



CLIMATE CHANGE, MEMORY AND TRANSITION: A STUDY OF THE SELECTED POEMS OF JAYANTA MAHAPATRA

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ABSTRACT

Jayanta Mahapatra is a much-discussed poet both in 20th and 21st centuries. He is not just a trend setter, he is also a mile-stone for the reason that he assembled multiple trends in his poetry. Although he breathed his last in the year 2023, his anthology of poems, Noon: New and Selected Poems, published by Ketaki Foundation Store, Bhubaneswar during the said year of the poet's death focuses on Mahapatra's intriguing maturity of thought, precision of language, complex portrait of life and the imposing influence of the verse up on the readers. Reading climate change, memory and transition in Mahapatra's poems will highlight the poet's concern for the dreaded existence on the planet. Although he doesn't hold any one directly responsible for the climatic and ecological devastation, he tries his best to drive home the point that we're dependent on each other. One cannot separate oneself individually from the rest of the world for peaceful and smooth living. Mahapatra's articulation of memory in his poems is strong enough to underline the transition that has hampered the historical and natural life of the Odias (the people of the state of Odisha). Although there are innumerable poems, some of the poems like "Starting Point", "Light", "Poem", "Bird and Sky", "A Hot May Afternoon" and "Village Mythology" are worth-reading in ecocritical line. The poems project the gravity with which the planet in general and Odisha in particular have changed over the years. It is not just the tone of the poet, but also the portrayal of the silent embrace of the change that Odisha has faced is also significant. Reading some of the important poems of the poet will add to the discourse of 21st century criticism on Mahapatra.

Key words: Odisha, Memory, Language, Ecocritical Insight, Climate Change, Transition and Poetic Representation.

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Jayanta Mahapatra's poems are usually evocative, symbolic and to the point. He has the capacity to express much more with less use of language. For that he leaves things up to the readers to imagine and think. As he cannot bear the burden of existence, he wishes to begin life afresh. Such yearning of the poet is clearly visible in the poem, "Starting Point". Among the natural devastation, he specifically refers to climate change because of which there is ecological degradation. There is adverse impact of environmental pollution and climate change, the disastrous effect of which the poet is not able to tolerate. That's why he wants to go back to the "Starting Point" whereby he can begin his life anew. Mahapatra's poetic expression is evocative: ".....Thirsty-looking branches/ for a barefooted love in the distance./Half of what I see isn't there" (lines 7-9). For the poet, love is another name of rain to which the trees look forward. The poet is habituated with things which are full of life and exuberance. Because of the drastic change, he is yearning for the life he has lost in past. In the poem language is saturated. The poem is not just about the past and the present, it is also about the commingling of the two. Experience is put in the straight-jacket of language. The poet implicitly confesses that human language has its own failure because it works up to certain limit. There is an expression of rural-urban conflict in the poem. The poet longs for the rural ambience: "The wind drags me to mid-river" (line 11). The poet is suffocated by the urban excess: "A dog in a violent pool of blood" (line 11).

The poem, "Light" is more insightful, if read in relation to starting point. One can discover its other side i.e. darkness. When darkness is there light is not far. Hence, the poet is optimistic. The ecological hazard that we experience at present, for the poet, may not continue for long: "The green bamboo and the scent of a woman/have only sharpened my love" (lines 5-6). The green bamboo is symbolising playful nature and the scent of a woman signifying the active participation of women for the making of human existence. Both are having similar virtue and the women stand as the corollary of nature. "Light" is a development upon "Starting Point". It is the light of the natural life that the poet yearns for: "The green bamboo and the scent of a woman/ have only sharpened my love" (line 12). Despite all the negativity of life the poet looks forward to light: "With every lie I still wait /for the truth. For light on which we build,/and trust in, but always unknown to us" (lines 11-13).

Like the previous poem, in "Poem" the poet intensifies his own feeling towards natural life which gets sedimented by the layers of life brought forth by new ideas of living. The old ways of living for the poet are so close to his heart: "So it's here / with all these dead, refusing to die,....." (Line-13). For the poet, the old ways of living a natural life is as good as a poem which is fresh and vibrant. Childhood and the process of growing up are in interaction with each other. The poet laments at the huge mess of life where everything is artificial. The poet being frustrated looks forward to the "Dawning Light" (line 11) in the poem "The Childhood We Have Made". In "Poem" the poet is still in the world of innocence. He is sad over the death of the natural world and human bonding. Because of the receding natural world, the birds fly to the "country of weeds" (line 8). But, the memory doesn't die. The old self doesn't bow down to the new disappointing situation. The "waterless river" (line 11) doesn't exist by itself. It brings back the memory of its past fullness which is linked to the sea. Without the sea the river's identity is incomplete. This is a past which doesn't stretch up to present. So for the poet, this is a beauty which doesn't take any concrete shape. "Poem" speaks about the self which is simple and child-like.

For Mahapatra, there are images of devastation concerning the present in one hand, and on the other lurks the sweet past the consciousness of which haunts him. The incompatibility between the past and the present is the occasion for the poetic lines to pour in. As a representative of mankind, he carries within himself a “guilt conscience” (line 7) for having spoiled the present we’re living in. Odisha as a microcosm is turning to desert slowly and slowly. The state with natural exuberance erstwhile used to be the abode of varieties of birds which are not seen these days. “.....The wounded bird/ thrown into a country of weeds “(lines 7-8). The river -ocean relation in Odisha is natural in terms of trade and commerce, cultural growth and tourism. The traders used to begin their voyage from river and end up in far off countries across. Modern day Odisha has its trade and commerce from the river as well as sea ports. Now that we’ve “waterless river” (line 11) the tradition of trade and commerce with modern transformation becomes a “yearning” (line 12). So, here is a poem that becomes a platform for environmental and ecological denigration against the backdrop of catastrophe and void. In “The Childhood We Have Made” the poet projects his closeness with the dawn and the night. The day comes in-between the two in the glaring light of which he feels shy. The poet is so much fed up with the reality of natural devastation that he doesn’t want to encounter it in words. He falls in love with the dawn because of its freshness and purity. He wants to go back to the time past for its enamouring capacity. He wishes the day might shrink and he would thereby get opportunity to take shelter in night for introspection. “When it’s born, /it is what it does to its heart,/as it,/waits for day to come closer to night (lines 16-18). Mahapatra is obsessed with his childhood of natural glory and sagacity so much so that he is not able to take in the present-day pollution. His concern is rather for the children who are well into the childhood of perversion. In the said poem the poet also speaks about the distortions we’ve made in our life . There is no scope for the moon-beam to be enjoyed. There is no one to receive its charm. The sky doesn’t enchant any one. It is only the “hand” (line 9) that matters. It refers to reality based on which the poet wishes to dream. Another marker of happiness and tranquillity is the dawning light which leaves no trace of its own as the day ages. Hence, the childhood we’ve made is constituted of the elements which are not natural, rather artificial and cultural.

In “Bird and Sky” Mahapatra gropes for love associated with nature. His love for nature has a heightened effect with the rain thrashing the bamboo shrubs. When there is no rain, the bamboos are exposed to excess of light. Mahapatra writes: “The rain thrashes the bamboos/and is a thought/for me, because it was flooded with the light of the sky” (lines 14-15). Mahapatra interweaves dream and reality. The bamboos being thrashed by rain is just a thought, not a reality which speaks of the poet’s yearning for rain.

Searching for rain and brooding over it is obvious in “Likely Time”. For Mahapatra, time changes, but it is not “vital” (line 5). The poet’s desperate search for rain is well-reflected in the poem through the image of fire-flies looking forward to “mating in the new rain” (line 15). In “Letting in the Darkness” Mahapatra portrays darkness, and suffering linked to it. He doesn’t say that there is light at the end of the tunnel. But, he reflects that when things are sordid and there is no hope, there is no beauty of the situation. As a representative poet of Odisha, he projects that people may not be happy, but they are content with all the changes including the phenomena, i.e. ecological and climatic. This is for the reason that the present cannot be wasted in the name of the past which was glorious and enjoyable. To revive our ecological and climatic dexterity it needs concerted effort although individual effort matters. Till the situation improves one should be content with whatever one has. So, Mahapatra teaches the reader the art of living. “Patience is the only weapon” (line 12) for Mahapatra. Hence, he has the ultimate realization: “Perhaps it grasps something else, / this hand of suffering, / perhaps only to grasp it firmly, a stone, / to fling it /all the farther” (lines 33-38).

In “Believing” Mahapatra thinks over life attaining a saturation. When the world is too much he is not turning to “solitude” (line 11). The poet believes that solitude also passes by with the movement of time. So, he can neither believe in solitude nor in anything idealistic. Further, his realization is that there is a limit to his enlightenment. So, the poet is “down to earth” (line 1). He cannot be dismissive of anything earthly also. He is more for the acceptance of life. “The riverbank scents with flowers for lovers/ to walk again. / A starving mother sells her child” (lines 7-8). As a poet Mahapatra stands with whatever life ultimately gives. His art is not all about ivory tower. He is also the true postmodernist who centres the margin. His believing is not related to imagination, it is rather steeped in reality. Besides the beauty of life, Mahapatra is also concerned with the stark reality of starvation. To feed oneself how one sells her baby is a matter of concern.

“A Tale to Begin With” is an autobiographical poem of Mahapatra. It gains more of meaning by way of reading after his death in 2023. What he speaks about himself turns out to be true even after his death. The location he speaks about holds a lot of memory: river *Kathjodi*, Christ college in Cuttack, in terms of season, “summer nights” (line 18), “cold winter skies”(line 34) and “Durga Puja”(line 64) of Autumn etc. Mahapatra’s ‘present’ is in search of the ‘past’ which was full of freshness and active participation. He was well-known to everyone who was down-to-the-earth at that point of time, although not known to the people of higher strata of society. Even the seasons knew him well. With climate change and environmental pollution, he missed the serenity of the seasons: “ / The monsoon rain could easily point him out/ And even the mild misty mornings of December;/.....” (pages 77-78). He gives expression to his displeasure over climate change and ecological degradation deftly. His is a holistic vision in which each and every phenomenon is connected to each other. Whatever is lost to past is revived by the poet in “present” in the form of poetry. The loss he gives expression to comes up well in artistic form to give impression that nothing is lost as long as memory is alive. The usefulness and the importance of memory is well-articulated by Mahapatra. Its depth and mesmerizing effect is explained by Hodgkin and Radstone.

Moreover, implicitly to assent a therapeutic relationship between past and present would imply returning to a model of memory in which memory speaks for truth: there was an event, it is remembered (painfully), it must be spoken in order to defuse it.

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In “A Hot May Afternoon” Mahapatra portrays Odisha with all its imposing effects related to summer. There is the rise of mercury every year: “the river’s/ burning sands” (lines 8-9). It is not just confined to the exterior. Unlike the previous years, the heat affects the life within the enclosure too. It is the memorable summer of the past that for the poet acted as “lover’s breast” (line 12) which brings in its trail the scathing effect of climate change. The poet without looking down upon it considers this as the “First Book/ of an untouched life” (lines-14-15). A new experience comes over because of such change. The poet keeps cool when such a situation arises. The way the poet remains undisturbed, it gives a hint to the readers that one can understand and experience things better with calmness and detachment.

“Playing the Magician” is a poem of conflict between being civilized and neanderthal. The poet wishes to be saved from being sandwiched from the chaos of life by some magic. He is aspiring to be innocent and neanderthal. The poet implicitly speaks about the planet when it was exuberant and full. He has already come across that state and has a good memory of it.

The poet gives the image of evening to the sordid state of things in the poem, “Evening”. He creates an atmosphere of desolation and frustration by using a set of images: “ A loose wind plays far out into the leaves” (line 3). The atmosphere intensifies with a sense of fear and loneliness: “ All night something cries- a solitary cricket?” (line 5). Mahapatra describes his own existence of aging and senility which stands contrasted with the outer world.

He has been growing older parallelly with the planet he has been living on. The planet is also getting older and exhausted. He is, however, not pessimistic of the future: "Tomorrow takes its time" (line 15). The poet has an inner delight in the entire articulation which he shares with the readers.

In the poem, "Story" Mahapatra speaks about love which is diminishing these days. Love grows with innocence. But "innocence dissolves" (line 9). As love now has diluted, what the poet is left with is his memory of love in the past: "This middle/ of my breath which cannot change my memory. /Only the past leans out. What else is there?" (lines 12-14).

The poem "Uneven Travel Guide" states that we can view the country unevenly. Whatever is happening in the country is not up to our expectation. It is not just a stagnation. Things are rather so much related to each other that even a small phenomenon hampers the entire world. Although in the poem Mahapatra doesn't speak about ecology and climate change, his verse depicts that he is deeply concerned with ecological degradation in a broad way. His image of "bamboo" (line 14) stands tall as this is what one comes across in many of his poems: " The shadows of bamboo leaves/ in our courtyard appeared as though / they were dragged over the sofa where we sat./ Each happening, each memory, that comes out/ wasn't just his own, or mine, but the world's" (lines 15-19). In "Eager for Love", Mahapatra repents for not being the way he is supposed to be. If love is the matter, so much of glamour in life is also required. This is not just the question of what is right and wrong. This is rather a practice towards which we tilt. That's what he realizes:" If I had lived under the same simple rules,/ the shadows of my desires wouldn't have/ climbed all over me on their hands and Knees; "(lines 5-7). Love, in fact, can never be parochial. It includes everything. One loves all living beings and nature. With love everything turns positive. Sustaining ecology even is part of the bliss such as love. "After the Death of a Friend" brings realization to the poet when we've a huge loss in life. Past remains empty. Past with all its delight and glory is meant for yearning. Here the death of a friend is none other than the past with all its natural energy which is already erased from the earth. The present is arid and dull. It is only the past which has not passed, but remains concrete in the poet's consciousness: " A slow-moving ray of sun-light walks me backward/ to a past turned magical by the virtue of its emptiness,/this past of myself that never fails to embrace us "(lines 21-23).

Mahapatra puts forth the realization of life in the poem, "The End of Something". We're no more ourselves. We're dead as individuals . We're fully in to something which is not natural. In this process we've lost our sensitivity and ceased to be human. We're far away from the enjoyment of things which are natural around us: "Under the dim cry of the dawning light,/who knows, you might even have died" (lines 15-16).

"Uneven Catalog" speaks about the harmony with which the *santhals* live amidst nature. Since nature is tattered now, they are also in distress. It is not just the distortion of nature, but also the mutilation of ecology and climate which has hampered the human existence on the planet. The *santhals* the poet refers to are into some one's mistake without any fault of their own: " all their lives, not the ground they possessed;/ the wrongness of the world they were in" (lines 15-16).

By "Season of Memory", the poet understands the pattern of memory. Memory for Mahapatra is an alternative to reality. What is memory today was a reality in past. That is why the poet speaks: ".....I feel this river/ flow past , this hope where I lead/the other life" (lines 2-4). Added to this discourse is Mahapatra's poem "About My Father's plot to Get Home". The poet contrasts his father's innocent and immaculate world with that of the modern world. He doesn't want the mire and perversion of the contemporary world to make the home of his dream vandalized.

He , in fact, looks forward to a life of simplicity which ought to be nature-based where coordination, not subordination should be the law. Arya Singh, one of the critics of the poet supplements Mahapatra's philosophy with empathy and understanding.

Mahapatra emphasises the interdependence of all living thing and the pressing need for environmental stewardship with striking images and meaningful symbolism. Finally his poetry urges the readers to reevaluate their relationship with the environment and work towards a sustainable future by acting as a potent reminder of the fragile balance that exists between people and nature.

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History for Mahapatra has a life of its own which is ageless. The memory of Kalinga War still haunts the poet. It was a turning point in the life of emperor Asoka when thousands of Odias were massacred. From that time onward, after embracing Buddhism, Asoka was transformed from Chandasoka to Dharmasoka. The river Daya is in the memory of the poet. Besides the inscriptions on the walls of Sanchi Stupa, emperor Asoka built in memory of the people killed, the poet is enthralled by the brooding river and the sun, calmly participating in the historicity of the place, "goes into clouds" (line 5). The poet with all equilibrium responds to the ancient monument and the glory constituted both of history and nature. It is the nature over there with calm and quiet surrounding adds a magnificence to the historical relic. With devastation of nature during the present time, the entire scenario is changed. The poet's artistry would've taken a different direction. The poet is full of remorse for the apathy that people have towards the ancient monument and their lackadaisical attitude towards the ecology and environment. Human endeavour doesn't have any long-term vision. The marks of beauty and health do not last long because of the poor understanding of the humans. This serves as the background of the poem, "Idyll". It is the happiness which is at stake because of the non-supportive environment: ".../..where it can't measure that uncertain joy we steal/ for ourselves, lost in the honkings in the emptiness" (lines 18-19). The poem, "In This Country" adds to the serious thinking of the readers as the rivers, the poet speaks about, are not as vibrant as before. The poet has a good memory of the river like Mahanadi which is large and awful. The sagacity of the river doesn't last long because of human ambition and indifference. No one realizes the long-term contribution of the rivers to human life. While talking about the imposing beauty of nature which is throttled by ecological degradation each and every moment in Odisha, the poet gives description of a park in the poem, "Riverside Park, New York". There is a beautiful and dexterous portrayal of tea gardens in the poem, "Like the Blue Haze of Faraway Tea Gardens". The reality of the portrayal doesn't exist anymore at present. So, the poet builds up an alternate world to enjoy. The poet feels the death and non-existence of the individual in each and every moment. That's what he gives expression to in "A Missing Person". A person who is not lost can be assertive and give leadership in positive direction. Such people can keep the planet free from toxin, healthy and cheerful. The poet deliberately speaks about life which is natural and unnatural both. In each poem he depicts the recession of natural cover and overpowering of the planet by catastrophe and devastation. That gets expressed in "I Hear My Fingers Sadly Touching an Ivory Key" also. In "A Hint of Grief", the poet visualises Odisha with rain and hopes that with the yield of more of crops people will come out of hunger. The effect of time is felt more than before. As long as time passes by smoothly one doesn't feel its bone. But the moment we experience climate change, time is transformed to "Bone of Time" which is one of the poems of Mahapatra. The way we move is rather bumpy, instead of becoming smooth. "The autumn night struggling with its breath" (line 2) indicates that the cycle of season is displaced. We hardly realize that until and unless its effect affects us in the form of natural disasters, we hardly take it seriously. Tom Cohen reflects Mahapatra's thought and simplifies it in the following lines.

The ecological crisis is nothing but the sudden turning around of someone who had actually never before looked into the future, so busy was He extricating Himself from a horrible past. ...[T]his hero [is] fleeing His past so fiercely that He cannot realize—except too late—that it is precisely his flight that has created the destruction he was trying to avoid in the first place.

(qtd. in Cohen 27)

There is an intimate relationship between historical relics and the season. This is evident in the poem, “Relationship”. Odisha is a state of historical monuments and sights. The way Mahapatra depicts season alongside the monuments, it gives the impression that this is a relationship which holistically makes Odisha: “.....the colossal temple had crumbled in the unknown past,/on to the sandy bank of a vanished river/ which once had dominated the heart of the wind” (lines 64-66). The time-monument interface is remarkable here. If the temple crumbled, the river also had vanished indicating that time is a factor responsible for it. The unconscious side of the whole discourse is that we have been contributing to this unholy phenomenon of the dying of the river. This remains as an unconscious in the psyche of the Odias. Mahapatra’s statement replete with memory is noteworthy. He gives a realistic touch to the present state of affairs in relation to the past he has already lived.

To Odisha, to this land in which my roots lie by past and in which lies my beginning and my end where the wind knees over the grief of river Daya and where the waves of Bay of Bengal fail to reach out today to the twilight soul of Konark. I acknowledge my debt and my relationship.

(qtd. in Samal 60)

“In Village Mythology” depicts the common women who hardly receive God’s grace indicating that God is more of a myth than a reality. Moreover, God is a male which is based on typical male-construction. Because, the woman Mahapatra speaks about is not only steeped in poverty, but also vulnerable to the desire of men. Her chastity and womanhood is taken for granted. She has been raped more than once. Life comes so heavy on her that she has no time to focus on it as she has to struggle for survival each and every moment. Mahapatra portrays this against the backdrop of rain and sea. The transition that takes place in the life of women is more of a degradation than upgradation. So also at macro level, there is an overall deterioration of the climatic condition. People forget the existence of the sea even. The rain which has a magic of its own to mesmerize is also far from being enjoyed by people. In fact, nature is close to us. It becomes an interpreter and symbol of human mind and mood. Nature is inseparable from humans. But, how come it is separable now from us? In “More in Dreams Than in the Death” Mahapatra integrates nature with human life with all its sorrows and death. Now with nature grown fragile, human life evades interpretation and culminates in obscurity. It becomes purposeless and hollow. In “A Rain of Rites”, human life stands in contrast with nature in terms of “rain” (line 1) and “beach” (line 6). Nature makes life easy and lofty: “Numbly I climb to the mountain-tops of ours/where my own soul quivers on the age of answers” (lines 11-12).

The poet gives vent to his sorrow related to his son’s death on 10th March 2018 in the poem “The Hour”. The suitable images drawn from nature are “a patch of grass”(line 10), “shadow in the air” (line 15) and “.....pigeons/fly free.....”(lines 13-14) etc. There is an atmosphere of seriousness giving the impression that with death one belongs to “another world” (line 15) of which we’ve poor understanding.

In “Possessions” the poet talks about the art of the poets, politicians and himself. He also talks about his parents. He gives an image to our complex living in association with frustration and a part of life which we’ve inherited: “The trees never move, /yet seasons reason through their branches. /The worn-out faces of India/ holds the weak eyes of dumb/solitary poets/who die alone,/silenced by the shapelessness of life alive”(lines 61-66).

In “The Hollow Mouth” Mahapatra focuses on the pain and pleasure of life. The poet has certain realizations of life because of which he says: “I realize more than half of my life is over” (line 1). He explains his own life, its complications and the corresponding realization through a set of images drawn from nature. The images like “morning mists” (line 1), “Soon it will be summer” (line-2) and “foggy dawn” (line 5) add to the delight and pleasure of life. Those images also hint at natural elements which are the balancing factors of life. Realization is more effective than communication. That’s what the poet understands of life. Language always doesn’t serve human purpose.

Darkness literally leads to invisibility. The poet may refer to darkness of life in the poem, “Steps in the Dark”. But, the other side of darkness is rather positive. Darkness obliterates what has already been written. Darkness rather gives a scope for a new beginning. In “God’s Night” the poet gives expression to the contours of life through “leaves of Summer” (line 3), “burdensome silence”(line 9) and “awesome wind”(line 4) etc. The said natural images are the breeding ground of hopes, aspiration and dream. Frustration is not the destination, it is rather the means of achieving something higher.

Poverty in Odisha in general and Cuttack in particular is portrayed by Mahapatra with all its realistic forms in the poem, “The Lost Children of America”. The poet writes about the lepers among other phenomena, who ironically are compared to the lost and marginalized children of America. Mahapatra dilutes the effect of such sordid portrayal by taking up the images of “dawn” (line 22), “unknown sea” (line 24), “rain” (line 5), “and grass and flower” (line 40) etc. He doesn’t want that the spirit of survival should be lost. The previous climatic condition of the planet was well-known to the poet. He interprets the present morbidity in that light. America here stands for advancement and vision.

In the poem, “Violence” Mahapatra puts innocence in terms of school children in relation to Mahatma Gandhi who is the epitome of non-violence and truth. The poet sprinkles poetry for violence to cool down which is noteworthy in the poem, “All the Poetry There Is”. Poetry alleviates suffering. If there is nothing but ashes, poetry could transform it to something inspiring and meaningful: “All the poetry there is in the world/appears to rise out of the ashes”(lines 1-2). The poet matures with ideas and wisdom in relation to death in the poem, “The Plan”. It is the fear that remains unconsciously. All life one fears and dies with it.

Mahapatra in all his poems uses complex imageries which are metonymic in nature. The images cannot be discussed in isolation. Those are to be analysed in relation to the phenomena around. Modern poetry is prosaic largely. Mahapatra as a true modern poet uses the imageries which not just serve the specific purposes, but also serve the purpose of explaining its relation to others. Ecological imbalance and corresponding climate change are not just the off-shoot of the devastation of nature, increase of population and industries, it also has its origin from attitudinal change because of utilitarian consideration at many levels of life. The past of Odisha in relation to present serves as a basis of the discourse. Mahapatra’s use of memory is rampant in his poetry. One finds it in the portrayal of multiple fields like nature, landscape, historical relics, poverty, frustration and death etc. The significance of Mahapatra’s poems lies in showing, not telling. Hence, the discourse of ecology and climate change do not come alone. It rather comes up in a large field of referentiality for a holistic perception. While writing poetry Mahapatra is into a range of phenomena. One gets into the kernel and flavour of Odisha as whole. The reader is to use his/her insight for a clear perception.

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