

## *Important Questions with Answers*

**Q. 1. On the basis of your study of Jayanta Mahapatra's poems, critically examine his principal thematic concerns.**

*Or*

**Comment on the subject-matter of the poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra.**

*Or*

**What do you think are the main themes of the poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra, and how has he dealt with them ?**

*Or*

**Evaluate the poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra from the point of view of its themes and subject-matter.**

### **The Wide Range of Mahapatra's Thematic Concerns**

Mahapatra's thematic concerns in his poetry are many, and in dealing with them he has shown the hand of a master. The excellence of his treatment of his themes matches the dignity and the significance of his themes. Not words like means or trivial or unworthy, or even ordinary would occur to a reader with regard to the themes which he comes across while going through Mahapatra's poetry. Only words like significant, dignified, profound, stimulating, startling, and uplifting would occur to the reader in this connection. The Orissa landscape, the Orissa cultural history and background, the social life of Orissa, and the rites and rituals of the people of Orissa constitute the most important and significant theme of his poetry. This, of course, shows Mahapatra's mainly regional outlook. But though regionalism is certainly the most striking feature of his poetry, this poetry is not limited or narrow so far as its themes are concerned. Mahapatra deals with human relationships, Indian social problems, love, sex, marriage, morality, human nature, and Nature with a capital N. Thus the thematic range of Mahapatra's poetry is wide enough, though it cannot be described as all-embracing.

### **The Orissa Landscape and Oriya History and Culture**

*Dawn at Puri, Taste for Tomorrow, Slum, Evening Landscape by the River, and Events* are poems which deal chiefly with the Orissa landscape. Of these *Dawn at Puri* is the most conspicuous, the most realistic, and perhaps the most interesting, with its endless crow noises, a skull lying on the holy sands, white-clad widowed women waiting to enter the great temple, and so on. *Taste for Tomorrow* also depicts a scene at Puri with its crows, with its one

very wide street, with its lepers, and its religious-minded crowds thronging the temple door. In fact, Puri figures prominently in Mahapatra's poetry. Puri and the Konarak temples partly in ruins constitute a big and impressive presence in his poetry. Other poems depicting the Orissa landscape and alluding to the culture and the ancient history of Orissa include *The Orissa Poems*, *Orissa Landscapes*, and *Evening in an Orissa Village*. If a man, who has never been to Orissa, goes through these dozen poems or so, he would definitely begin to think that he has paid a visit to Orissa and not only paid a visit to that region but stayed there for some time and observed all sorts of scenes, situations, and people there. Mahapatra's treatment of this theme stamps him as a great poet because he has given us such vivid pictures of Orissa and the life in Orissa that we feel as if we have actually been transported to that region of our country.

### **The Themes of Sex, Sexuality, and Poverty**

Sex, sexuality, and social concerns come next in importance so far as Mahapatra's themes are concerned. In this connection two of the most significant and interesting poems are *Hunger* and *The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street*. *Hunger* depicts both sexuality and poverty. In fact, sexuality here is closely interlinked with poverty. It is a hungry fisherman with a hungry daughter who have resorted to prostitution, while it is the sexual urge which takes a customer to the fisherman's shack. The fisherman has even to tell the lie that his daughter has just turned fifteen: actually she must be much older. He then invites the customer to "feel\*" his daughter and to finish the business because his (the customer's) bus would be leaving at nine. As soon as the fisherman leaves, the girl opens her "wormy legs" wide, and the customer feels the hunger there. The hunger is evidently two-fold, there is hunger between the legs, and there is hunger in the belly above. Of course, there is much more in the poem, but sexuality and poverty are surely its theme.

### **Sexuality and Prostitution**

*The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street* is a more elaborate poem. Here the customer has much scope for indulging his fancies. Going into a whorehouse seems to promise to him the spectacle of a number of beautiful prostitutes whose faces would resemble the pretty faces depicted on the posters and the public hoardings which he has often seen and which have always aroused a sexual urge in him. The customer is glad that he would get this opportunity but he also experiences a sense of guilt and a feeling of shame in having entered a house of ill-fame. While he would be able to gratify his sexual urge, he thinks that he would also learn something more about women. As for the prostitute, she does everything possible to please him; and that, of course, is her function as a professional. And she also betrays her profession when she says to the customer: "Hurry, will you? Let me go." Here is, then, a poem in

\*"Feel" here means "fondle" or "caress".

which the customer-prostitute relationship is depicted in a most detached and realistic manner. The poem combines a psychological interest with the interest which such a theme inherently possesses. The theme is a familiar one, and Mahapatra's treatment of it is simply fascinating. At the same time, this poem is not without its social implications. Prostitution is the result of poverty; and yet, even if there were no poverty, prostitution would continue and perhaps become more hygienic and therefore safer from the health point of view. The oldest profession in the world might become modernized and civilized.

### **Psychological and Philosophical Themes: *Total Solar Eclipse***

Mahapatra has written a number of psychological, reflective, and philosophical poems which show that his is not a superficial mind and that he is not a poet of an ordinary mental calibre. *The Logic, Grass, The Exile, The Abandoned British Cemetery at Balasore, Total Solar Eclipse* and *The Moon Moments* are the most conspicuous and the most impressive of poems of this category. *The Solar Eclipse* depicts both the approaches to the natural phenomenon of the solar eclipse—the scientific approach and the superstitious approach. The scientific approach is indicated by the line: "Quietly the moon's dark well moves on"; and the superstitious approach is indicated by the reference to the "fearsome Brahmin priest" in the temple treating the darkened sun as "a portent of the gods" (meaning an indication of the displeasure of the gods who would be inflicting some catastrophe on mankind as a punishment to them for their sins). The poet/himself seems to be of the view that the solar eclipse can be regarded as "a disrobing of human values by a rabid civilization". And the poem is not only remarkable because of its profound ideas but also by virtue of its imagery, particularly the animal imagery pertaining to the cobra, the hyena, the vultures, the sparrows, and the crocodile.

### **The Philosophical Quality of *The Moon Moments***

*The Moon Moments* is philosophical in its own way. It has its realistic lines such as "Those women talking outside have clouds passing across their eyes". It shows Mahapatra's social concerns in the references to socialism and the doctrine of the brotherhood of love which are ideals difficult of attainment. The poem acquires a psychological value from the line "How can I stop the life I lead within myself?". A thinking man will always have an inner life and he cannot drive it out of his mind. But where is the philosophy in this poem? It is in the line: "Always there is a moon that is taking me somewhere". Some ideal or the other occupies a thinking man's mind. Only a philosophical kind of person can have ideals. A man in the street does speak of socialism but he does so like a parrot which repeats certain words that it has often heard. It is only a man like Mahatma Gandhi, and others capable of experiencing certain noble impulses and urges, who can visualize a society free from bloodshed, violence, hatred, and injustice. This poem, like *Total Solar Eclipse*, is written in a style which matches the dignity of the theme.

Both these are learned poems in which the vocabulary and the syntax stamp the author as a great scholar.

### **A Philosophical Element in *The Exile***

*The Exile* has a philosophical content though it has a realistic component too. Land's distance; the mouldy village; the hills charred by the heat of the sun; the corpses burning on the funeral pyres; the old, ailing parents; the squalid town; and the long-haired priest of Kali are all true to life and are recognizable by everyone. But philosophy enters the poem with the lines:

It is an exile  
Between good and evil  
Where I need the sting of death.

The tussle between good and evil is a philosophical concept. Realism and surrealism have beautifully been blended in this poem. In fact that blending is evident in *Total Solar Eclipse* and *The Moon Moments* also.

### **Another Psychological Poem**

*The Abandoned British Cemetery at Balasore* is again a psychological poem, full of reflections over the dead. The deaths of young persons are the most poignant and heart-rending. Such deaths give rise to profound thoughts. Besides, a mere anchor lying half-sunk in mud in the cemetery may one day, in the distant future, acquire the status of a deity whom the people of the coming generations would worship.

### **A Probing of Human Nature**

There are poems which depict human nature and probe the human mind. Section 2 of *Temple* is one such poem. There is no woman who is not alone; there is no woman who is sure that she has found her way to her real purpose of life; there is no woman who does not believe that living is more appropriate than dying; and so on. A woman, who is dying, may be able to chasten the vision of her own death. And then there are cases and situations in which a man would say that it is the same story which has been heard a thousand times before.

### **Views of Critics**

According to a critic\*, Mahapatra's dominant concern in his poetry is the vision of grief, loss, dejection, and rejection. The tragic consciousness, says this critic, does not seem to operate in the work of any other Indian poet in English as disturbingly as in that of Jayanta Mahapatra. "The sombre wind". "The darkened room", and "The intrigues at my fingertips" these objects and images put their unmistakable emphasis on the sombre vision. The recurring portraits of women in Mahapatra's poetry point specifically to this aspect. The women are drawn with sympathy and with precision, as in

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\*K.A. Paniker

the *Indian Summer Poem*: "The good wife/lies in my bed...." This critic finds moral anguish in *The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street* which, according to him, has been absent for a long time from Indo-Anglian poetry. Another critic\* expresses the view that, when Mahapatra deals with the themes of trade in flesh, poverty, and destitution, his skill and subtlety do not fail him. Mahapatra avoids making a tickling poetic opportunity of such themes and scenes. Another critic† says that Mahapatra often excels in writing love-poetry, especially poetry which expresses the fragility as well as the stasis of inter-personal relationships. *Lost* is one of Mahapatra's best love-poems. *The Logic* too is a great success. Mahapatra always depicts the encounter between a man and a woman in a gripping manner. Mahapatra's treatment of sex and love, according to this critic, is quite a contrast to the calculated cynicism of Ezekiel or the flaunting sick malady of Kamala Das. Mahapatra's presentation of love as a moral presence in a sex-haunted world avoids the usual sentimental blabber.

**Q. 2. Write a note on Jayanta Mahapatra's contribution to Indo-Anglian poetry.**

*Or*

**Bring out the most distinctive qualities of Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry, giving illustrations in support of your views.**

*Or*

**Sum up Mahapatra's achievement as an Indo-Anglian poet.**

**His Manifold Contribution to Indo-Anglian Poetry**

Jayanta Mahapatra is one of the major Indo-Anglian poets. His contribution to Indo-Anglian poetry is very weighty and substantial. He ranks with the best of the Indo-Anglian poets, both as regards his themes and his treatment of them. He shows as great a command of the English language as Nissim Ezekiel, Ramanujan, and Keki Daruwalla do; and he can claim as much originality as any one of them. His output is also by no means small or slender. His poetry completely falsifies the view that Indians should not write poetry in the English language. In fact, Mahapatra is one poet whose sensibility is wholly Indian and who has yet written highly successful poems in the English language. His contribution to Indo-Anglian poetry includes his enlargement of its themes; the originality of his approach to, and treatment of, his themes; the felicities of word and phrase; and his imagery which is sometimes perfectly realistic, sometimes symbolist, sometimes surrealist, and sometimes of the common, familiar, and everyday kind. In this connection it has to be emphasized that Mahapatra belongs to the Symbolist-Surrealist stream of poetry; and, by writing poetry of this kind, he has enriched Indo-Anglian poetry and extended its scope and range.

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### His Enlargement of Themes

Mahapatra stands alone as a poet who has brought a particular region of India on the map of Indo-Anglian poetry and added greatly to the importance, dignity, and stature of that region while, at the same time, pointing out and even emphasizing the ugly and seamy side of the life of that region. Mahapatra is, above all, an Oriya poet; and the Oriya landscape constitutes the most important and significant theme in his poetry. His emphasis on the Orissa landscape has imparted a greater Indianness to Indo-Anglian poetry than the work of any other Indo-Anglian poet has done. The coastal town of Puri and the ruins of Konarak temples figure prominently in his poems. *Dawn at Puri*, *Taste for Tomorrow*, *Slum*, *Evening Landscape by the River*, and *Events* are poems which deal chiefly with the Orissa landscape. Of these, *Dawn at Puri* is the most conspicuous, the most realistic, and perhaps the most interesting, with its endless crow noises, with a skull lying on its holy sands, with its white-clad widowed women waiting to enter the great temple of Lord Jagannath, and so on. *Taste for Tomorrow* also depicts a scene at Puri, with its crows, with its one very wide street, with its lepers, and with its religious-minded or religious-seeming crowds thronging the temple door. Other poems depicting the Orissa landscape and alluding to the culture and the ancient history of Orissa include *The Orissa Poems*, *Orissa Landscapes*, and *Evening in an Orissa Village*. Mahapatra has surely been able to magnify the image of his native region in our minds, at the same time bringing into focus the backwardness, the poverty, the misery, and the wretchedness of its people.

### His Treatment of the Theme of Love

Sex and love are another conspicuous theme in Mahapatra's poetry. This theme certainly figures prominently in the work of every Indo-Anglian poet; but each one of them has dealt with this theme in his own way. The poem entitled *Lost* is one of Mahapatra's finest love-poems. In this poem something seems to have gone wrong with a man's love for a woman. Mahapatra here depicts the flaw in this love-affair by comparing it with the first faith of some child going wrong, and then comparing it with some defect in a mechanical toy. At the end he compares his loss with one's loss of a watch which one has misplaced; and he asks: "Where was I when I lost it?" *The Logic* is also a good love-poem, though somewhat difficult to understand. Here the lover tells the woman that his "devoted pads of flesh pave the ground/for what you strove to accomplish." And then he says to her: "Make me small and edible, love." Two of Mahapatra's best poems depict the twin themes of prostitution and poverty. *Hunger* and *The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street* are poems in which Mahapatra depicts his own outlook on these two matters. Poverty is one of Mahapatra's chief preoccupations, and in these two poems he attributes the vice of prostitution to the poverty of the people, though we are not inclined to agree with this view because prostitution would continue, and perhaps with greater vigour and zest, even if poverty were abolished by some miracle. In *Hunger* a fisherman offers his

own young daughter to a customer who has been feeling sex-starved; and, when the fisherman leaves his shack to clear the field for the customer, the girl opens her wormy legs wide, and the customer perceives the hunger—both the hunger between the legs and the hunger in her belly above. In *The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street*, the customer enters the premises with a great hope—the hope of seeing pretty faces of the kind which he has often observed on posters and on public hoardings. But he also experiences a sense of guilt and shame. At the same time he believes that he would learn something more about women. And he must certainly have learnt something more about women in this business because the prostitute asks him to hurry up and finish his business so that she may be able to go away. Like *Hunger*, this poem too is an engrossing and instructive one.

### His Social Concerns

Mahapatra has enriched Indo-Anglian poetry also with poems in which he expresses his social and political ideas and leanings. Both *Hunger* and *The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street* show his distress over poverty which is undoubtedly the greatest problem in our country. He obviously feels much perturbed by the poverty and the destitution of the Indian people. His dark view of the state of affairs in this country also finds a clear and emphatic expression in his poem *The Twenty-fifth Anniversary of a Republic*. Taken together with his poems about the life in his home State, they show Mahapatra as a kind of social reformer. He does have certain ideals in the political sphere; and those ideals are hinted at in his poem *The Moon Moments* in which he alludes to the shattering of those ideals, namely socialism and love (meaning universal love or the doctrine of the Brotherhood of Man).

### His Most Striking Contribution, According to a Critic

One\* of the critics has given us what is perhaps the soundest analysis of Mahapatra's genius as an Indo-Anglian poet. According to the critic, no other Indo-Anglian poet approaches the depth, the sweep, and the subtlety of Mahapatra's imagination. Most Indo-Anglian poetry, no matter how subtle and suggestive it might be, is basically paraphrasable; but much of Mahapatra's poetry is difficult, if not impossible, to paraphrase. Most Indo-Anglian poets find it difficult to manage without logic and reason; Mahapatra, seldom lapsing into incoherence and meaninglessness, achieves a wonderful transcendence. Belonging to the Symbolist-Surrealistic stream as he does, he depends upon the resources of the unconscious; and his unconscious would seem to connect him more than most with the collective unconscious of India. It is notable that irony and satire, which are the tools of almost all the other Indo-Anglian poets, play an insignificant role in Mahapatra's poetry. According to another critic\*\*, who is himself a poet of no mean order, Mahapatra explores the intricacies of human relationships,

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\*Vilas Sarang

\*\*R. Parthasarathy



especially those of lovers, with a robust tenderness. About the poems themselves, says this critic, there is an unexpected quietude. Love offers to Mahapatra a sort of relief from the uncertainties one has come to expect of life, probed rigorously, for instance, in *Lost* and *The Logic*. There is an intense dramatic quality about *A Missing Person*. The same critic also finds an economy of phrasing and startling images in Mahapatra's poetry.

### **His Philosophical, Psychological, and Reflective Poetry**

Mahapatra is by no means a shallow-minded poet. On the contrary, he is a deeply philosophical and profoundly reflective poet. *The Logic*, *Grass*, *The Exile*, *The Abandoned British Cemetery at Balasore*, *Total Solar Eclipse*, and *The Moon Moments* are the most conspicuous and the most impressive poems of this category. *Total Solar Eclipse* depicts both the approaches to the natural phenomenon of the solar eclipse—the scientific approach and the superstitious approach. The scientific approach is indicated by the line: "Quietly the moon's dark well moves on;" and the superstitious approach is indicated by the reference to the "fearsome Brahmin priest" in the temple treating the darkened sun as "a portent of the gods" (meaning an indication of the displeasure of the gods who are preparing to inflict some catastrophe on mankind as a punishment to them for their sins). *The Moon Moments* also shows Mahapatra's philosophical bent of mind; and one line in it shows that he is a deeply reflective type of man. That line is: "How can I stop the life I lead within myself?". Furthermore, this poem shows his social concern by virtue of its mention of "socialism and love". And this poem has its realistic lines too, such as "Those women talking outside have clouds passing across their eyes." Indeed, *The Moon Moments* is one of Mahapatra's masterpieces, as is *Total Solar Eclipse*. The poem entitled *The Exile* also has its philosophical, almost mystical element. The poet finds himself in an exile; he is fluctuating between good and evil, and what he needs is "a sting of death". It is because of such lines that Mahapatra may be regarded as a transcendental poet, though he is at the same time a hard-core realist. Indeed, these two aspects of his poetry may be regarded as an admirable combination imparting a special quality to his work (his realism being evidenced in poems dealing with the Orissan landscape and the Oriya history and culture).

### **Imagery**

Mahapatra has enriched Indo-Anglian poetry by his imagery also. He is an Imagist, meaning that he has written poems which are short and which contain a number of vivid pictures having no apparent connection with one another. In fact, he has written a number of excellent Imagist poems. *Indian Summer Poem*, *A Missing Person*, and *Dawn at Puri* are first-rate Imagist poems. In the first-named poem, for instance, we have three or four separate images or pictures, which are not inter-connected but which combine to build up what Mahapatra believes is the atmosphere of an Indian summer in Orissa. *Taste for Tomorrow* is also an Imagist poem. The first picture here is: "At Puri, the crows." Then follow other pictures, with the closing line

containing a philosophical idea, namely that a huge holy flower is "swaying in the wind of greater reasons". *Evening Landscape by the River* is another Imagist poem. Here we have the separate and disconnected pictures of the fishermen's broken shacks by the river, a temple standing frail and still in the distance as if lost in a reverie, and a six-month old child crawling across the dung-washed floor. The time is evening, and some light laughter is audible. Over the "abundant darkness of water", the uncertain light of the moon is falling and resting there like "a familiar but useless ornament". Thus we have not only the essential images but also incidental images like the floor being a "dung-washed" floor, and "a familiar but useless ornament." All the imagery in these poems is vivid and realistic. This is Mahapatra's special contribution to Indo-Anglian poetry—this Imagist technique. But he also gives us symbolic imagery, as in *The Exile* and in *The Moon Moments*. *Total Solar Eclipse* contains some striking animal imagery and also some philosophical imagery. There is some suggestive and startling imagery in *The Twenty-fifth Anniversary of a Republic*. Here we read that the jungles have become gentle; the women have become restless; history reposes between the college girl's breasts; and the pretty Mina goes round and round the gilded stage in an ostentatious manner, hiding jungles in her purse, holding on to her divorce papers, and a lonely Ph.D.

### A Critic's Assessment

We might as well conclude this essay with the remarks of a critic\* according to whom Jayanta Mahapatra's technique is that of fusion, and there is a constant inter-action between the objective and subjective worlds, and between the epic and lyric impulses. Along with Arun Kolatkar (the author of *Jejuri*, which is another great poem, and which too is set in temple ruins), Mahapatra gives a new thrust to the modernist movement in Indo-Anglian poetry whose ground rules are concrete experience, the secular and rational stance, and the imagistic technique. Using Srinivasa Iyengar's words, this critic goes on to say that Mahapatra's poetry is lyrical in intensity but epic in comprehensiveness. Mahapatra's work and vision combine what is best in the romantic and the mystic tradition of Tagore and Aurobindo Ghose and the modern tradition of Ezekiel, Ramanujan, and Parthasarathy. Mahapatra's command of the English language, we may add, and the felicities of word and phrase in the poems already named by us, are also among his assets.

**Q. 3. "Jayanta Mahapatra's poetic vision stems from his originality as a poet in the most exclusive sense." How far is this view correct ?**

### The Originality in His Choice of Themes: Orissa

There is certainly much truth in the view that Mahapatra's poetic vision stems from his originality as a poet in the most exclusive sense. There is

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\*C.L.L. Jayaprada in Volume II of "Indian Literature Today" edited by R.K. Dhawan.

### The Protagonist's Reaction

The protagonist felt as if the sky had fallen down upon his head. The fisherman's invitation had seemed shameless to him; and he therefore felt stunned by it. However, he could judge that this father had been using all kinds of tricks to persuade possible customers to agree to his proposition. Even the father's saying that his daughter had just turned fifteen must be a trick. Anyhow, after the fisherman had left, the girl opened her legs wide in order to make it easier for the customer to commence the sexual act. The girl's gesture made the protagonist feel that it was sheer poverty which had driven the father and the daughter to adopt this method of making money.

### A Sound Comment by a Critic on this Poem

In the opinion of one very discriminating and sound critic\*, the simplicity and strength of this poem, namely *Hunger*, have made it one of the great peaks of Indian poetry in English. A profoundly human document this poem is; and its power depends mainly on the authenticity of the experience established by the words and their arrangement. Every word is telling, is in its proper place. One could hardly wish to upset any sequence in it. The happy blending of the literal and the metaphorical is achieved in expressions like 'the flesh was heavy on my back', 'trailing his nets and his nerves', 'the white bone thrash his eyes', 'burning the house I live in', 'the flickering dark', 'his lean-to opened like a wound', 'a father's exhausted wife', 'her years were cold as rubber', etc. The protagonist, the fisherman, and the girl have the clarity and hardness of figures in bas-relief. The complexity of the human situation is not sacrificed for the sake of any sociological formula. The poet achieves his eloquence through silence. Silence, incidentally, is a word that gets endlessly repeated, one might say consecrated, in Mahapatra's poems; there is no doubt that it has "gripped his sleeves" too. But nowhere has he made silence more eloquent than in this poem. The young man does not speak; the girl also does not speak; even the fisherman speaks in a matter-of-fact tone which has the ominousness of silence. The poet here is exploiting in full measure the communicative value of silence. It makes this poem singularly free from the kind of grandiloquence which used to be the badge and bane of Indian poetry in English for quite some time. However, the same controlled silence is not to be found in another poem by Mahapatra on a similar theme, *The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street*. The choice of the title and the length of that poem point to a different orientation.

### 3. "THE MOON MOMENTS"

#### NOTES AND EXPLANATIONS

**Explanation.** *Always there is a moon that is taking me somewhere*—It is not absolutely clear what the moon here stands for. The poet speaks about a moon which creates an urge in him to go somewhere. The moon may stand for the beloved. In ancient Latin mythology the moon was believed to be a

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\*K.A. Paniker

goddess having the name of Cynthia who fell in love with an earthly man. Keats made this love of the moon-goddess and an earthly man (of the name of Endymion) the subject of a long poem entitled *Endymion*. Here perhaps the poet means that always there is some woman who leads him somewhere. But more probably the moon here symbolizes some ideal or some lofty purpose which urges the poet to make some kind of effort to achieve it. Ideals goad human beings into action. Ideals serve as a source of inspiration to human beings. So we may interpret the moon in any way we like because Mahapatra himself has given us no clear hint about what he has in mind.

*Clairvoyant*—one who can guess what is happening out of his sight; one having some kind of magic power to know what is going on at another place. But the word may also be used to mean a person having an exceptional insight. Here, of course, the poet says that time is not clairvoyant, meaning that time does not know everything which is to happen to human beings.

**Explanation.** *Beating the visions of childhood out of us*—driving our childish fancies and aspirations out of our minds by teaching us the nature of reality. A child imagines things which would never happen because, to a child, nothing is impossible. A child would believe everything that an elder tells him. That is why children easily believe fairy tales which, on growing up, they just forget because they now realize that those fairy stories were intended only to entertain them.

*The great north of honour*—the everlasting values of honour; the honourable course from which a noble-minded man never deviates. (The northern star never shifts its position).

*How can I stop the life I lead within myself*—how can I put an end to my inner life? How can I extinguish my thinking or the workings of my mind?

### A SUMMARY OF THE POEM

#### A Question Asked by the Protagonist

The light of the stars is falling on the matting in a restless manner. The women talking outside have a gloomy look on their faces and an expression of sadness in their eyes. As for the speaker in the poem (or the protagonist), there is always some ideal which takes hold of him and acts as a stimulus to action. He asks why one room always leads to other rooms. In other words, he wants to know why one idea leads to other ideas.

#### Impossible to Ignore Ideals

The protagonist says that human beings often feel convinced that their minds would lead to something which had never been permitted to them before. Human beings encourage themselves to think along those lines even though they do not specifically know what to expect. They just sit under the trees, feeling hurt, and feeding (or imparting greater vitality to) the ideal which has taken hold of them. They behave in this manner naturally just as the wind blows naturally against a tree.

### The Difficulty of Achieving Ideals

When all is said and done, we have to realize that time is not a magician who knows everything about everybody, and who can also forecast or predict what would happen to individual human beings in the future. If time does know these things, then it has every right to feel proud of its fore-knowledge, and it has every right to feel proud of its awareness of the triumphs which human beings are capable of achieving. With the passing of time, the fanciful and impractical notions, which human beings used to harbour during their childhood, would certainly dissolve. Even such ideals as socialism (meaning the equitable distribution of wealth among human beings) and such ideals as the brotherhood of man melt away from the minds of human beings with the passing of time. Even a belief in the equality of wealth and a belief in the brotherhood of man no longer appear to be feasible or practicable when human beings begin to understand the realities of human life and human nature. Some human beings may still adhere to such notions, and they may continue to cling to the everlasting values which their sense of honour and of human dignity teaches them; but the ideal of universal love does not last long in the minds of most people. The protagonist wants to know why he is unable to speak the truth about human nature and why he does not have the courage to reveal the shameful deeds which human beings have committed or are likely to commit.

*Chief person in drama*

### The Protagonist's Feeling of Frustration; and the Persistence of Ideals

The protagonist has his ideals even though his ideals have remained unrealistic all these years. Previously the sense of the non-realization of his ideals used to haunt him but now he has become accustomed to this feeling of non-realization. And yet he cannot prevent himself from leading an inner life which does not have much resemblance with his outer life. The outward reality differs entirely from the ideas and thoughts which dwell in his mind, and which keep his mind alive and active. The gods above seem to be laughing at the human failures on earth. They may be laughing at the protagonist's idealistic notions also; but he can neither give up his idealistic aims nor understand why he is doomed to fail in those aims.

### CRITICAL COMMENTS

#### Frustration But Not Despair, the Dominant Feeling of the Poem

*The Moon Moments* is another philosophical poem by Mahapatra. Although the word "moon" could here be interpreted as the beloved, yet it would be perhaps nearer the facts of the case to interpret it as meaning an ideal. The title, namely *The Moon Moments* means those moments when a human being begins actively to contemplate his ideals and to determine the degree of success which he can achieve so far as that ideal is concerned. Ideals can never be fulfilled; this seems to be the message of this poem. And yet a man cannot stop harbouring an ideal: this too is the message. Socialism

and the theory of the brotherhood of man may have come to nothing; but this failure on the part of mankind cannot put an end to ideals. The poet here expresses his disappointment and his profound feeling of frustration but the poem yet radiates hope. It is a pessimistic poem, like most others by Mahapatra; and yet it does not fill us with despair.

### An Abstract Poem with Memorable Lines in It

This poem does not contain the kind of concrete imagery which *Total Solar Eclipse* contains. In fact, it is an abstract poem. But Mahapatra's command of the English language is certainly evident even in this poem. There are memorable lines in this poem such as the following:

- (1) Those women talking outside have clouds passing across their eyes.
- (2) Yet time is not clairvoyant.
- (3) What humility is that which will not let me reveal the real ?
- (4) How can I stop the life I lead within myself ?

Besides all this, the poem has a gentle, soothing rhythm which to some extent lightens the gloom of the poem.

## 4. "THE EXILE"

### NOTES AND EXPLANATIONS

*Mouldy village*—decaying village.

**Explanation.** *Rests rawly against the hills*—lies crudely and shabbily at the foot of the hills. The word "raw" means unripe or inexperienced or immature. Here, however, it has been used to mean crude or unsophisticated.

**Explanation.** *The charred ruins of sun*—The hills are here described metaphorically as rocks which have been charred by intense heat of the sun. Nothing ever remains the same. Even hills and mountains show the effects of the heat of the sun and the effects of the intensity of cold and of snowfall.

*Drugged*—as if intoxicated; not fully aware of the surroundings.

*Kali*—the goddess of destruction and death, worshipped by the Hindus with mixed feelings of reverence, awe, and fear. Bloody sacrifices are offered to the images of Kali by the orthodox, devout Hindus.

**Explanation.** *It is an exile*—The speaker in the poem (or the protagonist who may be the poet himself) describes his plight or miserable condition as a state of exile. It seems to him that he does not belong to any place, and that no place would be willing to own him.

*A country's ghosts*—the past events of a country; the ancient past of a country; the memories of ancient happenings in a country.

*My inconsequences*—my meaningless or insignificant or trivial doings and actions.

## A SUMMARY OF THE POEM

### **The Miserable Plight of the Protagonist**

This poem describes the persona's (or the protagonist's) feeling that he is an exile or that his plight is similar to a state of being in exile. Evidently the speaker in the poem is in a miserable state of mind. He seems to be broken, physically, mentally, and morally; and so he gives vent to his feelings of distress and frustration.

### **The Funeral Pyres Frequently Burning Near a Shabby, Decaying Village**

He first refers to a decaying village which has a crude and shabby look and which is situated by the side of the sun-burnt hills. The village is evidently situated in a hilly area. People keep dying everywhere, and people die in and around this village also, so that the protagonist frequently witnesses dead bodies being burnt on the funeral pyres. The wind sometimes scatters the ashes from these funeral pyres; and these ashes, which the protagonist regards as the ashes of the present (or the passing memories of the present which is fast becoming the past). He feels that some of these ashes fall upon him and stick to different parts of his body.

### **The Protagonist's Old, Ailing Parents; and the Long-Haired Priest**

Having walked away some distance from the village, the protagonist now returns. He is so lost in his thoughts that he feels like one who has been drugged. He is only semi-conscious because of his self-absorption. He has old, ailing parents to look after. The long-haired priest, who looks after the shrine of the goddess Kali, still steals jasmines from other people's gardens and parks in order to offer them to goddess Kali early in the morning. The priest continues with his professional duties while the protagonist is feeling miserable.

### **An Exile, Pulled in Opposite Directions by Good and Evil**

The protagonist thinks himself to be an exile. His condition is no better than that of a person who has been banished from his country. But his state of exile is unlike the state of exile of anybody else. He finds himself torn between the good and the evil which pull him in opposite directions. He experiences the pull of good; but he also experiences the pull of evil. In this state he feels that it would be better for him to die. Death would come to him like a scorpion's sting and would awaken him into a state of full awareness of his plight. But, although death might come to his rescue in one way, the past of his country creates in him an urge to continue living in the hope of a Renaissance.

### **The Possibility of a Renaissance in the Country**

The expected Renaissance would resemble a relative whom one has never seen but who might arrive one day. It is possible that his country, which is in a miserable condition, might renew itself and regain its ancient glory.