UNIT 14: JAYANTA MAHAPATRA: LIFE AND WORKS

UNIT STRUCTURE

14.1 Learning Objectives

14.2 Introduction

14.3 Jayanta Mahapatra : The Poet

14.3.1 His Life

14.3.2 His Works

14.4 Let us Sum up

14.5 Further Reading

14.6 Answers to Check Your Progress

14.7 Model Questions

14.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to :

- identify the poet Jayanta Mahapatra and write about his life
- name the poems written by Mahapatra
- assess the importance of Mahapatra as a poet

14.2 INTRODUCTION

In the earlier unit, we discussed the poem "An Introduction" by Kamala Das. This unit deals with another Indian poet, Jayanta Mahapatra whose poetry is well read and well received. Here, we shall be discussing the life of the poet and reflect upon the major works that has established his reputation as one of the most popular poets in Indian English literature.

14.3 JAYANTA MAHAPATRA : THE POET

Jayanta Mahapatra is one of the most celebrated Indian poets. His poetry is closely associated and identified with the place, Orissa. He is the first Indian poet to receive the Sahitya Akademi award for English poetry. He was also awarded the Padmashree. Now let us discuss his life and works of the poet.

14.3.1 His Life

Jayanta Mahapatra, was born on 22nd October 1928 in Cuttack, Orissa and he received his early education in English medium at Stewart school, Cuttack. Mahapatra comes from a Christian family. This piece of information is hardly known to the critics. His grandfather could be called the 'rice christian' because in the time of famine and starvation he sought refuge from a Christian mission and in the process adopted a new faith for himself and his family. After his Master's Degree in Physics, he joined as a teacher in 1949 and served in different Government colleges of Orissa. He retired in 1986 as a Professor of Physics at Ravenshaw College, Cuttack. Jayanta Mahapatra began writing poems rather late in comparison with his contemporaries but this late beginning does not in any way pose as a setback for him to emerge as a leading Indian English poet today.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1: Who is called the 'rice Christian '?

Q2: Does Mahapatra's late beginning affect his poetic career ?

Q3: When did Mahapatra retire and as what?

14.3.2 His Works

Jayanta Mahapatra began his literary career as a writer of short stories but very soon he turned to poetry and came to be recognized as one of the eminent Indo English poets. He has published about seventeen volumes of poetry. A selection of his best poems was published as a collection entitled *The Best of Jayanta Mahapatra* in 1995 edited by Dr. P. P. Raveendrawn. This collection covers the poetry written by him from 1971 to 2005. His seventeen volumes of verse are : *Close the Sky, Ten by Ten (1971); Swayamvara and other poems (1971) ; A Father's Hours (1976); A Rain of Rites*

(1976); Waiting (1979); The False Start (1980); Relationship (1980); Life Signs (1983); Dispossessed Nests (1986); Selected Poems (1987); Burden of Waves and Fruit (1988); Temple (1989); A Whiteners of Bone (1992); The Best Of Jayanta Mohapatra (1995); Shadow Space (1997); Bore Face (2001), and Random Descent (2005). It can be seen from the above mentioned titles that Jayanta Mahapatra has produced an impressive amount of poetry. A wide range and varieties of themes, style and technique mark his poetry from the beginning. For instance, his concerns with earth, life and language are found in his early poetry with fear and despair being the leitmotif. The first volume of poems *Close the Sky,Ten by Ten* has forty nine short lyrics which express love and loneliness as a dominant theme. The second volume of poems *Svayamvara & Other Poems* which includes thirty nine poems deals with fear of death, loneliness and human sufferings. The third volume *A Father's Hours* is about the relationship with a father. According to Bruce King (*The Shapes of Solitude: The poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra*,1986), Mahapatra's early poetry reflects his sense of belonging to his native Orissa .

The four volumes viz *Rain of Rites*, *Waiting*, *The False Start* and *Relationship* constitute his middle phase as a poet . The poems included in these volumes deal with his consciousness of tradition and change. They also reflect his moods of despair. Mahapatra himself writes in the blurb of the collection *Rain of Rites* that poems are *"*from a land where everything endures while everything changes". We encounter here poems dealing with a variety of subjects such as the year's first rains, rivers and villages, the poet's attachment to his land of birth (Orissa).

The later volumes reveal Mahapatra's meditative tone and experimentation with different images of the land. *The False Start* for example, goes back to the earlier themes of death, pain, place and race while the more memorable verse collection *Relationship* deals with the poet's relation with his native place, Orissa and its history. It has been

said that in this phase Jayanta Mahapatra's poetic style saw a new development and he changed from a romantic to a modernist. Some of the themes treated in the last eight volumes are: Hinduism, Temples and their mythical structures, rituals of love and hope and even contemporary events such as the Bhopal gas tragedy. In the volume *Dispossessed Nests,* the poet is acutely aware of the chaotic situations surrounding us. Two more collections viz. *Shadow Space* (1997) and *Bare Face* (2001) followed the volume *The Best of Jayanta Mahapatra* and here Mahapatra's language seems to be more refined. In 2005, he published a collection of forty nine poems in a volume entitled *Random Descent*. The poems are divided into three sections. True to the title of the collection, the poems have a random selection of themes and images he has so far concerned himself within his illustrious poetic career. A significant feature in Jayanta's Mahapatra's recent poetry is the mystical tone striving to find a definite meaning in life.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q4: Name some of the famous collections of poetry by Mahapatra?

Q5: Which volumes constitute his middle phase?

Q6: What is the theme of *The False Start*?



14.4 LET US SUM UP

This unit discussed the life and works of the poet, Jayanta Mahapatra. As you have finished reading the unit, you are now able to list down the various poems and collections of poetry by the poet. Also, after a thorough reading of the unit you will be able to discuss the life and works of the poet in a detailed manner.



14.5 FURTHER READING

1. Pandey, Mithilesh K. (1999). *Contemporary Indian Literature*: A *Humanistic Perspective*. Kalyani Publishers : New Delhi.

2. *Indian English Literature*. IGNOU: 2001.

3. *Understanding Poetry:The Indian Poets*. IGNOU.1991.



14.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q1: He, who in the time of famine and starvation, seeks refuge from a Christian mission and adopts this new faith can be called a "rice Christian".

Ans to Q2: No, the late beginning does not in any way pose as a setback for him to emerge as a leading Indo-Anglican poet today.

Ans to Q3: Mahapatra retired as a Professor of Physics at Ravenshaw College Cuttack in 1986.

Ans to Q4: *Close The Sky, Ten By Ten, Swayamvara and Other Poems, A Father's House, A Rain of Rites, Waiting, The False Start, Relationship, Life Signs, Dispossessed Nests* among other volumes of Mahapatra.

Ans to Q5: The four volumes viz. *Rain of Rites, Waiting, The False Start, Relationship* constitute his middle phase as a poet.

Ans to Q6: "The False Start" goes back to the earlier themes of death, rain, place and race.



14.7 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q 1: Write a short note on the poetic works of Jayanta Mahapatra.

Q 2: What are the common features of Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry?

Q 3: Give a detailed analysis of Jayanta Mahapatra as an Indian English poet.

*** ***** ***