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Jayanta Mahapatra

- 4 poems -

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Jayanta Mahapatra (22 October 1928 -)

Jayanta Mahapatra is one of the best known Indian English poets. Perhaps any discussion on Indian English Poetry is incomplete without reference to his poetical works. Physicist, bilingual poet and essayist, Jayanta Mahapatra holds the distinction of being the first Indian English poet to have received the Sahitya Akademi Award (1981) for Relationship. In 2009 he was awarded by Government of India with "Padmashree Award", country's most prestigious award for civilian citizen for his out standing contribution to the field of literature.

Birth and Early Life

Jayanta Mahapatra, born on 22 October 1928 in Cuttack (India), belongs to a lower middle-class family. He had his early education at Stewart school, Cuttack . After a first class Master's Degree in Physics, he joined as a teacher in 1949 and served in different Government colleges of Orissa.

Later Life

All his working life, he taught physics at different colleges in Orissa. He retired in 1986. Mahapatra has authored 18 books of poems. He started writing poetry at the age of thirty-eight, quite late by normal standards. Mahapatra's tryst with the muse came rather late in life. He published his first poems in his early 40s. The publication of his first book of poems, Svayamvara and Other Poems, in 1971 was followed by the publication of Close the Sky, Ten By Ten.

His collections of poems include A Rain of Rites, Life Signs and A Whiteness of Bone. One of Mahapatra's better remembered works is the long poem Relationship, for which he won the Sahitya Akademi award in 1981. He is the first Indian English Poet to receive the honor. Besides being one of the most popular Indian poets of his generation, Mahapatra was also part of the trio of poets who laid the foundations of modern Indian English Poetry. He shared a special bond with A. K. Ramanujan, one the finest poets in the IEP tradition. Mahapatra is also different in not being a product of the Bombay school of poets. Over time, he has managed to carve a quiet, tranquil poetic voice of his own--distinctly different from those of his contemporaries. His wordy lyricism combined with authentic Indian themes puts him in a league of his own.

His recent poetry volumes include Shadow Space, Bare Face and Random Descent. Besides poetry, he has experimented widely with myriad forms of prose. His lone published book of prose remains The Green Gardener, a collection of short stories. A distinguished editor, Jayanta Mahapatrahas been

bringing out, for many years, a literary magazine, Chandrabhaga , from Cuttack . The magazine is named after Chandrabhaga, a prominent but dried-up river in Orissa.

Vision of Poetry

"To Orissa, to this land in which my roots lie and lies my past and in which lies my beginning and my end..." declared the poet in his Award-receiving speech at the Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi.

The clue to understand Mahapatra's poetry is given by the poet himself: "My poems deal with the life within myself where the mind tries to find a sort of coherence from the mass of
things in the world outside it."

Awards

Second Prize International Who's Who in Poetry, London, 1970.
Jacob Glatstein Memorial Award Poetry, Chicago, 1975.
Visiting Writer International Writing Program, Iowa City 1976-77.
Cultural Award Visitor, Australia, 1978.
Japan Foundation Visitor's Award, Japan, 1980.
Sahitya Academy Award National Academy of Letters, New Delhi, 1981.
Invited Poet Asian Poets Conference, Tokyo, Japan, 1984.
Indo-Soviet Cultural Exchange Writer, USSR, 1985.
Resident Writer Centro Culturale della Fondazione Rockefeller, Bellagio, Italy, 1986.
Invited Poet University of Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, 1988.
Singapore Festival of Arts, Singapore. 1988.
New Literatures in English Conference, Justus-Liebig-Universitat, Giessen, West Germany, 1989
ACLALS Silver Jubilee Conference, Canterbury, England, 1989.
First Prize Scottish International Open Poetry Competition, 1990.
Invited Poet Poetry International, The South Bank Centre, London, England, 1992.
Cuirt International Poetry Festival, Galway, Ireland, 1992.
EI Consejo Nacional Para la Cultura y las Artes, Mexico. 1994
Mingei International Museum of World Folk Art, La Jolla, USA. 1994.
Gangadhar National Award For Poetry, Sambalpur University, 1994
Ramakrishna Jaidayal Harmony Award, 1994, New Delhi.
Vaikom Mohammad Basheer Chair Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, 1996-97.
Invited Poet ACLALS Conference, Kandy, Sri Lanka, 1998.
Awarded Honorary Degree Doctor of Literature, Utkal University, Bhubaneswar, 2006.
Invited Poet Weltklang Poetry Festival, Berlin, Germany, 2006.
Bishuva Award Prajatantra Prachara Samiti, Cuttack, 2007.
Padma Shree Award India's Padma Shree Award, 2009.
SAARC Literary Award, New Delhi, 2010

Poetry Readings

Outside India

University of Iowa, Iowa City, 1976
University of Tennessee, Chattanooga, 1976
University of the South, Sewanee, 1976
East West Center, Honolulu, Hawaii, 1976
Adelaide Festival of Arts, Adelaide, 1978
P.E.N. Centre, Sydney, 1978
Australian National University, Canberra, 1978
International Poets Conference, Tokyo, 1980
Asian Poets Conference, Tokyo, 1984
Aoyama University, Tokyo, 1984
Sapporo University, Sapporo, 1984
Writers Union, Moscow, Leningrad & Lvov, USSR, 1985
Singapore Festival of Arts, Singapore, 1988

Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur, 1988
University of Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, 1988
Universitas Indonesia, Jakarta, 1988
University of the Philippines, Manila City, 1988
Museong Kalinangang Pilipino, Manila, 1988
Irish Writers Centre, Dublin, Ireland, 1992
Sligo Arts Centre, The Grammar School, Sligo, 1992
The Guild Hall, Derry, 1992
WEA, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Hexham and Durham, 1992
The South Bank Centre, London, 1992
Universities of Hull and Leeds (UK), 1992
The Naropa Institute, Boulder,Colorado, 1994
Instituto de Cultura de Campeche, Mexico, 1994
Instituto de Cultura de Puebla, Mexico,1994
Clark Atlanta University, Atlanta, USA, 1995
Hunter College, New York, USA, 1995
University of the South, Sewanee, USA, 1995
Writers Forum, De Kalb College, Atlanta, USA, 1995
Writers Forum, St. Andrews College, Laurinburg, USA, 1995
British Council, Kandy, 1998
Indian Cultural Centre, Colombo, 1998

In India

Andhra University, University of Jadavpur, Calcutta University, University of Delhi, Osmania University, The Poetry Centre - Hyderabad, Visva-Bharati - Santiniketan, North East Hill University - Shillong, Tezpur University - IIT Guwahati, India International Centre - New Delhi, Bharat Bhavan - Bhopal, University of Lucknow, DAV College - Kanpur, Arts, Science & Commerce College - Durg.

Works:

Poetry

1971: Svayamvara and Other Poems
1971: Close the Sky Ten by Ten
1976: A Father's Hours
1976: A Rain of Rites
1979: Waiting
1980: The False Start, Bombay: Clearing House
1980: Relationship
1983: Life Signs
1986: Dispossessed Nests
1987: Selected Poems
1988: Burden of Waves & Fruit
1989: Temple
Bare Face
Shadow Space
The best of Jayanta Mahapatra
A Whiteness of Bone
2005: Random Descent, Third Eye Communications
2006: Samparka, Natuna Dilli: Sāhitya Akādemi
2009 The lie of Dawns: Poems 1974 - 2008

Prose

The Green Gardener, short stories
Door of Paper: Essay and Memoirs
Mahapatra's poems have been anthologized in the celebrated volumes of Indian poetry edited by R. Parthasarathy and Arvind Krishna Mehrotra.
Significant anthologies in which his work appears are:
The Poetry Anthology 1912 - 1977, Boston, USA (Houghton Milfin, 1978)
The Vintage Book of Contemporary Poetry (J.D McClatcky, Editor - Random House, USA, 1996)
The Poetry Anthology 1912 -2002, Chicago, USA (Ivan R. Dee, 2002)

Critical Studies

2001: Bijay Kumar Das, The Poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra: third revised and enlarged edition; New Delhi, Atlantic,
2006: Jaydeep Sarangi and Gauri Shankar Jha, editors, The Indian Imagination of Jayanta Mahapatra, New Delhi, Sarup and Sons, 2006, a compilation of critical articles

Ash

The substance that stirs in my palm
could well be a dead man; no need
to show surprise at the dizzy acts of wind.
My old father sitting uncertainly three feet away

is the slow cloud against the sky:
so my heart's beating makes of me a survivor
over here where the sun quietly sets.
The ways of freeing myself:

the glittering flowers, the immensity of rain for example,
which were limited to promises once
have had the lie to themselves. And the wind,
that had made simple revelation in the leaves,

plays upon the ascetic-faced vision of waters;
and without thinking
something makes me keep close to the walls
as though I was afraid of that justice in the shadows.

Now the world passes into my eye:
the birds flutter toward rest around the tree,
the clock jerks each memory towards
the present to become a past, floating away
like ash, over the bank.

My own stirrings like the wind's
keep hoping for the solace that would be me
in my father's eyes
to pour the good years back on my;

the dead man who licks my palms
is more likely to encourage my dark intolerance
rather than turn me
toward some strangely solemn charade:

the dumb order of the myth
lined up in the life-field,
the unconcerned wind perhaps truer than the rest,
rustling the empty, bodiless grains.

Jayanta Mahapatra

Freedom

At times, as I watch,
it seems as though my country's body
floats down somewhere on the river.

Left alone, I grow into
a half-disembodied bamboo,
its lower part sunk
into itself on the bank.

Here, old widows and dying men
cherish their freedom,
bowing time after time in obstinate prayers.

While children scream
with this desire for freedom
to transform the world
without even laying hands on it.

In my blindness, at times I fear
I'd wander back to either of them.
In order for me not to lose face,
it is necessary for me to be alone.

Not to meet 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.

And not to see the uncaught, bloodied light
of sunsets cling to the tall white columns
of Parliament House.

In the new temple man has built nearby,
the priest is the one who knows freedom,
while God hides in the dark like an alien.

And each day I keep looking for the light
shadows find excuses to keep.

Trying to find the only freedom I know,
the freedom of the body when it's alone.

The freedom of the silent shale, the moonless coal,
the beds of streams of the sleeping god.

I keep the ashes away,
try not to wear them on my forehead.

Jayanta Mahapatra

Her Hand

The little girl's hand is made of darkness
How will I hold it?

The streetlamps hang like decapitated heads
Blood opens that terrible door between us

The wide mouth of the country is clamped in pain
while its body writhes on its bed of nails

This little girl has just her raped body
for me to reach her

The weight of my guilt is unable
to overcome my resistance to hug her

Jayanta Mahapatra

Hunger

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 only dragged up from the seas.

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.

I heard him say: My daughter, she's 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

Jayanta Mahapatra