



BOOK REVIEW

Poetic Tributes to Jayanta Mahapatra

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Ashwani Kumar. Ed. *Scent of Rain: Remembering Jayanta Mahapatra*, Red River, Chennai, 2024, p. 290, ISBN 978-93-92494-93-2, Rs 499/ --

*Scent of Rain* is a felicitous tribute to Jayanta Mahapatra and his long-standing literary creations. He supported poetry by the young and old with maximum beneficence. Mumbai-based noted poet and political scientist Ashwani Kumar's anthology is redolent with the poet's relationships with people living in small towns and villages, rivers passing by and ruins of the past at various levels, all these are his uneven catalogue of poetry. Poet Adil Jussawala, the author of *Trying to Say Goodbye*, pays his sincere tribute to Mahapatra "The garden's earth yawns, / It has a pink tongue. It has ears" ('The Garden's Earth Yawns,' 15).

Mahapatra's writing career lasted for more than five decades. Like many great poets of all ages, his poetry is vigorously intense, sensuous and it breathes with Indian images and the landscape. Anamika dedicates her poem, faithfully. She is nostalgic:

Aged mountains bless trees

With longevity.

Plants know to say nothing

They know to be, to be quiet. ('Silence Roars,' 21)

Nature has long been the muse of writers from different lands, mythological legacies and cultural contexts, who map human life, instincts and feelings poignantly. They are map makers of the human race. Jayanta Mahapatra is one of them. Robin Nagangom, a significant contemporary soul maker from the North East India,

describes his feelings for Mahapatra and his vision in his poem 'Days': "After Sunday prayers fall silent / And bells fade away in the hills" (78). Many of Robin's early works were published in the *Chandrabhaga*, edited by Jayanta Mahapatra.

The quiet house of poetry is quieter now. Memory comes silently and soothingly. Noted poet Sudeep Sen gives a vivid pen picture of Mahapatra's intimacy with quiet music of the age and art even when poetry is not advised to read and write: "Words come gently on paper, slowly ripening/ Like mangos, green to amber, or orange, to red." ('The Gentleness of Memory,' 231)

Mahapatra's material descriptions of the indigenous landscape and people dwelling therein is accompanied by his historical vision, becoming a fascinating gift. Sonnet Mondal's dedication, 'Grandpa's Veranda' reminds us Jayanta Mahapatra's iconic poem on his grandfather:

Grandpa used to sit on a protrusion  
of the veranda in our old house.  
He used to nod subtly  
to acquaintances walking by— (223)

After Jayanta Mahapatra's demise unwarranted solitude patrols Tinkonia Bagicha, Cuttack. The city is not extravagant with sunlight. Extraordinary Bibhu Padhi arrests the moment with his beguilingly lucid words,

Keep the priests away, weep like a child  
I am sure, the long-lost god  
shall appear behind your tears,  
and ready for compromise. ("Puri" 60)

Cuttack-born prolific inward looking poet Bibhu Padhi approximates his feelings of loss with the sea's patience and the rock-cut wheels of Konarak. Bibhu Padhi's poem is a collage of varied impressions and psychological imprints at multiple levels.

Poetry for Mahapatra is a door to reach out hearts of his countrymen. His poems capture the fuzzy differences between

absence and presence, arrivals and departures, shadow spaces between objects and spells of rain of rites. Ashwani Kumar, the editor in his dedication compares Mahapatra with great Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, whom Mahapatra considered as a champion artist: “I can’t tell you everything/ But I often hear Pablo’s voice between memory and time.” (‘Pablo Neruda in Gaya’ 50) Mahapatra was a mentor for many poets, critics and translators. Jamshedpur based poetess and one of the curators of *Hearth Within* Basudhara Roy, records her indebtedness for Jayanta Mahapatra. She elegantly writes of Mahapatra’s fascination for rivers. Mahanadi is his source for poetic thoughts and feelings:

I have returned every night to a river  
which has preserved in her meanders  
the pinnate stories of my youth. (‘Rehabilitation’ 56)

Jayanta Mahapatra’s training in Physics made him cerebral, straight-thinking, law-bound, specific, precise, cryptic and terse. His idioms are rich with the flavor of his culture and traditions. He writes poetry that is intensely personal and fits in the parameters of contemporary world poetry written in different cultures. According to Sahitya Akademi award winning author, Arundhati Subramaniam,

At first  
it’s nostalgia—  
a downpour of kisses  
under a weeping umbrella.” (‘A First Monsoon Again’ 40)

Like many other Indian English poets from Orissa, ‘rain’ is Mahapatra’s one of the stock images. Arundhati’s love without a story captures Mahapatra’s fascination for the monsoon rain. H. Shiva Prakash translates from his poem Kannada: “I am your translator/ Let me translate your untimely tears (.)” (‘I Am Your Translator’ 82)

Mahapatra’s poems are like healing herbs. All his followers are translators of his hope, zeal and longings. Noted author Mani Rao in the poem ‘Chandrabhaga’ expresses her longing for Mahapatra and

his art, "In the shadow/ of the moon/ See you again." (p. 137) We wait for the timer's wondering self. We keep longing. *Scent of Rain* is Sahitya Akademi award winning poet Jayanta Mahapatra's linkages with the world of poetry and his poet-followers in the truest sense. His magazine *Chandrabhaga* played an important role in literary canon making in India and beyond.

There are so many poets, published in *Scent of Rain*, who had personal/intimate relationships with Jayanta Mahapatra and his house. Many visited his residence in Cuttack in monsoons. Many poets and scholars of poetry have his hand written letters in their personal treasury. All of them hold his silent yet subtle moves as life's precious gift. His encouragement is a vital dose for aspiring minds. Urna Bose translates her sincere feelings in the poem 'Sorrow': "Cast a spell on you, hold your free will captive/ a dark addiction, on such black onyx mornings" (p. 248). We follow patterning of repeating what is music to our ears. Urna unfurls how sorrow sits at the edge of the bed. Jayanta-da is no more and we miss him. We remember him repeating many times, "Love is as strong as death." No wind, no storm can wither away love of a great poet.

*Scent of Rain* is about returning to the writer and his craft. Jayanta Mahapatra's publications and appearances in seminal poetry journals and magazines all over the world carved a prominent space for Indian English poetry in the 1970s. This handsome anthology, with 189 poets, records how our hands meet, part and dreams like faith making flower-boats of relationships. A must read!