

Search for Self in the Contemporary Indian Poetry A Study of Selected Poems of Kamala Das and Jayanta Mahapatra

MITA BISWAS

The 'search for self' in Indian culture begins with the Vedas in c. B.C. 1500 through Brāhmaṇas and Upaniṣads wherein it becomes a major concern for sages through meditation, and for ordinary mortals it progresses as a dialectic in terms of various relationships of man and woman and God. In the *Bhakti* cult which is supposed to have started right from the times of the *Svetāśvatara Upaniṣad* and which had a great following in the south, eventually spread its wings in the rest of India. By the fifteenth century, it culminated in the poetry of Dadu, Kabir, Farid and in the great Vaiṣṇava movement in Bengal of the fourteenth century under the impact of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. In all these developments one may encounter different approaches in exploring the 'self'. The Vedic approach seems to have been dynamic and extroverted, as it celebrated man's relationship with nature, cosmos, earth, sky, etc. The Upaniṣadic view, in comparison, was more inward and introspective. Yet another approach was devotional which postulated itself in relation to God and then to mankind. It is not difficult to encounter manifold expressions interrogating 'self' in Indian literature in general, and in poetry in particular, depending upon the aptitude, upbringing, experience and exposure of the poet concerned.

Radhakrishnan (1957: 91) states:

...when the individual withdraws his soul from all outward events, gathers himself together inwardly and strives with concentration, there breaks upon him an experience, secret, strange and wondrous, which quickens within him, lays hold on him and becomes his very being.

He deeply believes in the spiritual experience rather than the mere pursuit of the scriptures. All seers in different climates and ages testified to the certitude and the illuminating, transforming potency of spiritual experience. To Radhakrishnan, absolutism is intrinsically superior to theism, and as a result of this attitude, Hinduism, though making room for devotion to a personal god, certainly regards the quest for the Brahman as the highest form of piety.

There is little gainsaying the fact that the good of the individual consists in self-realization. Man is a unique and a typical being. His essence lies in raising himself from animal level to divine status. The self in man is the expression of his spirit. It is the product of higher integration in the being of man. As man moves ahead on the way to self-realization, he transcends all discords and difficulties that impede his evolution. 'The end of man', further says Radhakrishnan (1976: 98) 'is to let the spirit in him permeate his whole being, his soul, flesh and effections. He attains his deepest self by losing his selfish ego. In a nutshell, self-justice is perfect being, perfect consciousness and perfect freedom, *Sat, Cit* and *Ānanda*'. Self is, indeed, a variegated term. Poets, writers, artists have different definitions about what they think as constituting the self. The quest for the self is difficult, hazardous and the routes are circuitous and meandering. The search for identity at the end of the twentieth century is inspired by a feeling of alienation, which is related to psychological and physical exile or both: psychological, as when a colonial power determines the identity; or when modernism upsets the balance between old and new; and physical as when a major source of identity, the soil or the homeland is removed from the people.

The question arises as to why should any one be interested in the 'self' of a particular poet unless it evokes sympathetic responses of recognition in other 'selves'. The poetic process is both creative and critical: it is basically the sudden understanding of the truth which has gained universal significance through the all-conquering power of imagination. As long as poet's ego remains a personal ego, it cannot attain significance unless there is a mystical expansion of the self. In such a state language remains tentative, broken, abrupt and inconclusive. As the poet grows and develops beyond the limits of his constricted ego, he transcends the marginal self so that the individual 'self' celebrates other 'selves' and finds a language of common speech which is charged with the laser beams of passion, thought and sensuousness. Then the poet's voice becomes the voice

of the common reader who is born, who suffers and dies, only to be born again as one of the colours of the rainbow which joins the two horizons of sensibility: the thought and the passion.

The origins of Indian poetry in English are dim and shrouded before Henry Derozio. Before Indians could write poetry in English, two related pre-conditions had to be met. First, the English language had to be sufficiently Indianized to be able to express the reality of the Indian situation, secondly the Indians had to be sufficiently anglicized to use the English language to express themselves.

Indian poetry in English began in Bengal, the province in which the British first gained a stronghold. In addition, this poetry was largely an urban phenomenon, centred in Calcutta. In fact, for the first fifty years, it was confined entirely to a few Bengali families like Dutts and Ghoshes who were residents of the city. Because India was part of the British Empire, Indian poets in English were not given a separate national identity. But after Independence it was natural that Indian writers' struggle began for literary freedom with a special identity for Indian literature in English. Life is often regarded as a mirror either reflecting the reality of life or reflecting the writer's self. In the latter, the writer expresses his 'self' through his literary work, lets his own image, feeling, and emotion be reproduced in the 'mirror'. It is a process of transforming the subjective into the objective, so that the writer can identify himself just as one identifies oneself in a mirror.

Identity may be defined as a process of creative self-realization. It has been established that to create an identity is part of the essential business of an artist. It is the perennial sustaining creative and abiding force of an artist. The poet must belong, must find his roots and endeavour to search for the self in order to define himself. The post-1960 Indian English poetry began to exist independently with a stamp of originality and authenticity. Kamala Das, A.K. Ramanujan, Jayanta Mahapatra, Nissim Ezekiel, Som P. Ranchan and many others published their books of verse in the same decade and onwards. In the last forty years it has been recognized as a vital body of literature in the realms of 'Commonwealth Literature' and 'Third World Literature' written in English today.

The predicament of an alienated individual, his rootlessness and lack of belonging have been explicitly delineated insightfully in Indian English fiction. It is intriguing that the contemporary Indian poet has been left to himself. The modern poet, like a modern fiction writer, is also confused, frustrated, disintegrated and an estranged

man. Angst-ridden and utterly hopeless, he finds life infinitely vast without any proper interlinkage to hold it together from falling apart. Painfully aware of his precarious position, the poet experiences severe limitations in today's setup and an acute terror of the society augmented by its randomness and isolation.

The sensitive poet is affected not only by the estranged realities of life and landscape around him but turns to the turbulent inscape desperately searching for his self, rootedness, the essence of his being. He must find his distinctive private voice and that comes naturally, meandering through the labyrinths of his selfhood. The intensity of the pursuit gets accelerated when the poet is a product of the conflicts and reconciliation of two divergent cultures. Haunted by a sense of loss and estrangement, the Indian English poet is locked up in a Hamletian dilemma. In a world of ineptitudes, quest for one's identity, the search for one's roots and the discovery of self and the affirmation of his belonging become indispensable anchors in the poetic outbursts of contemporary poets.

In this paper I have taken two living contemporary poets, Kamala Das and Jayanta Mahapatra who begin on a note of despondency but reach spiritual resurrection as they seem to believe that the only redeeming feature for the survival of mankind is in the knowledge of self through spiritual evolution.

Kamala Das is a major Indian woman poet in English, hailing from Malabar, a coastal region of South India. There can be no better way to introduce her than in her own words (Das 1973; 36):

....I am Indian, very brown, born in
Malabar, I speak three languages, write in
Two, dream in one.....

.....
I had a house in Malabar
and a pale green pond.

I did all my growing there. (Das 1973: 36)

She appeared on the poetic horizon like a meteor streaking across the sky juxtaposed against the cliché ridden sentimental poetry of the earlier era. Her raw, uninhibited and unconventional poetry came like a gust of wind blowing away the wispy remnants of the bygone times. She chose the confessional mode of writing and emerged as the new voice of poetry. Confessional poets are the primary continuators of a tradition that attempts to incarnate significance and beauty out of a terror of our modern condition which is marked

by a retreat into privatism and a progressive alienation of the artist from the society. Emily Dickinson once called publication "the auction of the mind", but today many writers regard such psychological self-probing as the soul's therapy. This mode of writing was developed by Robert Lowell and made their own by John Berryman, Snodgrass, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. Confessional writing can be traced to Shakespeare's soliloquies, Wordsworth's autobiographical musings and Browning's dramatic monologues. Whereas with Romantics poetry had been a spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions, Kamala Das uses poetry as literal self-exposure, the baring of the soul and stripping off the mask so that the innermost thoughts and deepest emotions are laid bare, private and sexual humiliations come out in the open, and in her sufferings, in her torment and in her anguish she becomes one with the reader. A glimpse at her poetry reveals the genuine core of pain

I must let my mind striptease
I must extrude
Autobiography. (Das 1973:5)

Confessional poetry is cathartic in its effect because it ventilates the sorrows of the self, unleashing psychological pressures, thereby acting like a balm on private miseries. Its therapeutic effect acts, like an emotional purgative, purging the self of suffering and resulting in ultimate tranquillity and security.

The neglected childhood, the failure of her marriage, and dejection and disappointment about the concept of true love nurtured her muse, which gushed forth with its lava of pain, misery and grief. The two main themes of Kamala's poetry are love and the woman's identity and through them comes the woman's voice. Love has certainly been the perennial theme of poetry but its handling by the woman poet has a distinction of its own, a flavour and sensitivity not to be found in the man's love poetry. The second theme of identity can be discerned through her poems as she makes a discovery of the multiple levels of paradoxes through which the self passes in order to define, authenticate and validate its total involvement in the affairs of life. These paradoxes such as, female-male, physical/sensual-immoral, worldly-divine, real-mystical, subjective-objective, gynocentric-phallogocentric, mundane-ideal, fettered-liberated help in shaping the vision of life. Self-assertion involves self-knowledge and self-knowledge is the knowledge of one's human identity.

The crux of Kamala's poetry is a search for an identity. In this

process of self-probing she oscillates between her nostalgic past and nightmarish present. Past is symbol of security, love and freedom and present stands for insecurity, pretensions and bondage of society. Her poetry, therefore, tends towards suicide, death and decay because the entire world for her is a manifestation of her own disturbed consciousness. For her, writing becomes a 'compulsion neurosis'. Her private angst creates this storm which finds an outlet in the outburst of soulful poetry, 'my grief fell like drops of honey on the white sheets of my desk'.¹

I also know that by confessing
by peeling off my layers
I reach closer to the soul
and,
to the bone's
supreme indifference. (Das 1973:7)

She had looked for fulfilment and security in her marriage but was faced with total despair experiencing rejection, jealousy and bitterness. 'I grew old suddenly and my face changed from a child to a woman's and my limbs were sore and fatigued'.⁵ When the marital walls became prison walls choking and smothering her, it was then that she looked inwards searching for herself, for her suspended identity. She embarks on an inner voyage of an awareness beyond the skin's lazy hungers to the vortex of her hidden soul.

Who are you? I ask each and everyone,
the answer is within, it is I. (Das 1973: 27)

Elsewhere she wishes to negate all relationships in the quest of 'Self'. Her desire is to break free from the pessimism that threatens to lay siege around her thereby annihilating her identity and individuality.

I shall some day leave, leave the cocoon
You built around me...
I shall some day take
Wings, fly around, as often petals
Do, when free is air. (Das 1973: 28)

She tries to rationalize her quest and speculates and reaches the conclusion that her true being did not exist in a tradition or philosophy but in herself as a writer. Through the dreams of warm climes of Malabar, her home state, memories of her grandmother, the inherited

Nalapat House, her Nair heritage and her Dravidian skin, she resurrects herself like a phoenix out of ashes to remain afloat in life. At times she sees her missing identity in her newborn son Jaisurya. Her pursuit for an ideal lover ends with the quest of the mythical figure of Ghanshyam. The Radha-Krishna syndrome is associated with the progress of the poet and can be perceived in her later works.

In an article, Kamala Das wrote, 'After meeting Krishna each moment of my life became meaningful. I looked for the beautiful Krishna in every man. Every Hindu girl is in reality wedded to Lord Krishna'.² In the glow of spiritual awakening, her personality undergoes a total transformation. Floundering till now in the sea of life, the poet looks upon Krishna as an anchor, a safe harbour where the ship of her life finally comes to rest. She looks upon him as a saviour who can shield her, protect her and be there whenever she needs him. Her urge for a lover, a mate, an ideal husband comes full circle as in the poem 'Shyam O Ghanshyam'.

Shyam O Ghanshyam

You have like a fisherman cast your net in the narrows
of my mind

You have like a koel built your nest in the
Arbour of my heart

My life, until now a sleeping jungle is at last astir with music.

You lead me along a route I have never known before... (Das
1976: 62)

A sense of peace engulfs her tortured soul and with a fervent zeal she surrenders herself. Her tensions are channelised into devotion and calm surrounds her like an aura. With Krishna and in Krishna she finds herself, the self she has been seeking as her battered identity metamorphosises into an ideal union with Shyam, in divine form, when the physical transcends and reaches the ultimate, the spiritual.

Free from the lust of human bondage, I turned to
Krishna. I felt that the show had ended and the
auditorium was empty. Then He came, making a
quiet entry. What is the role you are going to play
I asked Him. Your face seems familiar. I am
not playing any role, I am myself, He said. In the
'Old Playhouse' of my mind, in its echoing hollowness
His voice was sweet. He had come to claim me
ultimately. (Das 1976: 185)

Therefore, it becomes evident that Kamala tried to reach the goal of discovering her 'Self' via many avenues of introspection, reflection and connectivity to others in her hazardous journey of confession. Through her, we see the evolution of a woman from being a teenage bride to an adulteress, to a mother figure, and finally in her role of Radha or Mirabai, questing for divine love.

Let us follow up this description now with a critique of Jayanta Mahapatra.

Jayanta Mahapatra, the Sahitya Academy Award winner in 1980 for his epical work *Relationship*, is a strikingly original voice emanating from Orissa. His deep-seated allegiance to his birthplace is the outcome of a quest for identity and roots. Mahapatra began to write poetry at the age of forty with his first book of poems *Close the Sky, Ten by Ten* (1971) and had published ten books of verse within the space of fifteen years. The blazing path, that he seared across in the history of Indian English poetry, is all the more astonishing because he came from a scientific background, and started writing poetry very late in life when 'most poets would have... shelved their creation in a drawer'.³

Mahapatra seems to have found a voice and a medium entirely by the force of a surging need within him to express and relate to his own inner self. He is on record claiming that he is an Oriya poet who incidentally writes in English. In the last few years he has moved to his native tongue—translating from and writing verse in Oriya. Contrary to his contemporaries, Mahapatra shows few signs of recognizing the inherent conflict of the Indian religious sensibility, militating against the tongue of its expression.

Jayanta like all mortals is afraid of death, afraid of the death of language, afraid of oblivion and therefore continually laced through his poems is his search for his identity, the search for self, the desire to establish himself so that the sands of time do not erase his name and fame. He feels trapped in the whirl of his ancestral lineage and, therefore, time and again, he questions the existence of his being. The alienation caused by his grandfather's conversion into Christianity and his own English language education by British teachers voices anguish within him. He never lays open his emotions but smoulders below the surface. The guilt of his conversion and the barrier of language bar him from baring his soul and so he hides behind his self-made barriers of isolation. Orissa landscape is a strong presence in his poetry and breeze of the East flows through his poems. He

feels astounded when the saffron clad priest questions him, 'Are you a Hindu?' The turbulence within him rages on and he further retreats within, searching and trying to discover his real origins, his roots. Where is his real emergence? Should he follow the dictates of his heart or the codes of laid down conduct? He tries to unravel the mysteries of his existence, thereby isolating himself and hiding behind a self-imposed facade of silence. He feels a loner and like a hermit or a sage he meditates in isolation, thus calming himself. Silence is an obsession with Mahapatra and like the Buddha he seeks contentment and peace through silence. On his quest to the discovery of his emergence he mingles the personal with the historical. He searches and wishes to unravel his racial past. In the poem 'Relationship' he plunges deeper in his search for roots. He amalgamates his thoughts cleverly mingling the historical, the mythical with the personal:

It seems to me that Jayanta Mahapatra's creative mind, all along its complex march, was advancing towards the creation of 'Relationship'...an attempt to relate man to god and man to nature, man to myth and man to his multiple heritage. It finally unfolds the poet's relationship to his self and the way in which he comes to terms with reality.⁴

The poet wishes to make inroads into his inner self as he travels beyond the self-created barriers:

I know I can never come alive
if I refuse to consecrate at the altar of my origins
where the hollow horn blows every morning
and its suburban sound picks its way
through the tangled moonlight of your lazy sleep. (Mahapatra
1980; 42)

The profound roots of his soul seek vital links with the infinite. Carrying the burden of his alienated soul he journeys along, probing, analysing and still searching. His Christianity is like an albatross around his neck, and like the ancient mariner he suffers in silence. When despair and disillusionment reach their zenith, then hope revives like a phoenix and soars once again.

In the process of exploring his roots he falls back on the deposits of the racial past so that the 'self' gets deciphered by the redeeming phantasmagoria of the place. The self gets absorbed in the place.

In somewhere, my man,
 A man does not mean anything,
 But the place.
 Sitting on the river bank, throwing pebbles
 into the muddy current
 A man becomes the place. (Mahapatra 1980: 42)

Mahapatra's poetry is redolent of the Orissa scene, steeped in history, legend and myth. Jagannath temple at Puri figures quite often in it. Through the metaphor of light the poet hints at the possibility of redemption from human misery and folly. 'In the great temple at Puri, at the inner sanctum there are 'Ten feet' away, three gods, dark, dark and strange, limbless, grotesque—and I am here. Stark eyes, white, unblinking, gazing into my abyss... or Perhaps I would like to be with them. Within and without'.⁵ The poet in an epiphanic moment depicts his identification with the crowd, and thus in a religious fervour, he finds enlightenment and becomes one with the rest of the worshipping humanity. It is a joyful and novel experience, it illuminates his inner being, tearing asunder all sorts of bondages. He loses his identity in religion and feels one with the infinite. This sudden enlightenment is his *nirvana*, as he cuts all ties and bondages and is one with the rest in his devotional ecstasy. His mind and body which were closed in, had certain reservations, perhaps, because of conversion to Christianity, now bloom like the lotus at the touch of the Lord's Chariot, divinity pulsates his being, and he unites with the chanting crowd. He was aware that unless a poet initiates a dialogue with his place and culture, he would not be able to identify his roots and find his self. There is a recurrent motif of time in Mahapatra's poems. It is neither rectilinear, nor circular nor cyclic but it emerges from the ambivalent nature of his own existence, both as a human being and as a poet, constantly confronted by mortality—immortality and flux—permanence dialectics.

In many other poems he creates a complex and difficult world of his own, constantly enquiring, questioning, doubting. 'I ask myself questions because I have little faith in me'.⁶ Whatever may be the catalyst, the poetry he creates is soaked in an eloquent silence, lonely and forbidding. He grovels in a deep well of anguish, sinking and wallowing in an abyss of self-indulgence. His world is a claustrophobic world. The poems appear as a continuous relation of aspects of the isolation, loneliness, solitude and alienation of the self from external realities in a world without apparent purpose. This is perhaps the existential dilemma of modern life.

His poems have been profuse, massive in quantity, the anguished outpourings of an acutely sensitive man afraid of death and ageing, afraid of the oblivion that it brings. Mahapatra does not want to face the eclipsing of the sun of his name and fame. The consciousness of death as termination of life renders life itself a purposeless existence.

The themes have been numerous such as time, immortality, desire, passion, the mutability of life and the enveloping fear of death. He attempts to relate his life to his friends, to his land of birth and more importantly to himself. The poem 'False Start' is in reality an exploration of the self. Numbly he climbs to the mountain top where his own soul quivers on edge of answers.

I try to pull back my life
as if from a great distance
Crowds beyond my life look up
expecting it to reveal my true identity. (Mahapatra 1982: 46)

In his own words he confesses, "Writing a poem is a satisfying act, because it helps to bring happiness, a light to the eyes, a spring to the feet".⁷

The above survey shows that Jayanta Mahapatra orchestrates a developmental cycle as a poet from alienation to immersion to enlargement of the self. Therefore, continuously he weaves through his poems the search for identity, a search for self, and the desire to establish himself so that the sands of time do not erase his name.

REFERENCES

- Das, Kamala (1976) *My Story*, New Delhi: Sterling.
Das, Kamala (1973) *The Old Playhouse and other Poems*, Madras: Orient Longman.
Das, Kamala (1971) "I Studied all men", *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, Sept. 19.
King, Bruce (1987) *Modern Indian Poetry in English*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
Mahapatra, Jayanta (1986) "Summerdust and a Scent of Mangoes", *The Hudson Review*, xxxix, No.2 (Summer).
Mahapatra, Jayanta (1983) "The Stranger Within: Coming to Terms through Poetry" *The Dalhousie Review*, 63, No.3.
Mahapatra, Jayanta (1982) *Relationship*, Cuttack: Chandrabhaga Society, (1980, Rep.1982).z
Mahapatra, Jayanta (1980) "The Inaudible Resonance in English Poetry in India" *Literary Criterion*, Mysore, 15, No.1.

Radhakrishnan, S. (1957) *An Idealist View of Life*, London: George Allen and Unwin (Revised Version).

Shahane, Vasant A. (1982) *Perspectives of Indian Poetry in English*, New Delhi: Abhinav Publications

NOTES

1. Das, Kamala (1976), p. 95.
2. Das, Kamala (1971), p. 39.
3. Mahapatra, Jayanta (1980), p. 26.
4. Vasant A. Shahane (1982), p. 154.
5. King, Bruce (1987) p. 201.
6. Mahapatra, Jayanta (1986), p. 186.
7. Mahapatra, Jayanta (1983), p. 435.