


Natural Symphonies: The Evocative Imagery in Jayant Mahapatra's *A Rain of Rites*

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ABSTRACT

Jayanta Mahapatra is renowned in Indian English poetry and is well-known for his vibrant and reflective songs. He skillfully blends the local and the global in his poetry, which addresses themes of identity, culture, and the human condition. Though he began writing poetry in his forties—quite late—he established a solid reputation for himself in Indian English literature quite quickly. His collection *A Rain of Rites* is one of the most significant, even if several of his compositions are considered outstanding. His use of imagery throughout the anthology prompts readers to consider their own lives as well as the universal struggles that define the human condition. Mahapatra shows off his mastery of imagery in *A Rain of Rites*, which addresses profound existential issues and arouses powerful feelings through vivid descriptions. The present paper aims to analyze *A Rain of Rites* from the point of view of natural imagery.

Keywords: *Imagery, Odisha, Rain, Puri, Indian English Literature.*

Jayanta Mahapatra, a legend in Indian English poetry, is known for his vibrant and introspective songs. In his poetry, which seamlessly merges the local and the global, he examines subjects such as identity, tradition, and the human condition. Notably, he started composing poetry in his forties, which was a somewhat late start, yet he made a strong name for himself in Indian English literature quite rapidly. He started out his prolific literary career with his debut book, *Svayamvara and Other Poems* (1971). As the first Indian English poet to win the coveted Sahitya Akademi Award, Mahapatra became famous overnight with his most celebrated poem, *Relationship* (1980). Entangling individual and communal recollections, this extended poem contemplates the history and customs of Odisha. *The False Start* (1980), *Temple* (1989), and *Waiting* (1979) are some of his other noteworthy collections. They all

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demonstrate his skill at sensitively and deeply capturing the complexity of life. Mahapatra's poetry is distinguished by its profound subjects, nuanced rhythms, and vivid imagery. He frequently uses the people, rivers, temples, and terrain of Odisha as metaphors to delve into more general existential issues. His writing often challenges and redefines existence's spiritual and philosophical aspects, reflecting a profound involvement with these aspects of life. Mahapatra has made substantial editorial and translation contributions to Indian literature in addition to his poetry. "Escaping the orbit of Yeats, Eliot, Auden and Dylan Thomas, it claims a wider kinship with such poets as Whitman, Neruda and other Latin Americans." (Sarang 31) His literary journal Chandrabhaga, which he co-founded, provides a forum for several up-and-coming poets and authors in India. Many accolades, including the Padma Shri, one of India's highest civilian decorations, were given to Mahapatra in 2009 in recognition of his services. Despite these honours, Mahapatra continues to be a modest and contemplative man, always delving into the depths of the human experience via his poems. Prof. R. K Bhushan has remarked, "He has successfully and loudly conveyed his message rooted in his strong convictions and morals and spiritual leanings in his tranquil lyricism of his innovative poetic idiom as a superb craftsman." (Sabharwal 73)

Though several of his pieces are regarded as noteworthy, his collection *A Rain of Rites* is one of the most important. The first poetry book by an Indian poet to be published by Oxford University Press was this collection, released in 1976. Many of Mahapatra's most well-known poems are included in it, such as "Dawn at Puri" and "Indian Summer." One of Mahapatra's most significant compositions of his day, *A Rain of Rites*, is a seminal masterpiece of Indian poetry. Jayanta Mahapatra's poem "Dawn," uses natural pictures to depict the tranquil but mysterious mood of early dawn. The metaphor of dawn emerging "from the darkness" and returning "to a darkly mysterious world" implies a continual journey from night today. The description of "thunders trailing around hatchet-faced banana leaves" (1) effectively depicts the storm's aftermath in contrast to the fragile "dew" on the front gate. The sensory element of the "acid sounds of a distant temple bell" unifies the spiritual and the natural worlds. The description of "the wet silent night of a crow that hangs in the first sun" (1) emphasizes nature's calm yet undeniable presence and the change from night today. Mahapatra creates a rich tapestry that captures the intricacies and subdued beauty of morning in an Indian setting with the utilization of natural elements like storms, dew, temple bells, and crows.

The acid sounds of a distant temple bell,

the wet silent night of a crow that hangs in the first sun.

Is the dawn only a way through such strange terrain?

The frenzy of noise, which a silence recalls

through companions lost, things suddenly found?

There is a dawn which travels alone,

without the effort of creation, without puzzle. (J. Mahapatra 1)

The poem “Village” masterfully captures the spirit of rural life and the depressing realities its residents face via the use of natural images. The poem's speaker crosses a “palm-trunk bridge over the irrigation-canal” (2) in a striking opening scene that emphasizes the basic and unpretentious rural infrastructure. The canal's “grave-green waters” (2) convey a feeling of deterioration and lethargy that is consistent with the village's overall atmosphere. The peasants' difficult circumstances are highlighted by the juxtaposition of the peacefulness of nature with the brutality of the surroundings in “peepul-tree-silence on the bleak burning ground.” (2) The picture of Radha “in the hurt-filled light of an early November sunset” (2) depicts a moving scene in which the emotional suffering endured contrasts with the natural beauty of the sunset.

A depth of sorrow is added by the mourning doves floating out of the “tall plumes of bamboo,” (2) signifying the village's vanishing character and lost qualities. The description of a woman with a “dark brown throat” (2) and the “scarlet mark of the gods” (2) on her throat adds to the depth of this picture by implying a past of spiritual perseverance and suffering. Mahapatra paints a striking image of the rural landscape while highlighting the themes of loss, survival, and its people's enduring spirit via natural photography. The poem paints a vivid picture of rural life, with the natural elements reflecting the inhabitants' challenges and the quiet resilience ingrained in their everyday lives.

Natural imagery is expertly used to portray themes of regeneration, spirituality, and the cyclical aspect of life in Jayanta Mahapatra's powerful poem “Samsāra.” The first line, “In a sky shaking itself from the long-burning rains, the first grasses of cirrus,” (8) alludes to a new beginning following a period of intensity and upheaval by evoking the picture of cirrus clouds and a post-monsoon sky. The change from rain to bright sky heralds the arrival of autumn, which is known as the “autumn's dream,” (8) a time for introspection and the rebirth of the gods.

As seen by the “newly resurrected gods” (8) waking from their slumber, the natural imagery combines with spiritual components, fusing religious awakening with the rejuvenation of

nature. The temple's references to a “fair Brahman priest” (8) and its offerings of “fruit, shaven hair, and marigolds” strengthen the bond between spirituality and the natural world. These sacrifices, compared to “terrified men,” (8) inspire awe and vulnerability in the presence of heavenly might. “The slow stone surges to flame” (8) is an additional metaphor for change and the continuing spirit of tradition. As the poem culminates, the lines:

“Offerings of marigolds, fruit and shaven hair
stare like terrified men; the slow stone surges to flame.
And a man begins to begin again
in the centre of this past,
and sees no end of it.” (J. Mahapatra 8)

captures the never-ending life cycle, in which people constantly reinvent themselves and reaffirm their ties to their past. Mahapatra's use of environmental imagery enhances the poem's examination of human experience and spiritual continuity while creating a realistic picture of the surroundings.

In “A Rain of Rites,” a poem by Jayanta Mahapatra, natural imagery is skillfully integrated to elicit profound emotional and intellectual considerations. Dr. Homen Baruah and Sumitra Jyoti say, “Rain’ is a recurring symbol this Indo-Anglian poet. No other Indian poet has written numerous poems on rain as the Orian poet has done. The favourite metaphor ‘Rain’ can be considered as the reflector of the poet’s psyche.” (Jyoti 544) The poem opens with the description of rain, which gives a contemplative tone to the poem:

“Sometimes a rain comes
slowly across the sky, that turns
upon its grey cloud, breaking away into light
before it reaches its objective.” (10)

This rain is symbolic of unrealized promise and ephemeral moments of clarity that never completely materialize; it is characterized as “breaking away into light before it reaches its objective.” (10) The speaker compares the rain, which she has “known and traded all this life,” (10) like seaweed that has been tossed upon the beach. The speaker's troubles and regrets are symbolized by this picture of kelp, which is frequently thought of as something that has been washed up and thrown away. The phrase “a malignant purpose in a nun's eye” (10) alludes to an uncomfortable, condemning power that the speaker is afraid to face.

An emotional response to nature's apathy is evoked by the picture of the “cold cloud” (10) bringing “blood to his face,” (10) emphasizing the struggle and loneliness that are inherent to human life. The speaker's ascent to the “mountain-tops of ours,” (10) where their spirit “quivers on the edge of answers,” (10) represents a tumultuous and unpredictable path towards self-discovery and insight. Mahapatra poses existential questions with the use of natural elements. For example, “Which still, stale air sits on an angel's wings?” (10) and “What traps my rain, making it difficult to escape?” (10) These lyrics allude to a state of emotional and spiritual stagnation in which even supernatural intervention seems pointless. A recurrent theme, the rain represents the difficulties and unsolved problems that the speaker still faces despite her best attempts.

Another lovely poem, “A rain,” has delicate yet profound natural imagery that highlights the philosophical and introspective topics covered in each stanza. “If it is a game one invents,” (11) begins the opening stanza. The phrase “if I know of the endless desert” (11) conjures up images of a vast, empty space and loneliness. This desert represents the vastness and difficulties of life; it frequently takes the form of a game or a solo trip. With the line “The clear, wise eyes of water, running,” (11), the second verse switches to more flowing imagery. In this instance, water is personified as having “clear, wise eyes,” (11) which allude to time, knowledge, and purity. This picture, which contrasted with the dry desert, symbolizes the possibility of clarity and rebirth in life. “The look on the other side of life” (11) alludes to a deeper comprehension or viewpoint that goes beyond the ordinary. Not this earth, that is. The phrase “just an evidence, or truth,” (11) refers to the pursuit of existential significance outside of the material world, where warmth of the body denotes awareness and human existence. Jayant Mahapatra himself writes, “It wouldn't be wrong to say that there is a distinct absence of vitality in our poetry. All our competence with words and with craft, with images and metaphors, asks for substance; and purpose beyond mere versification is what is called for. Our poetry must be involved with us, with the many lives we live.” (J. Mahapatra 31)

Mahapatra used the image of a wall to signify isolation and surveillance in the third verse, “Watching behind the wall, I see it play over people, piled up to their silences.” (11) The phrase “play over people” (11) alludes to a power or presence that subtly shapes lives and conjures up images of “vastness,” both literal and abstract. The wall also represents obstacles to understanding and communication, and the phrase “growing like earth or stone” (11) alludes to a merging with the unchanging, unhearing elements of nature, wherein emotional

manifestations such as “sad weeping words” (11) are silenced. The last line, “If it is a game one has made in childhood, there will be no word to hide in,” (11) brings the poem back to life as a game. The stark, unadulterated realities of childhood, uncovered by language or pretense, are highlighted by the lack of words to hide behind.

The artwork in “Listening” eloquently conveys a feeling of everlasting beauty and a close bond with the natural world. A widespread sense of inertia and decay is evoked by the “far sleep” (13) and “shabby nest,” (13) while “the touch of stone” (13) denotes an anchoring vastness. The wind “scallop the silence,” (13) alluding to the subtle yet potent forces forming reality. The “old hills” and the “black, motionless” (13) horizon stand for timeless memories and antiquated tales. Together with the sleep motif, these natural components weave a tapestry of contemplation and silence that emphasizes the deep, sometimes overlooked cycles of existence and the never-ending search for insight.

Every man, every beast,
trapped, deaf in his own sleep.
Only the wind you hear, that scallops
the silence of a whole birth, speaking
from the skies where nothing moves: (13)

The poem “Ceremony” by Jayanta Mahapatra deftly weaves together natural images to delve into issues of remembrance, spirituality, and time passing. An almost supernatural element is introduced by the “strange spirit” that “sculpts the trees,” (15) implying an ages-old, all-pervasive presence inside nature. This “ancient voice,” (15) which represents the enduring bond between the natural world and human awareness, is carried by the breeze. A landscape full with communal aspirations and ancestry is suggested by the picture of the “million prayers sitting on the villages,” (15) while the “cry behind the deodars” (15) alludes to underlying grief. The “hawk swoops” (15) represent a piercing, predatory hope in contrast to the sad picture of patience and perseverance represented by the “stony women” (15) who are waiting for healing. The vibrant and chaotic feature of the “chatter of monkeys” (15) in the trees contrasts with the somber tone of the “dry, drab weeds.” (15) The depictions of the event itself, which anchor it in the real and historical, include “dusty earth,” “star pyres,” and “roots.” (15) The use of natural imagery enhances the investigation of human experience and provides a clear picture of the surroundings. It captures the interaction between the transient moments of life and the permanent rituals that shape one's cultural and spiritual identity.

The poem “Main Temple Street, Puri” by Jayanta Mahapatra uses natural images to capture the vibrant but eternal aura of the holy city. The youngsters, who are described as “brown as earth,” (16) stand for the vibrancy and purity of childhood against the backdrop of daily existence and religious devotion. Their laughing highlights societal negligence amid religious fervor, since it contrasts dramatically with the indifference towards the underprivileged, such as those with disabilities and breeding mongrels. The temple is a central feature representing the city's constant pulse of tradition and faith. The dusty roadway conveys a sense of emptiness and fleeting existence, like to a “shorn scalp.” (16) However, things are paradoxically always in motion, pointing to an unending circle of activity and life:

“On the dusty street the colour of shorn scalp
there are things moving all the time
and yet nothing seems to go away from sight.
Injuries drowsy with the heat.” (16)

The wounds described as “drowsy with the heat” (16) depict physical suffering and exhaustion, reflecting the hard reality that locals and pilgrims must face. With a sense of seriousness and awe, the sky, “claimed by inviolable authority,” (16) is chained to its “crutches of silence” (16) and looms over the landscape. Through his use of natural images, Mahapatra conveys the spirit of Puri as a destination for spiritual contemplation and pilgrimage, where the holy and the profane coexist in an enduring dance of life and devotion.

Jayanta Mahapatra skilfully uses imagery in her “Four Rain Poems” to convey a sense of reflection, sorrow, and the passing of time. Rain is portrayed as sailing “vast spaces toward the season's end” (23) in the first section, signifying both progress and completion. Amidst the unrelenting fall of rain, the poet's face transforms into a “full white moon pressed onto the paper-dry surface of dead water,” (23) conjuring up an eerie picture of contemplation and silence. The poet's inner turmoil and the line separating memory from creativity are both reflected in this image of the moon on lifeless water. The second section depicts a scene of decay and resignation with the “submerged sun slumped in a medley of grave new ash and bone,” while the “mysterious looking boats on the river's edge” (23) inspire a sense of mystery. The sensation of loneliness and the weight of memory are further enhanced by the “noises of charred minds” and “stirred stale air.” (23)

The idea of going back to familiar ground is explored in the third section, when rain is used as a metaphor for time passing and regeneration. In the middle of the nonstop rain, the poet muses on loss and the quest for purpose, causing restlessness and desire. The last section uses the rain as a metaphor for memory and time passing. The poet muses on forbidden memories and the unstoppable passage of time while waiting for the rain to stop. The line “the day's last sun smoking in unending fields soaked in innocence” (24) highlights the fleeting aspect of life by contrasting innocence with loss movingly.

In “On the Bank of the Ganges,” Jayanta Mahapatra paints a striking picture of the contemplative and mysterious banks of the holy river. A sense of primordial energy and ancient veneration is evoked by the picture of “stone-eyed trees furred by vermilion,” (32) and the “song of a lone Ganga boatman” (32) that reverberates through “lofty silences” (32) represents the never-ending conversation between humanity and the divine. The bathers are drawn into a world of mystery and ceremony by the river, personified as “the old blind flow,” (32) as though by a strong magnetic force. Mahapatra reflects on existential issues surrounding life and death, wondering if it is “birth” or “death which moves the earth.” (32) The tranquil yet commanding presence of the river serves as a background for these musings, which reflect the complexity of human existence.

The river's “sullen dignity” and the wind's “harsh fire” (32) represent the poet's need for connection and seclusion in the middle of this serene sight. A hawk's call breaks through the darkness, reminding him of an unmet dream and his yearning to discover the deeper meanings of the river.

“And I know I am alone.
Tonight I can remember the lost mornings.
A hawk cries in the gloom:
a purpose on the air, not yet fulfilled.
To be whole, to know how the water lies. (32)

Mahapatra examines universal themes of spirituality, mortality, and the search for meaning while capturing the ageless importance of the Ganges as the vitality of Indian civilization and culture via such rich images and reflective observations.

The picture of “Indian Summer Poem” conjures up the sweltering heat and customs of an Indian summer. Priests are singing “over the souging of the sombre wind,” (35) which conveys a

feeling of seriousness and reverence as well as the depth of spirituality found in the Indian terrain. The idea that crocodiles are migrating to deeper waters contributes to the feeling of adaptability and change that comes with rising temperatures. The description of the “mornings of heated middens smoke under the sun” (35) conveys the intense heat and the way that people go about their everyday lives despite it. In this scene, the poet's wife is shown sleeping and appearing oblivious to the “deep roar of funeral pyres,” (35) which stands for fortitude and the capacity to find comfort in the face of death. Mahapatra blends aspects of tradition, nature, and introspective narrative to portray the spirit of an Indian summer. Her vibrant images and thoughtful narration accomplish this. The poem speaks of themes of spirituality, tenacity, and the resilience of the human spirit in the face of life's seasonal obstacles.

The poet depicts a reflective dusk setting in “Evening,” where waning light combines with reflection and doubt. The change from day to night is portrayed in the picture of “hard forms of day melting into the future,” (37) signifying the passing of time and the opening of new possibilities. The poet wonders what his thoughts are really made of and if they are just an illusion or a true creative expression. The phrase “poem, four warm and kindly lines” (37) alludes to the transient nature of human endeavor while simultaneously highlighting the ability of art to influence perception and emotion. As nightfall approaches, the environment turns “solemn, devoid of day's fretful pallor” (37), promoting reflection and the pursuit of inner serenity. The poet pines for the simplicity of nature, symbolized by “the leaf's green, the stone's ochre,” (37) to free himself from the weight of sorrow. He does, however, recognize his limited power over future events and their inevitable nature. The poem's final line, “something stands by the door for which I wait,” (37) conjures up a spooky picture of approaching death and the frailty of existence. The description of “a smell that lingers of a dead cow's entrails” (37) gives the images a more visceral feel and emphasizes the idea of time and mortality.

Jayanta Mahapatra explores human desperation and the harsh realities of existence in his well-known poem “Hunger.” The graphic and visceral visual depicts the harshness of existence mixed with both emotional and bodily hunger. The first few words portray the weight of the flesh and the hardship it causes, in contrast to the fisherman's nonchalant indifference when he offers his daughter. The fisherman's “white bone thrash[ing] his eyes” (44) picture alludes to a difficult inner battle and maybe even regret over his choice. There is a strong sense of helplessness and despair as the protagonist pursues the fisherman over the dunes, represented

by the impossibility of burning down one's house. A feeling of suffocation is evoked by the body clutching at foam and the silence squeezing sleeves:

“I followed him across the sprawling sands,
my mind thumping in the flesh's sling.
Hope lay perhaps in burning the house I lived in.
Silence gripped my sleeves; his body clawed
at the froth his old nets had dragged up from the seas.” (44)

The visual intensifies within the hut, with sticky soot smearing the mental space and the oil lamp splaying hours crammed against the walls. The story takes on a disturbing new dimension when the fifteen-year-old daughter of the fisherman is mentioned. This is especially true when the heroine compares her hunger to the fish creeping within. Mahapatra explores the intricacies of human connections, the extent individuals will go to in times of desperation, and the brutal reality of those fighting to survive via vivid cinematography and moving storytelling.

The poem “The Desert under the Breath” is a meditation on hunger, loneliness, and the unrelenting search for food in the harsh desert environment. The description of “sand sore on top of cool sheets scattered and unslaked” contrasts the harshness of the desert with the transient alleviation of coolness, evoking a strong feeling of unease and desire. The speaker's expression of loneliness and hopelessness is emphasized by the moon, which is a metaphor for an aloof and uncaring spectator that “does not seek its place.” (46) The roots, bearing the weight of an unsatisfied need, represent the never-ending battle for existence and the innate ability to persevere in the face of hardship. In the meantime, the agitated stars, which “clasp like hands,” (44) allude to a need for knowledge and connection in the vastness of the desert.

The speaker's internal struggle is evident as they ignore their physical constraints in pursuit of fulfillment and significance, wrestling with their disgust and rationalization. Even with the constant loneliness and starvation, there is a moving recognition of the desert's fortitude, as expressed in the following statement:

“Stars restlessly clasp
like hands words of the mind
showing the repulsion
as you push aside the skin
of the body finding justification

Lonely in the taste of stretched hunger
you'd think the sand is sore
to the end
And the water alive." (46)

Mahapatra concludes by pointing out that life endures and that there is always a chance for rejuvenation and nourishment, even in the most hopeless circumstances. "The Desert under the Breath" portrays the immense complexity of human existence and the persistent search for meaning in the face of misfortune through compelling imagery and thoughtful pondering.

Through vibrant imagery and thoughtful observation, Jayanta Mahapatra examines the difficulties of identity, introspection, and the passing of time in "The Face." The face is represented as a strong force that seizes control of the speaker's awareness, signifying the outer manifestation of inner ideas and feelings. The speaker's expression never changes, full of unsolved mysteries and unspoken depths, even if she is reluctant to express delight. The idea of the sky "exploding against it" (53) evokes awe at the size of the cosmos and the breadth of human experience.

"The sky still goes on exploding against it:
the miles of substance my mortality has travelled over;
in a corner of its wish the bones of a child slowly stir,
shaken by a wind that walks in pride among the clouds." (53)

Within this context, the wind's confident march amid the clouds and the moving bones of a child serves as symbols for the speaker's reflections on death and the fleeting aspect of existence. The face becomes a symbol for life's obligations and burdens, bearing the weight of wisdom passed down through the ages. Even if catastrophe is inevitable, the speaker finds comfort in the never-ending stillness of the evenings, when warriors march through a foggy landscape of reflection and remembrance. In the end, the speaker struggles with the face's dual meaning—that it represents both a source of prospective success and calm acceptance and an approaching catastrophe and fragile equilibrium. The poem ends with a menacing query that begs the issue of whether the speaker's life is like a puppet in a pantomime, unaffected by the lives that are mirrored in other people's faces. Mahapatra asks readers to reflect on the intricacies of selfhood, death, and the unrelenting march of time as reflected in the mysterious face of "The Face" through rich images and reflective reflections.

Thus, the physical and emotional landscapes of the Indian subcontinent are portrayed in all the collection's poetry using natural imagery. Mahapatra's vision evokes the spirit of place, transporting readers to the sights, sounds, and sensations of the Indian landscape, from the revered banks of the Ganges to the vast expanses of the desert. Mahapatra frequently uses his artwork to explore difficult existential issues. He explores themes of spirituality, death, and the pursuit of meaning in an uncertain and transient world using imagery of fire, water, and the sky. B. K. Das is of the view, "Recent Indian Poetry in English tries hard to set its roots and develop its own artistic credo. It has successfully risen above 'decadent romanticism'." (Das 2) Readers are encouraged to reflect on more profound realities about the human experience by the descriptive and symbolic imagery used here. With poems like "Hunger" and "The Desert under the Breath," Mahapatra explores existential longing for connection or the harsh realities of life. His imagery evokes readers' reflections about their lives and the universal conflicts that shape the human condition. Mahapatra demonstrates his command of imagery as a literary method in "A Rain of Rites," which uses evocative descriptions to address deep existential concerns and elicit strong emotions. Mahapatra captures the beauty and complexity of our planet via his artwork, taking readers on a voyage of reflection and exploration.

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