

Social Ecology and Ecofeminism in the poems of Jayanta Mahapatra: An Ecocritical Study

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Abstract

'Ecocriticism' has been used as a tool to understand poems in an ecological perspective and discusses the author's works in a theoretical framework. 'Green Studies' have relentlessly demanded a balance in the ecosystem and an in-depth analysis of its justice rewarded, is proposed to understand environmental survival. Environmental Studies have been a revelation since the early twentieth century and it is also termed as 'Green Studies'. It was Cheryll Glotfelty, who coined the word 'Ecocriticism' in her seminal work *Introduction to Ecocriticism Reader* Social Ecology is an approach that highlights the impact of social rules and regulations on environmental sustenance. It also refers to the alarming crisis of the environment through deforestation, sexism and racism. Ecofeminism is one of the praxes of ecocriticism that views nature as an embodiment of the female body. It has helped the critics to view ecology from a feministic perspective. The ecocritical praxes has been probed in detail with the works of Jayanta Mahapatra- an Indo-Anglican writer from Orissa, India.

Key Words: Ecocriticism, Environmental Studies, Social Ecology, Ecofeminism, Power Politics, Encroachment

Introduction

Jayanta Mahapatra, as the son of a primary school inspector- Lamuel, was born on 22 October 1928, in Cuttack, Orissa. As the son of a great father, he got a good schooling and completed it from Steward European School. Then he graduated in Physics from Ravenshaw College. He then completed his post-graduation from Patna University. Later, he became a lecturer of physics in Ravenshaw College. During his lectureship, he found Runu, then a literature student, who fell in love with her. He married her, defying his parent's wishes which created a lot of family problems which he mentioned in many of his works. As writing was his first choice, he started his career by writing fiction. Later he turned his attention to poetry and started writing in his early forties. Even though it was late, at the age of forty-three, he published his first volume of poems in 1971. It was not only recognized in India but also gained much attention from the international literary circle. He was the first Indian poet to be awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1981 for his renowned work *Relationship*. He began his writings with the themes of possessiveness and love. Later, he dealt with the themes of sufferings, love for the past, identity, history, tradition and culture of Orissa. His childhood memories played a key role in his writings and employed imagery from his regional spaces.

Ecocritical History and its literary implication

Ecocriticism in general, is an ecological study and a term used to ponder the relationship between literature and earth's physical environment. Green criticism in England is also termed as Environmental criticism, a fast developing area of study of the interrelatedness between human beings and the natural environment. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm were the editors of *Introduction to the Ecocriticism Reader*, a collection of ground breaking works in the emerging field of ecology. Environmental critics assess how nature and the physical world are intertwined through literary texts. In a gender conscious and continuously changing world, these literary representations are not considered the key to create culture but it enhances the pace of building the transactions. It is evident in literary history, and studies begin to comprehend current attitudes towards the environment. As Glotfelty says:

“Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman”. (Glotfelty xix)

An earth centred movement is implemented in literary studies using an ecocritical perspective that probes connection of literature with the environment and argues that evolution of a society has its influence from nature. Apart from an argument of the linguists that language interactions and social elements are the deciding factors of a society's development, ecocritics negate and assert that they are only a part of the society. According to critics, it is nature and environment that greatly influence language and society which is why it is considered as a literary theory. Ecocriticism has established into many other aspects that probe nature and natural elements in the works of literature and identifies scholarly works done worldwide as its representations. Green Studies as a regional literature considers nature, contrasts in different places that are the main sources of thoughts and findings of authors of world literature. Different approaches and literary features are presented to comprehend the theory and works of ecocriticism, the relationship between nature and literature.

Social Ecology and its features

Social Ecology is one of the green praxis that is being discussed in detail with reference to certain aspects of societal problems of capitalism, social inter-dependable exchanges of humans in his poems, degradation of social norms in the society and the structured ethics of it. Hierarchical social structures, mindset of domination are also discussed. Ecofeminism has been analysed through the aspects of the effects of sexuality, race, ethnicity and class. It also discusses reproduction and authority, encroachment and power politics in the ecological milieu. Jayanta Mahapatra's *Collected Poems* celebrates poetic marvel elaborately with eighteen books, reading in an ecocritical way deserves attention as the works are mainly related to women, land, nativity, pain, segregation and many other areas of scrutiny.

Social structures and its impacts on the environment are discussed in detail with reference to specific aspects that relate closely to the inhabitants of the region. Reading poetry alleviates the

distanced connection with nature and engaging ecological aspects enhances a conscious way of conduct. Talking about the hierarchical structures and social disparities in the twenty-first century demands a dire need to have a change in the viewpoint and to disengage any destructive measures that could annihilate the stability and integrity of the existing community. Interconnection, exchange of resources and ideas remain feasible for wellbeing and farfetched motives guide the society enabling its faculties available for the ones who depend on it. Modern society has become challenging for those who seek a favourable way of living and protecting humanity. Poetry is laid as the guiding star which can instil the need of being a coexisting entity in this ecosystem. In *The Trail of Poetry*, the modern world is not sympathetic to any life; protection is a self-nurtured aspect as the doors of hope mostly refuse to open for life to flourish.

“Don’t let your life leave its hiding-place to search for a weapon
in order to protect yourself from life itself,
which refuses all the doors to open.

You have to check whether poetry
really becomes a cry for protecting man.” (Mahapatra 184-185)

Human intrusion in nature has a lasting impact in the system that a destructive notion is recommended to be rechecked at the earliest. In his poem *Vulnerable*, Mahapatra makes a self-critical statement that it was human beings who ‘disrobed’ the natural existence of earth and has done with the public knowledge that there has been no mutual understanding; an attempt to exploit the natural resources is evident. It is a painful act that remains unnoticed and ‘folded’ and used as a habit of smoking weeds.

Memories identify existence and knowing the thought processes is key to the sustenance and wellbeing in the society by making a feasible and palpable creature.

The realization in finding an identity is a need for the benefit of the inhabitants who are dealing with the fear of accommodating in the world, thinking of the future and spoiling the present scenario with sleepless nights, negates the assurance of an amicable exchange.

To secure an identity, strenuous efforts are taken to have a fruitful future by losing the self in the present. The subjective self identifies memories that have given him terrible experiences and are after him for a long time. All the deeds that lead to supposed wellbeing have haunted him throughout his life which stands as a hindrance in having a dependable exchange.

“I was torn between
the desire to know, and fear of knowing.

I didn’t realize I had to live in the future
in order to face the sleepless night of the present.” (Mahapatra 19)

Religious beliefs seem to have a feeble attempt to carve identities in the past.

People in the region attempt to find their own identities just by the belief and not by one’s own desire for survival. Criticism on one’s own desire to make them believe and find their identity, is a measure of dependability. The ‘faded initials’ are carved in the ‘bark’ that has no validity to maintain their quality and entitle them as significant. Belief systems

are on the edge of continuous denial of understanding and have a meagre base to withstand the priorities of engagements in the environment. It is the instability of comprehending one's own position and completely negates the logical perspective of considering one's own desires. Skepticism towards metaphysical magic, science and religion has separated the distanced self to have a continued healthy connection.

“the faded initials we had once carved
on the weak bark of our faith,
or the grief of finding oneself not chosen
by the object of one's desire;
the magic, the science and the religion
that had broken out
from the loneliness of the exiled self.” (Mahapatra 20)

The culture of Orissa had a lasting impact on the author's poetic career. His double identity as a Christian shaped his poems with alarming concerns of nature and the life forces involved. In his initial writing career, he was more concerned about the human conditions and nature supplemented his poetic thoughts. He wrote about the environmentally driven issues of Orissa and the landscape, rich with natural pigments which complements his drive for ecological affinity and the notion to protect and make it sustainable like in the past. Nature has an evocative tone and sensuous appeal as the life forces in it makes the beings in the ecology survive and nourish themselves. When his poetic career started to mature, a more concerned attribute developed and the description of nature came with reference to the human experience. In his poem *Summer*, Mahapatra lashes out the idea of societal discrepancies with reference to the unnatural actions of the mango tree dropping 'green' mango softly.

The future of a girl is being snatched and her growth stagnates in her tender age itself. A 'living green mango' shadows the end of a girl's dream in her tender ages that nobody cares for her future so much as the future of nature. The destiny of a girl and nature is unnoticed and her duties are unending: she lives in a world of 'rivalries' which in turn makes her away from her own home. The ecological well-being runs parallel with the fate of the girl relating the natural sustainability being snatched and troubled making it irrevocably damaged. The home thus becomes away from what it belonged to in the past. The demand of an ethical society has been the voice of social ecologists as they advocate that if the norms are structured properly, then the problems in the environment naturally gets alleviated. The poems offer the same idea in relation to the unbearable pressure exerted through which the concerns are being addressed. The reference of the tree and its sustenance is an issue to be noticed and solutions are provided with concern for protection. The description of his own pain of being a human and the effect that inflict on nature is identified in the manifestation of natural phenomenon in his poem *Pain*. The tree is so dark that it stands tall over the man-made fields that fail to produce leaves and buds. The new life has become impossible to flourish, grow and mature and struggles to spread its roots of

survival into the earth. The 'blood' here is the hard work to possess the land.

The growth has become so difficult that it toils by looking at the sky for a possible future. The time then offers a little bit of relief and is always good to be a part that spreads its branches under which a shelter is sought. Human intervention has stopped the natural growth of trees and has become so 'dark' that it even provides a shelter home for them. The trees still possess the most important leaves which always become an inspiration and search for understanding and knowledge which has been hidden by the clouds of catastrophes. Wondering about the reason that has made a hindrance to the sun of knowledge to return back from the sky, seems parallel to the environmental movement of global warming and ecological disasters. A deep concern about the inspiration in the form of 'eyes' has been covered by the polluted sky.

The interaction with nature has been a long communion in which inhabitants find their place on the earth with the support of nature. The poem *End of Rains in the Hills of Odisha*, gives a valid reason for where the human beings reside and how they make their sense of being in a structured society. In human history, they have flourished their life through agriculture and rain harvesting. Mention about the tribal folk who feel ecstatic by the rains, celebrate with their drums and dances. They are the abandoned folks depending on natural resources for their living. But the rejoicing of the tribes and their dance elevates their spirit of looking forward to a more dependable and structured sustenance. The identity of the tribal people is attributed with agriculture and survives as such as their progress is confined to the area of their interest. It is the seasonal changes that make them realize their work has more to be done during autumn. "And now, in a raging harvest,/ the tribe celebrates/in the drum-heavy rite of abandon and dance. (Mahapatra 32)

The poems are very critical towards the corrupt politicians and the situation that the nation faces. In the poem *Possessions*, the poet describes the social discrepancy and the irresponsibility of the people of the country. Society is shaped by individual wisdom and when politicians with power lack integrity, the country faces a tough time to recover from the upcoming disaster. The norms created by them spoil the control of the nation. Moreover, they will not be concerned about the starving children in numbers of thousands. The people who sit and write may watch this happening. Condemning people who stay passive and witness the mishap in the country, poem signals to act under emergency. The complacency of educated folks and the irresponsibility to correct the social structure are strongly reprehended.

In *Behind Closed Windows*, the role of myths in degrading the norms of society are conversed. The lives of the people have become reckless because of tenuous myths of the country. People fight each other in the name of stories and belief systems that a hope for a better future seems arduous. The wishes of not to treat the aesthetic experience of looking at the moon again and again with any 'malice' of the myths' leftovers are legitimized. Undeniably, the loss of reason in the midst of the sprouting myths affect the locale. The need for a strong society with human friendly social norms without the governance of

religion oriented myths are recommended; otherwise the society may degrade easily Mahapatra was deeply concerned and sensitive towards the rise of religious intolerance which itself is a disaster for a healthy society that he feels the myths create tremors around the world irrespective of developed or underdeveloped nations. In his poem *Late Autumn Afternoon*, he feels dejected by the incident of Malala, a fourteen year old girl, who was shot on her head by the extremists of her country. The society's thought process has been shattered and people started feeling insecure in the modern industrial world. Time has lost its 'life' or value at the time of being a hostage waiting to be executed by the extremists or when they took time to shoot the fourteen-year-old Malala without mercy. The poet criticizes the influence of myths that have taken the safe havens of the human being which in turn affects the complete existence. Later, the poem demands that there is no chance for time to exist as it has deluded when nature witnessed severe holocausts in the past which was unexpected and the sense of time falls apart like the petals of a jasmine flower that was fully blown.

Man is always demanding and prone to disrespect the words that he speaks and exhibits in front of the society. Anthropocentric approach has been a concern for all the environmentalists of modern society. The sarcasm that people exercise without any perspective of being respectful to nature and to the women in the society is well depicted in the poems. Humans demand everything for their obsessed incitements and speak like an authority on everything. The feeling of excitement about the discoveries and achievements are retrospective that the ideas are shattered from behind. As Mahapatra rightly says in his poem *Trying to Keep Still*:

“And in secret we hear again
man's bizzare demands, the terrible act of his owning,
and the unwary wind
drowning in the laughter breaking out behind him.” (Mahapatra 211)

The ecology is deeply affected by human intervention which is probed deeply by the social ecologists. Human discourse is sorted out to settle the issue of the environment. The striking issue highlighted is the thirst of power and the conquering nature confers as undisputable beings on the earth. Through blood-shed, the world has conquered many places where the environment is being polluted largely by human carcasses. The bloodshed of Kalinga warriors and the destruction inflicted in the natural surroundings are vividly pictured in the poem *Dhauri*, It highlights the anthropocentric attitude of massive invasion which led to battles and shed many lives.

As the authoritarian nature is evident in the world, environmental issues seem to persist for long. The poems highlight the history that maintains such assertive nature on the earth that they wage war against each other to prove their dominant existence. River Daya is thus a witness of the terrible wars that had happened in the past. Invasions and killings are to be viewed as an act of supremacy and a lack of consciousness. Issues of power is the outcome of the hierarchical attitude towards nature. Apart from the modern

industrial concerns, waging war against one another also directly affects the ecosystem and shatters its balance. Here the poem gives an alarm that the land has become so scary that it can make anyone cry out of fear. The dead silence of the place has a terrifying impact on the community nearby. “and this scarred land stares up with such hatred /that it makes one cry out as if under a blow.” (Mahapatra 362)

The poetry’s growth can be taken as ecological well-being which is far away from the mega structures involving construction sites, machines and buildings. The speaker in the poem hopes to get nurtured and supported by nature where humans actually belong. Poetry here is a tool to make mankind aware of the importance of livelihood in the right places than in the cities. It makes a correction method to place the race beyond the complexities of the modern world.

“Not a souvenir in a shop window,
That you would love it
Nurture it up from its diapers
For it to become a man.
For poetry, the world lives far away
Among machines, construction sites, board rooms.
Let it raise you right where you belong.” (Mahapatra 184)

Ecofeminism and its praxis

Ecofeminism scrutinizes the elements with regard to key concepts like woman and land parallelism, reproduction and authority, encroachment and power politics, gender stereotyping, effects of sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, heterosexual bias, revaluing science and the role of subjectivity and intuition, inherent hierarchical and patriarchal issues. Poems of Jayanta Mahapatra are subjected to pursue the praxis of ecocriticism and engage in discussing the women connected to nature which have been assumed for similar attributes.

Mature poems have an air of wisdom while describing the elements of nature and its connection with people living in. The poet often connects nature with that of a woman and her sufferings which enunciate the critics of ecofeminism. In his *Village Evening* 18 Mahapatra draws a picture of an idol laid under the foot of an old banyan tree which is visibly decayed and life withdrawing. The dying tree resembles the dreadful situation of Ahalya, a widow and her seven-year-old son, who has to do day long labors to fulfil the needs of the family. Here Ahalya is relieved of the absence of his father who is dead; not because she is not sad about it, but she is unable to meet the ends of her life with a meagre amount. The same is the situation of the old banyan tree and the decay of it is clearly a representation of women in the society as a weaker, helpless folk. She, like nature, is always destined to suffer and it has become a habit for Ahalya to make sacrifices for her child and feel guilty of the promises she keeps for her seven-year-old child. The ecology also is in such a depriving situation that it always has to sacrifice for

humanity and the dream for a better day remains at stake.

A sense of complacency and helplessness of a woman is comprehended in Mahapatra's *Sickles* and also echoes the call for the treatment of women in the society against a quiet and unquestioning mode of conduct. She is a ten-year-old girl who starts working in the paddy fields to cut the ripened grains and leaves back home with her sickles in her weak hands. The girls are not spared in the society nor the woman. They are treated as a machine to serve happiness, love and pleasure to man. The society demands such roles for her and she is bound to fulfil them as they are supposed to be the slaves of the male dominant society. Despair and desolation are the results of their service. The general concept of making a woman under a man's shadow reverberates the attitude of human beings with nature. Man tries to show his sovereign approach with egotistic inducements. The woman in *Sickles* portrays a typical nature of village women and their livelihoods.

"The day's last light

Surprises us, leaving everyone

Suddenly on an endless, desolate shore.

And a small desire to make love then" (Mahapatra 281)

Plight of women and girls are lamented in the poem *Relationship*. Women are pictured as a mother and giver and are tired and weak like nature. The child is wildly ready to suck mother's 'dry and drooping breasts'. In every instance, Mahapatra's mothers are tired, old, helpless, passive and voiceless. She has been subjugated and her plight is pathetic to the level that she does not have anything to say about her tiredness or her choice. Nature seems to be a parallel to her plight, expecting everything good for the ecosystem, but the deeds of humans always hurt it in some way or the other. The feeling of goodness here is a sign of hope and is presently experiencing under 'the fierce winds of summer dust'. The patriarchy enjoys the world reading the valiant stories from the epics without bothering the plight of a woman who is a mother and the world around her is with people who look for selfish motives seeking lust and other excitements available to them.

"These nights of the growing moon

fill us with the feeling of good;

that is exactly what you wished for us,

didn't you, father?

So our courage would be swept away

by the fierce winds of summer dust?" (Mahapatra 470)

Race of women are haunted in the world as they creep into every relentless attempt to surpass authoritarian supremacy. It is a tireless issue devoid of any consideration in any perspectives that soothe them in the near future. Mahapatra never fails to tackle this disharmony, reiterating issues throughout his poems. In his *Village Mythology*, he points out the destiny of a woman who lives in a village as segregated and cornered. The village girl Suna is pictured as a faithful with all the village elements attributed to such

qualities of appreciation. She is destined to succumb to her husband hastily every night to satisfy his needs. The poem is so critical about her creeping gesture at night and embraces the torture only by being a woman. She goes through the path of life, death and beyond by the rape she undergoes every night.

The identity of women is questioned and her destiny is being traced from just being a village woman who silently bears all the sufferings as being in a race of selflessness. Mahapatra condemns in his poem that her destiny never finds any space. She is always in a locked state where she never gathers the reality of the world. Her only way to educate herself is through her children who go to school and read their books in front of her.

A typical Indian woman is pictured as a testimony of segregation in the name of sexuality and race. She is allowed to learn 'secretly' than to have a formal education like the other men in the community. Her desire to learn is being compared to an anchor dropped in a sea without water. Her voices and wishes are never heard and appreciated. Critics view the social status of Indian women as being a race who are destined only to sing songs of Gods, who remain silent to her prayers with a few consolations that are truly irrelevant for her sustenance. The poem strongly argues the relevance of equality and speaks against the racist and sexual contempt of women.

The complacent nature of mankind and treatment of women in the household are evident in the poem *Trying to Keep Still*. Male authority is obvious that women have become used to the situations of love making which is a dying experience for them. They still dream about a new life or a better one even though their eyes are tired and have dark circles around it. The society's demands make the circle visible and follows her life and dreams.

"We've become used to poor relics of deeds undone
to the body's fear of dying on rainy afternoons
and to you, woman of my long memory,
where you dream still with impudent eyes
while society draws its fateful circle around you again." (Mahapatra 211)

In his *Trying to Keep Still*, Mahapatra records the tired earth and women are fed up with the disaster that has been inflicted on them. The earth is laid vacant and nothing could be done there as it is destroyed by the burning of the rice fields where people and nature bear the same pain. The former loses their fathers and latter, its integrity. Even though time has lost its control; human beings are no more respectful towards anything in nature and the society that they live in. There is a surge of widows and fatherless children in the place and the widows extinguish the brightness of the day light.

Ecological perspectives are further nourished and dealt with in the ways of ecofeminism which should be appreciated well in the scenario of the global ecological crisis and the atrocities that pervades the women in the society. In his *The Woman Who Wanted to be Loved*, Jayanta Mahapatra delineates the current woman's status in the society who dreamt once in the past for happiness and freedom. The woman here has two

analogies: One is the mother which is rain and the daughter and the other, a human attribute. They are destined to work hard and also bear the tears for the family. The love she gets in return has always haunted her like a ghost. Here she sheds her life and becomes a part of earth along with water and grass. She has completely taken the manifestation of nature and is found among them. The place of a woman in the society is considered negligible that she finds solace from her sufferings when the rain comes. It sweeps away her sweats and tears along with it at her time of restlessness and pain. Mahapatra laments women's suffering blatantly to oppose the patriarchal domination in the society.

Women and nature are the bearers of life, either in the means of productivity or conceiving a child. Mahapatra presents the insanity of the condition of nature and that of a woman in his poem. 'Village wife' is narrated as a connoted resemblance of nature's compassion and love towards the living things on the earth. Only a village wife has been attributed these qualities so as to nurture her offspring even though she bears sufferings and atrocities from the society. Mahapatra in his poem *Guavas* lashes out men's authority to destroy the existence of another living being and also a village girl's plight to survive only as her children's mother by selling her own body to the people in the village. In either way they have been an integral part in protecting children so as nature protects its offspring on earth.

Exertion of power and domination are the most common practices of a patriarchal society. Even in modern society people hesitate to see individuals as human beings of equal opportunity and having equal dignity. Jayantha Mahapatra has been raising his voice against this disparity through his poem *Crossing the River* which depicts the plight of a woman who has been molested and realizes the atrocity happens in a forest that happens to be the safest haven for the culprits. The girl is being taken to a forest and has been assaulted by men that the 'silent trees' only stay as mute spectators. In most of the events like this, the men encroach into the female space and apply their power on her to satisfy their pagan needs. Mahapatra also points out that the deities in the forest are also helpless in the situation. She remains helpless and finds no way to escape from their wrath. Mahapatra questions the molesters' plot for this savagery and questions their God's omnipresence. They have already inflicted shame on her integrity and also challenged the silent Gods of the forest. Mahapatra here presents a God who remains passive and silent, unable to protect her under mishap and the privilege that the molesters get from this reverberates the same attitude of the modern man far deferred from the ideals of being a human, exploits nature and its surroundings without any consent and care from the environment.

"What else could they want,
besides plotting her every shame,
and abetting
the weakness of their gods?" (Mahapatra 3)

Conclusion

The poet argues for a society where women and nature are protected and considered equal and also a society where people do not imbibe a system that affects the stability of natural environments whether it is in the way of technological advancements or in the industrial methods. Mahapatra asserts both the aspects for a much developed thought process to stabilize nature and fight against the ongoing destructive measures in the name of social development.

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