

An Attempt to show Culture as the undercurrent of the Psycho-Social Identity through the selected Poems of Jayantha Mahapatra

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Abstract:

Culture is a multifaceted concept that encompasses the entirety of a society's identity, values, and way of life. It is often expressed through various elements such as traditions, religions, music, festivals, customs, and values that are unique to a particular group of people in a specific geographical area. These cultural elements serve as a window into the collective identity and heritage of a community, allowing individuals to connect with their roots and understand their place in the world.

In the 19th century, the British anthropologist Edward Tylor (1832-1917) provided a comprehensive definition of culture that has endured through the years. Tylor described culture as the complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. This definition emphasizes that culture is not limited to one aspect but is an intricate web of various components that shape human behavior and society as a whole. It highlights the intellectual, spiritual, artistic, legal, moral, and social dimensions of culture, making it a rich and diverse concept.

One poet who skillfully showcased the richness of Indian culture in his poetry is Jayanta Mahapatra, an outstanding Indo-Anglican poet. Through his verses, Mahapatra delves into the heart of Indian culture, exploring its nuances and complexities. He captures the essence of Indian traditions, beliefs, and customs, and weaves them into his poetry, creating a tapestry of cultural experiences that resonate with readers. His poems are a testament to the enduring influence of culture on individuals and communities, as well as an invitation to appreciate the depth and diversity of Indian heritage. This article discusses the works of Jayanta Mahapatra as those that focus on richness of Indian culture.

Keywords: *Culture, traditions, religion, customs, complex, anthropologist.*

Culture is a profound and all-encompassing concept that encompasses every facet of human life and society. Edward Tylor's definition reminds us that culture is a dynamic and complex whole that shapes our knowledge, beliefs, arts, laws, morals, customs, and more. Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry serves as a vivid illustration of how culture can be celebrated and explored through the art of words, reminding us of the enduring importance of cultural identity and heritage in our lives.

Jayanta Mahapatra born into a Prominent Odia Christian Family. Mahapatra went to Stewart School in Cuttack, Odisha. He completed his MSc in Physics from Patna University, Bihar. He began his teaching career as a lecturer in Physics in 1949. During his professional life, he taught Physics in various Government Colleges in Odisha. He superannuated at the Ravenshaw University and retired from his government job in 1986. He began his writing career very late in his sixties. His poems got published in international literary journals such as Critical Inquiry, the Sewance Review and also in Indian Magazines. He is one of the major poets in Indo-Anglican poetry. Most of his major poems reflect social problems in the society. His poems exhibit more concern about human beings who are under the poverty line. Mahapatra's poetry dealt with different theme like sentiments, nature, death and culture. Though he was a contemporary of A. K. Ramanujan, Nissim Ezekiel and Parthasarathy, his poetic density and themes are different. He was the first Indian poet to win sahitya Academy award for his contribution to English poetry in India.

Culture is everything made, learned or shared by the members of a society, including values, beliefs, behavior and material objects. We begin learning our culture from the moment we were born, as the people who raise us encourage certain behavior and teach their version of right and wrong. Culture can be materialistic and non-materialistic. If we take materialistic cultures it consists of concrete visible parts as food, clothing, weapons, buildings, etc. And differ from one society to another. In anthropony 'culture' has the specific connotation of 'a way of life' and refers to practices of specific groups of people.

Culture and Civilization:

The observation that by the middle of the 18th century, the term 'culture' had evolved to be synonymous with 'civilization' is significant in understanding how the concept of culture has transformed over time. In this context, being civilized or 'cultured' was associated with having refined manners and the ability to appreciate art, music, and literature. This shift in meaning reflects the evolving nature of culture, from a broader concept encompassing intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic development to one that is closely tied to refinement and appreciation of the arts.

Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry indeed resonates with this evolved understanding of culture. His poems often delve into the deeper aspects of human experience, touching on intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic dimensions. Through his verses, Mahapatra explores the intricacies of life, spirituality, and the human condition. His poetry is not merely a celebration of art and literature but a reflection of the intellectual and spiritual development of individuals and society as a whole.

Mahapatra's poems can be seen as a manifestation of this abstract concept of culture, as they invite readers to engage with the intellectual and spiritual aspects of life, often through rich and evocative imagery. Mahapatra's poetry is thus a testament to the enduring significance of culture in the human experience. It exemplifies the idea that culture encompasses more than just manners and aesthetics; it encompasses the intellectual and spiritual growth of individuals and societies. Through his work, Mahapatra invites readers to contemplate and appreciate the profound dimensions of culture in all its abstract complexity.

Culture as the way of life

The colonial period in India had a profound impact on Indian culture, both in terms of acquisition and interpretation. Understanding how Indian culture was influenced during this time and its connotation today sheds light on the complex dynamics of cultural transformation and preservation.

During the colonial period, there was a significant exchange of culture between the Indian subcontinent and European powers, primarily the British. This exchange influenced various aspects of Indian culture, from art and education to language and administration. The British introduced Western-style education systems, leading to the dissemination of Western knowledge, values, and literature in India. This had a profound impact on the intellectual and literary aspects of Indian culture, fostering a fusion of indigenous and Western ideas.

One notable aspect of colonial influence was the heightened interest in India's history, archaeology, and heritage. Colonial administrators and scholars took a keen interest in documenting, preserving, and sometimes misinterpreting India's monuments, temple sculptures, and ancient texts. This scholarly endeavor contributed to the preservation of India's cultural heritage, even though it was often viewed through a Eurocentric lens. Today, Indian culture is a rich tapestry that reflects both its indigenous traditions and those introduced during the colonial period. This syncretism has resulted in a diverse and multifaceted cultural landscape. Indian culture is a source of national and regional identity, encompassing a wide array of languages, art forms, religious practices, and culinary traditions that are deeply ingrained in the lives of its people.

Furthermore, Indian culture is not static; it continues to evolve in response to changing societal dynamics. Modern India's culture is also influenced by globalization, which has brought in elements of Western popular culture, technology, and consumerism. This globalization has presented both opportunities and challenges in preserving traditional culture while embracing the benefits of a connected world. The colonial period in India left an indelible mark on the country's culture by influencing various aspects of intellectual, literary, and historical heritage. Today, Indian culture is a dynamic blend of ancient traditions, colonial legacies, and contemporary global influences. It remains a source of pride and identity for the nation, and efforts are ongoing to preserve and celebrate India's rich cultural heritage while adapting to the modern world.

Psycho-Social Identity:

In the context of culture, one can indeed attribute a psycho-social dimension, as it involves the intersection of psychology (the study of human behavior and mental processes) and the social (the broader society and community in which individuals live). Humans exhibit a complex interrelation between their psychology, their behavior, and the society they are part of, all of which are profoundly influenced by the cultural context that has evolved over generations.

Culture and psychology together emphasize the centrality of culture in our understanding of human beings. Culture is essential for comprehending various aspects of human life, including identity formation, social behavior, intra and inter-subjective experiences, emotions, and creativity. It acts as a lens through which individuals interpret and navigate the world around them, shaping their values, beliefs, and behavioral norms.

Culture can be seen as the foundation of ideas, behaviors, attitudes, and traditions that are shared within a large group of people, often defined by common factors such as religion, family ties, or shared history. These cultural elements are not static; they evolve over time and are passed down from one generation to the next. In this way, culture becomes a dynamic force that perpetually shapes and reshapes the collective consciousness of a society.

Ultimately, the interplay between culture, psychology, and society is a multifaceted and intricate web that significantly influences the thoughts, behaviors, and experiences of individuals and communities. Recognizing the importance of culture in this context is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of human nature and the complexity of human interactions within the broader social and cultural framework.

Culture changes with society which exists in one particular place. In India we have cultural variation so it's considered as a 'unity in diversity'. At a cultural level people may differ in a society but for a social cause people are united.

Culture Influences Identity:

An individual's understanding of their own cultural identity is a lifelong journey that commences at birth and undergoes continual development. This process is significantly shaped by a multitude of factors, including personal experiences, the prevailing attitudes within their familial and home environment, and the broader societal milieu in which they exist. Inextricably linked to the human need to belong, cultural identity encompasses a diverse array of elements, encompassing physical objects, symbols, the interpretations ascribed to these symbols, and the collective norms, values, and beliefs that permeate social life.

Indian culture holds a distinct and venerable position in the world's cultural heritage, boasting a history dating back approximately 5000 years. Regarded as one of the world's earliest and most significant cultures, it embodies the principle of "unity in diversity," celebrating the coexistence of various traditions, languages, religions, and customs within its borders. This cultural diversity underscores the profound influence of culture in shaping the identities of both individuals and communities.

Within the context of societal living and membership in diverse social groups, culture plays an instrumental role in molding one's identity. It is important to emphasize, however, that while individuals sharing the same cultural background may exhibit certain commonalities in their identities, each person's sense of self remains distinctive and multifaceted. Cultural identity represents just one facet of an individual's comprehensive self-concept.

By examining the intricate interplay of culture, psycho-social factors, and identity, one can gain deeper insights into how cultural components influence perceptions, behaviors, and self-perceptions. This intricate relationship is particularly pertinent when analyzing the selected poems of Jayanta Mahapatra. Mahapatra's poetry offers readers a unique lens through which to contemplate the intricacies of cultural identity, the psycho-social dimensions of human experience, and the evolving nature of both individual and collective identities within the broader cultural framework.

The Selected Poems:

The following are the selected poems of Jayantha Mahapatra, which I highlight the concept of culture along with Psycho-social identity.

- 1) Taste for Tomorrow
- 2) A Summer Poem
- 3) Main Temple Street
- 4) Ash
- 5) Twilight
- 6) A Rain of rites
- 7) Dawn at Puri
- 8) The Captive air of Chandipur on Sea.

All the selected poems throw light on the psychological aspect because poetry is nothing but reflection of our thoughts here the thoughts of poet, related to the readers too, if they are inclined culturally.

Poetry as an Important Aspect of Culture and Society

From the perspective of Jayanta Mahapatra, one of the renowned poets of India, poetry holds a special place in reflecting the culture and society it emerges from. Poetry, in his view, is a timeless and ancient form of literature that predates even the origin of writing itself. It serves as a powerful lens through which one can gain profound insights into the culture that gives it life. According to Mahapatra, poets are astute observers of the world around them, acutely aware of the societal currents and personal experiences that shape their verses. They take these experiences and use them as a means to connect with the broader cultural context, providing a unique perspective that can illuminate the nuances of their society.

Mahapatra's poems often draw inspiration from the tangible aspects of his environment, depicting scenes of temples, beaches, and crowded streets. However, his poetic craft goes beyond mere description. While dealing with socio-cultural and political issues that may have influenced him, he does not compromise on the artistic quality of his work. This balance between social commentary and artistic expression is a hallmark of his poetry.

In the realm of culture and identity, Mahapatra's own journey serves as a poignant example. Although born into a Christian family, he has focused much of his poetic exploration on Hindu culture. This choice underscores the idea that one's cultural identity is not solely determined by birth but is also a reflection of the place to which one feels a deep attachment. In Mahapatra's case, his poetic exploration of Hindu culture demonstrates the profound connection he feels to the cultural landscape of India, showcasing the intricate interplay between personal identity and the cultural environment in which one lives. Jayanta Mahapatra's views on poetry, culture, and identity emphasize the role of poetry as a mirror of society, capable of providing profound insights into the cultural and societal fabric. His own poetic journey serves as a testament to the complex interrelation between personal identity, cultural attachment, and the creative expression of one's surroundings.

The Images and the Poet's Point of View:

1. "Taste for Tomorrow".

The above poem highlights the place "Puri" "The place which is famous for Lord Jaganath and rich source of culture which brings us the story of Lord Jaganath the sculpture of wooden deity without limbs. Generally, we see idols of the deities in the form of rock mostly but here it's a different story which takes back to our puranas and reflect our culture of changing the deities annually.

The poem shows the image of crows, which are important for the people after death. As the crows play a prominent role in the rituals and ceremonies after death of any person in Hindu Culture. The image of Lepers, a disease which leaves the patients away from homes, the only shelter here are streets of Puri Temple. They throng along the lanes and ask for alms for livelihood. The priest's image is a cultural image in Hindu Culture who can be noticed in all ceremonies of the Hindus from birth to death. Here we can notice how the poet pointed out the Hindu Culture in this particular poem and how the readers too can identify themselves.

2. A Summer Poem:

Mahapatra's poem titled *A Summer Poem* gives the cultural images of the chanting by the priest in the temples irrespective of seasons. They are supposed to offer the deities with Prasad and chant from the holy scriptures. He uses the metaphor mouth of India opens which signifies the strong culture of Hindus here, the priests and their respective duties in the temples. Another image here is of the funeral pyres which reflect the last journey of the Hindus. The Agni(pyre) resolving all the papas(sins) and the soul uniting with the Almighty. The simple image of the crocodiles moving into the deeper water to keep themselves cool trying to escape from the heat of the scorching sun.

This particular poet shows the cultural aspect of the last rites performed by the Hindus and one of the offerings given to God as food and later the people have food showing the incarnation of the respect to the Almighty.

3. Main Temple Street:

The poem *Main Temple Street* itself is an image of Hindu Culture. The Huge streets open into the large doors of the temple welcoming the devotees to offer prayers but here the poet reflect the poor culture of the economically poor people leaving their children in the lap of nature. Here the simile children, brown as earth show how near they were to mother earth clad with muddy clothes full of dust were laughing at the site of crippled people and the mongrels. The image of the shorn scalp in the Hindu Culture proves the men with dominance. The men with shaven heads can be the men performing the rituals. The poem envisages the cultural concept of the temple and the temple streets.

4. Ash:

The poem *Ash* evokes the concept of myth in the minds of poet and readers as well. We can say myths are specific accounts of Gods or superhuman beings involved in extraordinary events or circumstances in a time that is unspecified but which is understood as existing apart from ordinary human experience. The mood of the poet is very sad and calculative regarding the aspect of life and death. The title 'Ash' proves the ending material of the pyre. Ash is a cultural phenomenon in Hindus as they mix the ashes of the dead ones in the rivers, oceans and seas. The poet can feel the ash in the wind, Hindus consider wind as one of the Gods. The element of Panchabhutha's can be felt in the poetry of Mahapatra. Panchabhuthas include-wind, water, fire, earth, sky, here in the poem 'Ash' simply the poet narrates about the creatures, their existence and their exit from the world, through simple images of birds, winds, dust, sunset, etc. The element of sunset too is a cultural aspect as Hindu's offer prayers at this time by lighting diyas to represent the omnipresence of the God after the Sun God rests in the west.

Finally, 'Ash' poem revels the Journey of Life for the poet as a boy now grown and feeling the old age of his father and can relate many things to nature, the same can be felt by the readers too. Therefore, any person with aesthetic sense can feel the same as Mahapatra.

5. **Twilight:**

The poem *Twilight* is an exceptional poem describing the pain of a mother in the hospital ward losing her new born baby.

In the Indian Culture the mother is considered as a cursed person for losing her child. Mahapatra signifies the social structure in the poem and twilight is the specific time in 24 hours span of a day where evening alters into night. The orange colour signifies the dawn and dusk i.e., birth and death. Twilight is the time when people start lighting the lamps in their houses, it's also a cultural reflection removing darkness by inviting light.

6. **A Rain of Rites:**

The title highlights the symbolism and rain is universal but in Indian Culture rain is also considered as the God. People believe that rain has mystic powers and its difficult for a man to understand this. Mahapatra tries to explore that who will be the last man on to whom there will be the cold cloud. Rain in Odisha mostly brings floods but he also penetrates into the hearts of the people who wait for the rain. If we consider cultural aspect rain is the source of water for various purposes ex: ritual rites in Hindu Culture or Baptism in Christian Culture.

7. **Dawn at Puri:**

'*Dawn at Puri*' is a poem which depicts the morning scene on the sea beach at Puri. The cultural aspects of Indians, found in crowds. People move in huge crowds early in the morning. The image of skull on the beach portrays the poverty of the people unable to do the last rites properly, which tells us how economy forces to neglect culture. The other aspect is of women who came to attend the cremation, their desire was to be cremated in the same place which shows cultural bonding and belief.

8. **The Captive Air of Chanidpur on Sea:**

The Captive Air of Chandipur on Sea is a typical poem on the sea itself. How sea monitors the lives of the people who depend on sea. The Indian Culture, especially Hindu Culture has the Samudra God- who is responsible for prosperity or disasters. The fisherwomen pray to the sea and send their men for fishing. Here the poet felt the sadness in the air of the Chandipur sea as he was able to hear the cries of the fishermen who didn't return from the sea. The poet mourns for the glory of nature and the people think it's the decision of the Sea God. These beliefs reflect the innocence of the people who depend on the sea.

9. **The poem 'Myth'**

This poem is full of symbols and images related to the Hindu Culture. Mahapatra describes the steps of the temple in this poem as the steps in one's life which are never ending. The brass bell hanging near the temple reflect the prayers of the devotees. He feels many people come to the temple of Dhaulagiri in order to get their wishes fulfill by offering the prayers to the deity. The culture of offering flowers and leaves to the God are common in the Hindus. Here, the poet notices the scarlet(red) flowers and the dried leaves lying on the steps of the temple which were offered to the God. The myth of offering was seen changing the hands and places from the shrine on to the steps. Finally, a Sadhu approached the poet and questions him about his identity "are you a Hindoo?"

This aspect reveals the purpose of a person's presence near the holy shrine and the people continue their culture in certain forms of rites and rituals and the poet continued his culture of writing by experiencing various situations.

Conclusion:

The selected poems of Jayantha Mahapatra reflect cultural significance along with the images and symbols which strengthen the Psycho-social identity of the characters in the poems along with the poet and the readers too. The poems are mostly in a free verse connected to the rhythm of the readers and finally drafted the various dimensions which the poet came across in his life by transforming them into the beautiful poetic stanzas. The poems carry heavy load of cultural aspects from practices, to beliefs, to myths and rituals which anyone belonging to Indian culture can easily understand. The Socio-Cultural identity spectrum of the poet is truly Hinduism inclined to a large extent, if we consider his roots his grandfather converted into Christianity because of the great famine under the colonial rule.

Jayantha Mahapatra is a great Indian poet under the influence of post colonialism, tried to be experimental with his underlying roots in Hinduism and expanded his thoughts in the form of poetry and highlighted the land of Odisha. All the readers can identify with the cultural aspects which Mahapatra tried to describe in his poems and can relate to the Psycho-social aspects too.

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