that of white clad widows. They are past the centre of their lives'. They are waiting to enter the Great Temple. They are 'caught in a net' i.e. trapped by faith. 'Ruined' and 'leprous shells' subtly hint at the decay and death which is the usual fate of mortal things. The blazing smouldering pyre which is 'sullen' and 'solitary' slowly consumes the speaker's mother. And the poem ends with a note of uncertainty:

her last wish to be cremated here
twisting uncertainly like light
on the shifting sands.

The poet generalizes "Dawns at Puri" which are gloomy and unpleasant when people are burnt on sands, widows in white are seen waiting to enter the temple and empty skulls lie on the sands tilting their empty eyes towards the sky. This is a sombre reminder of the hunger of the whole continent, to which society is callous and indifferent. The poem is reminiscent of Philip Larkin's "Church Going" where the poet criticizes the age old institution of church and its empty rituals as devoid of any spiritual or religious content "fossils of piety".

"Freedom" is a significant poem of Jayanta Mahapatra in which the poet's view of the hollowness of the freedom of his country is expressed. He is disillusioned with his country's freedom:

At times, as I watch
it seems my country's body
floats down somewhere on the river
Everybody old and young covets to have
freedom. Old widows and dying men desire freedom
bowing time after time in obstinate prayer. Children
desire to trams form the world if they have freedom.

In his figurative blindness, he desires to be left alone and his heart cries for:

the woman and her child in that remote village in the hills who never had even a little rice for their one daily meal these fifty years.

Evidently, he prefers freedom from hunger and starvation. The 'bloodied light' goes uncaught in the Parliament House as politicians are indifferent. Neither politics nor heavenly power can mitigate human plight. The barb of attack is towards the superficial presence of God devoid of any practical aids. The poet has not any iota of importance to such divinity and religious fanaticism:

In the new temple man has built near

---God hides in the dark like an alien.

Here is an agnostic, dismantling Gods and their awe inspiring presence on people. Mahapatra is a poet of human relationship. Mahapatra, the poet, perceived the agony of imprisoned self. He realized individuals trapped by situations. There is a haunting presence of a sense of imprisonment in his poems. Life is absurd and one is to wait in corridor of uncertainty. One has come to expect of life is 'uncertainties' and love offers momentary surcease from such uncertainties as in the poem 'Lost'. In 'Evening Landscape' from *Life Signs* (1993) the poet wanders on the bank of the river in Cuttack. His mind is filled with "a kind of sadness which closes the eyes". He is plunged in abundant darkness in which all objects of daily life get detached and meaningless. Here, 'evening' becomes a metaphor for the suffering of human condition. Being depressed, he hears as though the sad, solemn and still music of humanity.

This quest for human predicament is deepened in popular poems such as 'Indian Summer', 'The Whore House in Calcutta Street', 'Waiting' and culminating in 'Hunger'. In "Indian Summer" India is projected as a sort of giant monster "the mouth of India opens" to swallow up the dead. The poet identifies the whole country with death. The Priests chanting, waters opening their mouth wide, the crocodiles moving further down, the burning pyres below- all build up the impression of the funeral ceremony of a person. The speaker is

haunted with a sense of death while his wife, in her mid-afternoon siesta, is oblivious of death, the horrible reality of life. A vast multitude of people hand to mouth in their struggle for daily existence, march on the pages of his poetry. They are the poor fishermen to riders to the sea, sweeper girls, poor humble daughters who are trafficked and sold, widow-women past their centre of life, the bereaved mother with dead child on her lap, the street whores in their flesh trade.

In Mahapatra's poetic canvas of human relationship it is the women's voice of silent sufferings that finds expression in his pen. Women stand out as the sufferer in many of his poems. Hardship of women, their tolerance is one of his major thematic concerns. He fosters a great reverence for women who are archetypal images of suffering and sacrifice. He anchors his faith in their struggle. Through them he criticizes the social order that renders them exploited and deprived. "The Whorehouse in the Calcutta Street" readers are invited to know the women in the whorehouse. We are nostalgically reminded the past of these women, their 'looked after children', and their 'home awaiting their return in eager darkness.' They are victim of a 'great conspiracy'. The effort of knowing them is a futile exercise:

--- like a door, her words close behind

Hurry, will you? Let me go, 'And her lovely breath thrashed against you kind.

The untold misery of a sweeper girls forms the subject of his poem 'Waiting' Through the portrayal of an outcaste sweeper girl which is based on a real experience the poet makes a dig at the pathetic condition of the child labours in India and government's inability to solve it. As a conscious social artist he holds up the mirror of our society to arouse the deepest koruna or compassion. In the words of Madhusudan Prasad:

Jayanta Mahapatra's poetic word is doubtless scattered singularly with various image of wives, beloveds, whores, seductresses, village women, city women, and adolescent girls having deeply significant metaphoric evocations and spotlighting his tragic vision of life to which he is essentially committed".

Unmistakably Mahapatra, the poet, is a social critic. This trend of social criticism culminates in 'Hunger'. 'Hunger' lays bare the hard-hitting reality of life. The speaker's hunger drives him onto an old poor fisherman's hut where his fifteen years old daughter lies with her hunger for food. Owing to his abject poverty the fisherman hands him over his daughter under compulsion. Hunger for flesh feeds on hunger for food. Two predatory instincts meet each other. The speaker has an appeasement of his hunger.

She opened her wormy legs wide. I felt the hunger there the other one, the fish slithering inside.

The speaker is filled with remorse, ignominy and shame. He has a sense of catastrophe; the very sky, it seems, falls on him. The moral outrage he has committed leaves him wounded in conscience. Mahapatra brings to the surface the casualness of the event which go unnoticed by a callous society, the tragedy of the have nots who are deprived of the bare necessities of life.

CONCLUSION

Stephane Mallarme wrote in his 'Crisis in Poetry' that realism should be seen merely as an interpretation of reality and not reality itself, since reality per se can never be directly presented. Mahapatra the poet holds up the mirror of reality of existence up to society. Many of his poems are born out of true incidents. They are attested to the reality of life. We notice an implicit criticism of major social issues and indifference of the society to suffering, callousness and indifference of culture and tradition, zeal for religious piety etc. His poetic world is static, languid and simultaneously corrupt, violent and predatory. Inertia, helplessness, torpor, decadence are the oft repeated images defining the mood of his poems. The poet perhaps is eager to have a change. Fundamental questions have been raised without the answers being supplied quite ambiguously. They are an expression of an honest doubt, a cynicism encompassing humdrum existence to a larger vision of life, a transcendence that the poet attained by fusing reality and mysticism in an artistic whole.

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