A Downpour of Rain in the poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra

Dr. Vivekanand Jha
Assistant Professor
Dept. of English
Govt. Model P.G. College Jhabua (M.P.)

ISSN 2277-7733
Volume 14 Issue 1,
June 2025

The rain has both regenerative and degenerative effects in the poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra and its major symbolic meanings are rebirth, renewal, spiritual cleansing, sadness, life, joy, sensuality, fertility, growth, abundance, forgiveness, grace, disappointment, difficulties, darkness, misery, frustration, depression, and femininity. The rain has catharsis effect which inspires the poet to rise up again and it symbolizes cleansing, not only of the physical forms but also of the mind. The rain, ambassador of the heavens, has great influence on the earth and its inhabitants which helps in spiritual augmentation and well-being too. On the basis of its heterogeneous nature that it imparts in the poetry of Mahapatra, the rain can be primarily divided into two contrary symbolic connotations: welcome and unwelcome. Welcome rain brings respite, a pleasant endowment or assistance from God, nourishment, replenishment, spiritual awakening, cleansing of filthy old to start afresh. Unwelcome rain symbolizes fearful challenge, punishment, bad luck, inopportune circumstances, nuisance, frustration, criticism, darkness, depression, anger, or despair. The rain is a symbol of renewal, rebirth and regeneration as it gives a sigh of relief from dry, arid and stifling summer and fills the landscape with thick greenery and vegetation. The rain accelerates the desire in man and woman for a physical union and this is common and truth in traditional Indian Literature.

The rain the poet talks about fountains from the month of monsoon which remains in peak in the month of August. Mahapatra shares his sense of refreshment that he achieves through the renewal, regenerative and spiritual awakening effect of the month of August: "August, a time of rain, when the earth is already wet with the continual showers of the first monsoon and is blossoming with new born things; a time of clouds too, falling apart on lotus leaves in village pools. A flame of rain, when golden orioles rush through the mango groves by the river, giving vent to their melodious calls, as though greeting man and nature alike with their songs. A time when all life seems to renew itself in its own mysterious manner.[1]

Rain is a natural process that holds many different emotions, feelings and forms for the poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra and it brings expiation to his morose ridden mind. K. Ayyappa Paniker has appropriately observed that: "In Mahapatra's scheme of sin and expiation, it is rain that seems to work out the hoped for expiation. The process of purification is also a rain of rites".[2]

The poet depicts the difficulties of writing in alien and foreign tongue, English. Though he has deep reverence for his native tongue and mother land but his education in the British Missionary School brought his inclination towards English lore, learning and literature. He never thought he would one day write poems in English and he confesses himself an Oriya poet incidentally writing in English. He elucidates his affiliation with alien tongue through the imagery of rain in the following stanza:

I attempt to fit mine
in words
that never belong to me
like the gentle rain's quality
to the hard earth's calling.[3]

The rain liberates one from culpability and expiation. It has purifying power and regenerating capacity. It fills fertility in living beings, plants and trees. It brings back new vigour and vitality in life and the poet is not debarred from reaping these gods gifted crops and it renders the poet a break from relentless tragic consciousness:

The rain
has come like an organized movement,
like a long tongue of tireless priests
that will not fail to lick your palms
of guilt and atonement.[4]

The rain after scorching heat is a harbinger for new hope and it brings a sigh of relief for the poet. It fills him with new verve and vivacity and stirs his poetic imagination that had gone into hibernation because of onslaught of summer:

Once again, it has been a day of rain.
And I hear the flutter of light feet
on the warm earth, excited wings
loosening from the dark.[5]

Orissa is the place where strict acquiescence to myth, rites, rituals and ceremonies are still observed even in the era of burgeoning industrialization, technical innovation, scientific discovery and invention. The poet is sceptic of and susceptible to pain, sorrow and suffering springing from strict compliance to his myth, heritage, rites and rituals. The image rain that has been used in following stanza reveals the poet in perpetual persecution perpetrated by people's predicamnet:

Who knows
what's dying underneath
a growing blade of grass?
Or what habit palpitates
inside the dark pit of love:
Art, ceremony or voice that lies
under my aimless hearing of the rain?[6]

The poet's concern for hunger, starvation and disease remains undeterred in the poem, *A Letter of Kazuko Shiraishi*[7]. The poet makes an apt comparison between rain and hunger as both are complimentary to each other. The rain in its destructive and devastating approach brings along with cyclone and flood resulting in the ruin of crops and thereby people are pitted to hunger and destitution. The stagnant water results in outbreak of endemic and epidemic. The poet's helplessness and guilty conscience jeers him like 'a discarded bone' where 'a leper's mutilated hands flow over/ his love, without a trace of horror'. He can't do anything more than listening the causalities and news of 'a hastily-induced abortion' on the radio and write a poem as:

It's rain again. Going on and on all day.
Like hunger. You would think this country
has nothing but seven hundred million bellies.[8]

The poet's disillusionment against the deprecating and denigrating scenario of country is oblivious in the poem, *Unreal Country*[9]. India is no more the country the poet and the world were looking for. It has lost its identity, entity and sovereignty. The youth aimlessly amble in the quest of livelihood and employment. The child supposed to be in school are washing plates and eating leftover meal in canteen and restaurants. The shelter they look for 'turns grandly into darkness'. Stark poverty, unprecedented joblessness, 'hunger and earth/ made the bones of one's breath'. The people has reached to stage where 'only the world/ is left, and the rain/ that hangs from the branches'. The poet finds the youth trapped in bizarre plot of life and this problem is prettily projected by the poet in the following lines:

Rain grates in the silence. My son
walks in through the dim walls,
a strange map drawn by life.[10]

The poem, *A Pastoral Perhaps* embodies true to its title and the bathing of woman in the pond is beautifully portrayed by the poet amid the landscape of the nature and this spellbound scenery reminds the poet of his childhood days and the past. The following passage presents vivid mental pictures of pastoral setting as if it were happening lively before the very eyes of the readers:

By the scummy pond, in the thin rain,
a woman shakes her hair loose,
before entering the water. Through the grove
of bamboos dripping bright raindrops,
a long abandoned thought appears to push a smile
at her lips. Audacious shadows open
to take her in; she shrugs, strong, unaware.[11]

The poet explores from one place to another to incorporate and experiment new themes and imageries in his poetry and in the pursuit of it he visits the jungles of Similipal, in Mayurbhanj in Orissa which is a vast forest bristling with varied flora and fauna, stretches of verdant green forest, a network of perennial, all pervading and never-ending streams and its invigorating climate contribute an ideal habitat for tropical birds and animals like tiger, leopard, elephant, sambar, and deer. Similipal is popularly called the Dreamland of Nature and the tourists get mesmerized by the majestic Sal forests, cool, calm and expansive grassy lands, soaring peaks and the waterfalls of streaming pearls. The image of June rain is employed to seek solace from sizzling summer of Orissa. All these paradises like beauty are prettily portrayed by the poet in the poem, *Dance of the Fireflies:*

This earth around us, this dance to death,
is a touch tone,
a weapon one must learn to use.
And something touches the silence of deep roots.

I draw away, like a June rain,
no more eager for answers.
Just pure flies
keep on breathing from our open eyes.[12]

The rain is recurring images and symbols in Mahapatra's poetry. The rain has different nuance and suggestion at different places in his poetry. Now it's good, now it's bad and now it's constructive and now it's destructive. It creates an impression of vastness as it links the sky with the earth and 'quietly opens a door' to achieve celestial bliss. Further describing importance of the word 'rain' in the poem "A Rain of Rites", Mahapatra in an interview makes known to the readers:

There are two things which connect human beings: what is above and what is below. The sky is above you and the earth beneath you and anything that connects earth and sky is rain. It is a bond you cannot miss. It has a process itself. It is a link. Therefore, rain is a linking process, and so, the very act of your living.[13]

The image of 'rain' signifies his composing of his poems and it is contemplating about the futility of his poetry so far he has written, harvested, mused and celebrated 'is thrown like kelp on the beach'. He thinks that his poems suffer from degeneration and infertility and it is like a dead sea weed hurled upon the beach that will never grow up again: "The rain I have known and traded all this life / is thrown like kelp on the beach"[14]**.** Elucidating the hidden psyche behind writing the title poem, *A Rain of Rites*, Mahapatra sums up:

In a poem I wrote about 15 years ago, titled "A Rain of Rites", I found myself once again at the border between two separate regions of the mind; between what, perhaps, I understood and what I didn't, using rain as a symbol for that substance which makes up my life, those blurs of vague light that pulsate with the days, making me ask at the end of the poem, "What still stale air sits on the angel's wings?/ What holds my rain so it's hard to overcome?" I suppose such questionings come from somewhere deep within oneself, and that there is no reason or rationale for these things. But such questions and such searching move me and I am unable to resist them in my poetry. For poetry is voice-vaak-and it is a voice which is forged from those elements that constitute the world both within and without, a voice which carries with it its unusual power of survival.[15]

The images of rain and stone have been such a factor in the poetry of Mahapatra if these two were minus from his poetry, he would lose the war that he wages for his own root and identity and Oriyan myth, history, tradition and culture. The image of rain has been used in both regenerative and degenerative forms. The rain turns the poet rhetoric: "Do I know what really is my loss,/ do I know what I mean when I say this/ while the remembered rain beats against my walls?"[16]. The rain that drizzles in the form of droplets of rites and rituals is conveyed in the stanza: "Sometimes a rain comes/ slowly across the sky, that turns/ upon it grey cloud, breaking away into light/ before it reaches its objective."[17] The image of rain is painted exquisitely and aesthetically in the following paragraph that sets the life journey on auspicious note: "The clear, wise eyes of water, running/ the look on the other side of life"[18]. The rain is presented in destructive and degenerative mode in the excerpt: "Do I know what really my loss is,/ Do I know that I mean when I say this/ while the remembered rain

beats against my walls?"[19]. The sensual shape of rain is suggested in the succeeding passage: "Rise and fall in turn, / in that inner kingdom of consciousness/ which moves each torture of memory into the flesh"[20]. The weakling and crippled state of the beggar out of destitution and starvation is expressed through the image of rain: "He turns weak/like rain riddling the earth of his body"[21].

The rain is the image of sensuality and fertility and in the poem, *The Rain Falling*[22], the impulse of sensuality passing from word to word and sentence to sentence: "Rain that falls silently in a July sky, / catching in your trembling skin/ pearls of fire, / wet pigeon's voices on the naked ledge, / a hand longing for love in the dark". There is also tinge of epigrammatic but corporeal connotation: "Who can bear the thought/ of his woman going out with someone else". The poem*, After the Rain*[23]*,* depicts the post rain landscapes and repercussions of the Orissa which are not conducive and wholesome: "a lost cloud slips by like an old whore", "the peacock wonders/ what made him dance to the rain" and "dead are flung about like stale air".

The poet is recurrently haunted by the tragic consciousness of his life, Orissa, nation and world but memory debars him from reminiscing auspicious aspects of life and thereby forbidding him to revitalize and resurrect his wretched condition caused by the winter's persistent asthma and migraine. The rain here is used as the symbols of sensuality, fertility, renovation and refreshment. The following passages have amalgamation of animal, visual, auditory and optical imagery that the poet craves to seek solace and respite from the mayhem perpetuated by the memories:

I forget easily
my old village's pelt, glistening with rain,
and the stillness of my gentle daughter's skin,
forget the desire
oozing out of the hewn stones of Konarka
and the voices of frogs
bending the white-wet moonlight into embraces,
through the strange fires that carried him down
from the tranquil hills in the rain."[24]

Even the first rain of the year brings about no relief into the injured and infected psyche caused by loss of legacy and the rain here is presented as symbol of degenerative force in the lines: "Here is the tapestry of the year's first rain;/ like an army, uniformed in gray,/ but penitents, down on their knees"[25].

Mahapatra compared barbarous and cold blooded killing of innocent men, women and child by terrorist in Punjab as hard as stone. Sitting in Orissa though he can't share the pains and agonies of people of Punjab but he offers prayer to God for restoration of peace and prosperity in perturbed Punjab so that one should not hate to alive rather one should have craze and passion to be alive. Here he has used the symbol of stone in degenerative mode when he says:

Rains fall heavy, hard as stones.
I am so faraway from these falls.
I chance pain and prayer,
the simple pendulum,

trying my utmost to replace
the senseless refrain of hate
by the amazement to be alive.[26]

Whenever Mahapatra is struck by the drought of imageries and symbols he looks towards 'rain' which has been all time favourite imagery of the poet. The titles of four poems of the volume, *Burden of Waves and Fruit* directly deal in rain and they are: Rains in Orissa, *Another Day in the Rain, A Rain Poem* and *The Rain Falls*. The poet talks of elementary matter of the earth of which this mortal body is ultimately made of and the idea of the death is suggested through the image of rain: "In the wind/ which carries the ash, the smoke, the odour/ which finally settles on the skin/ like rain on the funeral grounds of summer"[27] .

The poem *A Rain Poem* depicts the muddy and malarial life *of* the people in the rainy season and such instance is conveyed through the animal imagery: "Children stink like wet dogs"[28]. Another image of rain is noticed in the lines: Rain stands on the margin of my time/ A discovery, like theft"[29]. The image old *fire flies* refers to rain which pit the people of Orissa in inescapable inaction: "Old fire flies invade/our efforts to escape turn to mud/then the fatal touch of inaction/like this country's history"[30].

The poem, *With Broken Wings,* portraits the ghastly landscape posed by the monsoon rain of July in the night. The rain is here employed as the symbol of degenerative and destructive force. Hoarse and cacophonic voice of his mother is conveyed through the animal and auditory imagery. This rain plunges the poet into remorse which is looming large in the imagery of colour:

My grandfather's ghost standing in the rain,
watching the secrets between us burn away
and smoke past his grey eyes,
mother's voice a cricket's screams
and my remorse, like the brief red glow
of fireflies, gashing the air of the trees.[31]

The sensuality in a young girl is suggested through the metaphor of sea and image of rain: "Who was the man/ dreaming of you last night/ as you kicked the shingles/ on the beach of your dreams?"[32] and "in a dream, before our lips touch, /I can see the rain again, / like your longing/ to kiss someone younger than I"[33]. The rain is the favourite forte of Mahapatra and he is seen to be making permutation and combination with it and the science imagery has been used in the phrase, "the arithmetic of rain"[34]. The title of the poem, *In a Time of Winter Rain*, itself signifies something unusual and ominous to take place as the winter is not the time and season for raining.

It can be concluded with conviction that no Indian English poet has such a command, proclivity and penchant for the images and symbols associated with rain as Jayanta Mahapatra. There are host of poems whose title themselves bear the word 'rain'. It is a favourite metaphor which he contemplates and muses upon and there is a rain of poems on the theme of rain in his poetry and his real romance with the image of rain began with the title of volume itself, A Rain of Rites and its two of poems, *A Rain* and

Four Rain Poems. The False Start has *A day of Rain, The Rain Falling and After The Rain;* Burden of Waves and Fruit has *Rains in Orissa, Another day in rain, A Rain Poem, This is the Season of the Old Rain* and *Again the Rain Falls; Life* Signs has In *a Night of Rain*; Shadow Space has *June Rain* and Raining; Bare Face has *In a Time of Winter Rain*. Besides denotation by the titles, there are colossal number of poems which directly or indirectly deal with the theme and imagery of the rain in the poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra.

Works Cited

1. Mahapatra, Jayanta. Door of Paper, Essay & Memoirs, New Delhi, Authorspress, 2007, p. 92.
2. Paniker, K. A. "The Poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra". Osmania Journal of English Studies. Vol. 93.
3. Mahapatra, Jayanta. Svayamvara and Other Poems, Calcutta. Writers Workshop, 1971. Title poem Svayamvara, p. 22.
4. Ibid. Waiting, New Delhi. Samkaleen Prakashan, 1979, Rain Sense, p 45.
5. Ibid. The False Start, Bombay. Clearing House, 1980. A Day of Rain, p. 13.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid. Burden of Waves and Fruit, Washington, DC. Three Continents Press, 1988. A Letter of Kazuko Shiraishi, p. 29.
8. Ibid.
9. Mahapatra, Jayanta. A Whiteness of Bone, New Delhi. Viking Penguin, 1992. Unreal Country, p. 4.
10. Ibid.
11. Mahapatra, Jayanta. Bare Face, Kottayam. D. C. Books, 2000. A Pastoral Perhaps, p. 27.
12. Mahapatra, Jayanta. Random Descent, Bhubaneswar. Third Eye Communications, 2005. Dance of the Fireflies, p. 57.
13. Swain, Rabindra K. The Poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra: A Critical Study. Prestige Books, 2000, Patel Nagar, New Delhi-110 008, Jayanta Mahapatra in an Interview with R K Swain, p. 44.
14. Mahapatra, Jayanta. A Rain of Rites, Athens (USA). University of Georgia Press, 1976. A Rain of Rites, title poem, p. 10.
15. Ibid. Door of Paper, Essay & Memoirs, New Delhi, Authorspress, 2007, p. 22.
16. Ibid. A Rain of Rites, Athens (USA). University of Georgia Press, 1976. Four Rain Poems, p. 23-24.
17. Ibid. A rain of Rites, title poem, p. 10.
18. Ibid. Rain, p. 11.
19. Ibid. Four Rain Poems, p. 24
20. Ibid, p. 23.
21. Mahapatra, Jayanta. Waiting, Delhi. Samkaleen Prakashan, 1979. The Beggar takes it as Solace, p. 48.
22. Mahapatra, Jayanta. *The False Start,* Bombay, Clearing House, 1980. The Rain Falling, p. 31.
23. Ibid. After the Rain, p. 44.
24. Mahapatra, Jayanta. Relationship, Greenfield, New York. Greenfield Review Press, 1980, II, p. 12.
25. Ibid. III, p. 13.

26. Mahapatra, Jayanta. Dispossessed Nests: The 1984 Poems. Jaipur: Nirala Publications, 1986, p. 20.
27. Mahapatra, Jayanta. Burden of Waves and Fruit, Washington, DC. Three Continents Press, 1988. The Wind, p. 73.
28. Ibid. A Rain Poem, p. 13.
29. Ibid. Again the Rain Falls, p. 48.
30. Ibid. Rains in Orissa, p. 7.
31. Mahapatra, Jayanta. A Whiteness of Bone, New Delhi. Viking Penguin, 1992. *With Broken Wings, p. 39.*
32. Ibid. To a Young Girl, p. 41.
33. Ibid.
34. Mahapatra, Jayanta. Bare Face, Kottayam. D. C. Books, 2000. Silence, p.13.