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LIMINALITY AND THE "COMMONS" IN SELECTED POEMS BY JAYANTA MAHAPATRA

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Abstract

Jayanta Mahapatra's writing has been described as intrinsically Indian in its sensibility. The geographical and cultural landscapes of Odisha are inextricable from his poetic symbols: these shared spaces, or commons, are the site of all conflict in his poetry. The idea of the commons is one of universal accessibility and collective experience, in which resources and spaces are available to anyone who wishes to use them. In practice, however, there is really no true "common" space. All commons are governed by law, manipulated by social norms, and reflect the existing divisions of society in how they are treated. They are ambiguous liminal spaces that carry cultural tension.

Liminality essentially refers to a threshold, a space where the public and private begin to intersect, where the defined boundaries of interaction in these separate realms of life begin to blur. This paper argues that Jayanta Mahapatra's treatment of the commons is liminal in understanding, where the commons act as the background and the basis for class-based, caste-based, sexual and gendered conflict. Water, in terms of the seashore and the riverbank, is a recurring motif, as is the courtyard: both act as interstitial spaces that blur the public/private distinction. The inherently political nature of Mahapatra's poetry and all his social commentary is therefore based on this uneasy ambiguity that defies categorisation. The temples, villages, rivers and seas of his native state, Odisha, figure repeatedly in his poetry as symbols for this cultural tension.

Keywords: liminality, commons, interstitiality, river, culture

1. INTRODUCTION

Jayanta Mahapatra's poetic aesthetic is one that maintains a self-conscious Indian sensibility, one that is aware of its expression being in English rather than the mother tongue but which is not limited by that language. One is reminded of Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* being described by U R Ananthamurthy as "a Kannada novel written in English". Mahapatra's writing has been described as having a modernist form—due to his tendency to use open-ended, fragmented and non-linear images and recurring symbols—but postmodern content, with emphasis on dissolving the self/world binary and a constant fluctuation between sensual excess and deprivation (Padihari, 2007). He looks inward while simultaneously laying the world out in symbols of culture, belief, landscape and manner.

His native state, Odisha, features prominently in his writing: landmarks, geographical features and cultural markers are used as symbols of identity and community. The concerns of women and marginalised sections of society are another frequent theme, with several poems presenting raw images that are quite brazen in their starkness (Prasad, 1984).

For Mahapatra, ecology is the ultimate marker of differences between communities precisely because it is meant to be a unifying concept. When he represents the marginalised, he drives home the difference between a privileged tourist viewpoint and a lived space viewpoint. The privileged tourist looks upon the commons with an uninvested, impersonal lens; whereas for the insider, the brutal interdependence and juxtaposition of man and nature is inevitable. For marginalised communities, the natural ecosystem is not a scenery to be admired or a cause to be advocated for, but

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simply the space in which they belong. What is therefore the "commons" for one is then simply home for the other.
Traditionally, the commons refer to places that are open for public use, which are shared for utilitarian purposes like agriculture or as recreational spaces. Although the origin of the term is based on territorial divisions, the concept expanded over time to refer to spaces and natural resources that have historically been utilised by a population in mutually agreed ways governed by social norms and structures (De Moor, 2012). The term is usually used to refer to forests, water bodies, pastures, and fisheries—often collectively referred to as the environmental commons—but has also been used for more abstract concepts. The idea of the cultural commons, which means "a system of intellectual resources including ideas, creativity and styles, traditional knowledge, rites and customs, and shared and participated productive techniques of a community" (Santagata et al., 2010), is an example of such an abstract reading.
The idea of the commons is one of universal accessibility and collective experience, in which resources and spaces are available to anyone who wishes to use them. In practice, however, there is really no true "common" space. Natural resources remain open-access goods, but there is a "growing tendency to restrict access to them by establishing private property rights" (De Moor, 2012). All commons are therefore governed by law, manipulated by social norms, and reflect the existing divisions of society in how they are treated. They are ambiguous liminal spaces that carry cultural tension.
Liminality essentially refers to a threshold, a space where the public and private begin to intersect, where the defined boundaries of interaction in these separate realms of life begin to blur. It comes from Homi K Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994), where he delineates the idea of liminality through his concept of "interstitial spaces". While Bhabha focuses on borders in terms of identity, the idea of liminal or interstitial spaces is not limited to such explicit demarcations (Chakraborty, 2016). Public spaces like marketplaces or areas of worship are thresholds in much the same way, as are seashores and riverbanks. It can therefore be argued that the sea and the river themselves are also liminal spaces, in that they represent a means of passage across boundaries but are also boundaries in their own right. In the Indian cultural context, in which water is both a spiritual and material common ground, water itself becomes a site of struggle between states of being (Fallon & Jaiswal, 2012). It can therefore be established that seashores and riverbanks as well as the sea and the river are not only commons but also liminal spaces.

Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry has numerous examples of these settings. He relies heavily on imagery and situates many of his poems around water bodies, including passing references to them even when they are not the primary setting. The several rivers and beaches in his home state, Odisha, become both physical spaces around which social and personal conflicts occur, and abstract containers of civilisational values.

Mahapatra traverses his commons as liminal spaces: they are used as the background for a variety of social, cultural, religious, economic and sexual conflicts. Another aspect of liminality in his poetry, which connects to the idea of urban commons, is the sense of eerie loneliness that pervades these public spaces. In some ways, Mahapatra's shore and river are spaces that bring together disparate sections of society, but in others, they are the background to an isolation that is purely social in its origin, born of exclusion.

The commons are inherently political spaces due to their liminality: the blurring of public/private lines gives rise to identity conflicts between the ingroup and outgroup, arising not merely from the practical considerations of efficiency or equitable distribution, but also from the diverse cultural values accorded to spaces which must be shared.

Mahapatra's treatment of these political spaces ties into the idea of spatial justice (Soja, 2019). The commons are a rapidly fading resource, and so it is important to acknowledge a poet who respects them as commons, not just as landscape, and to analyse his treatment of them.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The distinction between public and private space is one that is increasingly blurred in contemporary times, leading to the rise of what has been called the "urban commons" (Feinberg et al., 2021). Historically, the commons were lands and spaces that were owned by no one and therefore by everyone. However, they can now be differentiated into those that are truly open-access, those owned by the state on behalf of its citizens; and those owned by certain sections of the population but left open to all (Feinberg et al., 2021). With both government and corporate encroachment on the rise, the distinction between the first two is increasingly difficult to define, and so spaces that were originally commons are taken over, privatised, and rebranded as public. Since interaction in the commons is still dictated by social conventions (and therefore traditional exclusions), the line between the commons and private property is further blurred. In India, this plays out as caste-based, class-based, religious and gendered exclusion from these "common" spaces.

The commons therefore act as liminal spaces: "a period and an area of ambiguity, a sort of social limbo" (Preston-Whyte, 2004). The idea of liminality is derived from the Latin word "limen", meaning "threshold".

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Liminal spaces are the "in-between location of cultural action", acting as the negotiation point for relationships, identities and interactions (Chakraborty, 2016). They simultaneously represent a brief moment of freedom from the constraints of either side of the public/private boundary, and a state of anxiety resulting from such a transitional state. Bhabha, in *The Location of Culture*, refers to these spaces as interstices, which are "innovative sites of collaboration and contestation" that create the transience responsible for social evolution (1994). The public imitates the private in its exclusionary assertions but can never fully exclude anyone from the commons.

The transition from the known to the unknown in liminal spaces "may be accompanied by unease in some cases, it may also produce a feeling of heightened sensitivity or a deeper awareness of the special qualities of the place" (Preston-Whyte, 2004). In the case of spaces such as riverbanks or seashores, which in India are not only recreational but also religious or spiritual, the cultural experience of such qualities can result in the space being deemed sacred (Fallon & Jaiswal, 2012). The term "tirtha"—which has come to be used as "sacred space" but is inherently connected to water because of its original meaning, "ford" or "river crossing"—establishes the link between spiritual sanctity and water, making water bodies important sites of culture in India.

The ghats of the Ganga and other river deltas have been the setting for several literary and artistic pieces, including Mahapatra's poetry. Motifs connected to nature and human-nature parallels are abundant in his poetry. The search for identity in his poetic persona revolves around a connection to his natural surroundings, which to him form his cultural landscape (Akhtar, 2018).

However, the very social merging that contributes to the liminality of the commons can make them an unpleasant place for those opposed to such mixing (Preston-Whyte, 2004). Mahapatra's Odisha or India is a world of gaps, a dissemi-nation, as Bhabha puts it: a nation split by its heterogeneity (1994). His poetry juxtaposes people of the highest degree of privilege with the most marginalised sections of society against the same landscape, bringing to the reader's attention the idea of spatial justice.

Spatial justice (and injustice) requires us to acknowledge that the geography of our surroundings is not equitably available to us all. Valued resources are generally governed by social structures and the political organisation of space, be it in terms of deliberate capitalist prioritisation of profit-generating infrastructure or inevitable natural unevenness in the distribution of resources across the region (Soja, 2019). This structural inequality dwells in the Firstspace: it is visible, physical and measurable. The manner in which interactions actually occur in the physical environment is the Secondspace: the conceptual space that represents social hierarchy, customs and norms that are not necessarily quantifiable but are internalised (Soja, 1996).

For Mahapatra, however, the commons are a Thirdspace: a "simultaneous bar and bearer of difference, a space where oppressed and oppressor are able to come together, free (maybe only momentarily) of oppression itself" (Bhabha, 1994). Mahapatra's use of his ecological landscape is therefore to drive home its unifying potential while emphasising its current discriminatory quality. He often resorts to water: rivers, seas, beaches and ghats, returning repeatedly to the Ganga, Daya and Mahanadi (the former being nationally relevant and the latter two native to Odisha). These spaces, for him, are spaces where poverty and disease are rampant: they do not "mitigate human miseries or sufferings but rather simply exhibit them to public gaze" (Lokhande, 2011).

3. ANALYSIS

Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry relies on imagery, usually in the form of harsh juxtapositions between the familiarly serene and the violently jarring.

On the Bank of the Ganges focuses on the treatment of the Ganga as sacred, by bringing into question what "sacred" means to the crowd that occupies this space. Mahapatra immediately reinforces a contradiction by calling the riverbank a "mildewed, magic bank" (Mahapatra, 2017). Another is brought in by the juxtaposition of the boatman's song with the eerie silence that pervades the ghat despite the crowd: a silence that the poet says is not the verbal kind but rather that of a mental block, a "dumb impulse". The Ganga, the most sacred of all rivers and the most hallowed of all commons, is littered and contaminated by the very worship that is meant to venerate it. It is the purifier of all sins, but the scenes unfolding on the ghats are those of exclusion, discrimination, segregation and blind faith. Water is therefore both commons and a site of conflict in terms of identity: the Ganga and Varanasi in general are hotbeds of caste and communal tension, as well as notorious for sexual harassment and gendered violence. Mahapatra therefore plays on the unsettling quality of a violated sanctum, making the banks of the Ganga an interstitial space: existing on the boundary of pure and impure, of equal and unequal.

Often, Mahapatra appears to be directly addressing the liminality being described thus far. He is aware of the reasons for the effectiveness of his juxtapositions. In the poem *In a Night of Rain*, the riverbank is the setting of hesitant sensuality for a couple, and also for the birth of a newborn girl. The two images are concurrent as if to say

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that this birth is a natural consequence of the sexual act described previously. Yet the poet immediately moves to the loss of a lover, to loneliness and then to death, as if to render the previous hope for life pointless. The rain then is not only symbolic of fertility and the potential for life, but is also a merciless force washing away meaning and memory. It fosters both union and separation, both birth and death, both identity and the lack of it. Water is also a liminal space for the human/animal conflict: dogs, monkeys, crocodiles, crows and other fauna recur as symbols in his poems, including this one.

Another interesting facet of the poem is how he refers to "homeless women who have put up their huts" (Mahapatra, 2017): implying that huts are not homes. In a coastal state like Odisha, cities are forced to expand towards the sea as their population grows: pushing fishing communities, who traditionally live by the seashore, further and further towards the edge of the water. This forced nomadic existence is constrained by the limits of geography, because there is only so much of the edge of the shore to occupy (Feinberg et al., 2021). *In A Night of Rain* describes this feeling aptly as "the unknown coastline of a land disappearing into the sea" (Mahapatra, 2017).

Fishing villages are therefore increasingly crowded, ghetto-ised spaces, whose segregation from the mainland is driven by caste hierarchies and whose occupation of any patch of land is therefore always temporary, subject to the shifting of an upper-caste population. This sort of dislocation is reminiscent of Bhabha's concept of "unhomedness", distinct from homelessness, that refers to a resistance to being easily assimilated into accepted boundaries of home/world (1994). For this marginalised community, once again, the public/private binary is unclear. The commons are not merely a thirdspace for them: they have no place in the firstspace at all.

Such a blurring of the home into the world, which results in an almost permanent occupation of the commons by those who have no space of their own, has deep-seated class connotations. The word "*poramboku*", for example, is a Tamil word that originally meant "commons". It is derived from "*puram pokku*", meaning "alongside the city" or "wayside", referring to places not owned by anyone and therefore owned by all. It can be found in old land revenue documents, but is now a derogatory word, a class/caste slur directed at "those who loiter": those who therefore have no identity tied to a place to be proud of (Krishna, 2018). This change in the meaning of the word drives the perception of those who cannot afford private spaces. Huts are therefore not homes, they are merely an eyesore on the otherwise picturesque landscape of the riverbank.

For Mahapatra, the commons also serve as liminal spaces in that they represent a shared cultural memory, one that appears to transcend social strata. Myth therefore becomes a facet of liminality in his poetry because such cultural significances transform the commons into not only a physical location but also an abstraction loaded with tension. Some public places might be inherently religious as places of worship, but even areas of natural beauty have been equipped with spirituality and turned into pilgrimage spots. This leads to an interesting situation in which the very existence of a scenic spot therefore leads to the popping up of religious spaces around it because of the Indian tendency to associate nature with devotion (Fallon & Jaiswal, 2012), and these religious spaces often become hubs of art and education.

In *Dhauli*, for example, the river is the bearer of memory. It is the shared geography that, to a long-lost native, serves as the reminder of identity and in fact leads to an identity crisis: the rituals, emotions and traditions associated with the river are deeply familiar but also forgotten. These spaces are therefore the meeting point for the old and the young, the ancient and the modern, the village and the city: the point where time curls into itself as sunrises and sunsets blend into each other.

4. CONCLUSION

The poetic persona in Jayanta Mahapatra's writing is a fascinating one. In several poems that present disturbingly realistic portrayals of the Indian socio-cultural ethos, the persona acts as a mere chronicler, often never taking an ethical stance. It is as if Mahapatra forces us to acknowledge the plight of the world, presenting contrasting images without explicitly commenting on them and choosing to leave the social implications of these images to the reader's interpretation. This contributes to the sense of unease that is predominant in his poetic landscape: the constant, exhausting liminality of the world is in constant view.

However, it is important to note that Mahapatra is still writing from a point of privilege. For him, the landscape is a native one, and so he is not truly a tourist; however, the experiences of the insider are not his. His representations of the marginalised, in terms of class, caste or gender, are hardly ever from lived experience but rather from observation. There is hence an undeniable sense of distance between the scenes being presented and the voice in the poem, and it is difficult to ascertain whether that distance is deliberate or unintentional: whether the poem is meant to maintain that distance to drive home the privileged status of the poetic persona (who is separate from the poet), or whether that distance between the persona's viewpoint and lived reality is an inevitable byproduct of the poet's own

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social standing. The latter may be more likely, because often, his persona also transcends mere observation, becoming indistinguishable from omniscience. He could therefore be described perhaps as an "attached outsider".

In an interview shortly before his passing (Das, 2023), Mahapatra referred to the act of writing poetry itself as traversing the meandering of a river. To him, landscape is merely an extension of the person, and so the actions of the person are reflective of the space they occupy. This ties into an analysis of his poetry as brimming with liminality in the commons: art is a cultural unifier and yet inherently representative of social divide. The identity of the artist is inseparable from his art, and yet the art is a medium of connection across strata. The accessibility of art is limited by constraints to the accessibility of social spaces, and yet art often serves as the bridge between segregated groups.

5. STATEMENTS & DECLARATIONS:

Use of AI Statement

The authors declare that they have not used generative artificial intelligence, specifically ChatGPT in the writing of this manuscript and/or in the creation of images, graphics, tables, or their corresponding captions

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