UNIT 38  A.K. RAMANUJAN AND JAYANT MAHAPATRA

Structure
38.0  Objectives
38.1  Introduction
38.2  A.K. Ramanujan (March 16, 1929 – July 13, 1993)
38.3  Self-Portrait
   38.3.1  Introduction
   38.3.2  The Text
   38.3.3  Critical Appreciation
38.4  Chicago Zen
   38.4.1  Introduction
   38.4.2  The Text
   38.4.3  Analysis
38.5  On the Death of a Poem
   38.5.1  Introduction
   38.5.2  The Text
   38.5.3  Critical Appreciation
38.6  Jayant Mahapatra (Oct. 22, 1928...)
38.7  Hunger
   38.7.1  Introduction
   38.7.2  The Text
   38.7.3  Critical Appreciation
38.8  A Rain of Rites
   38.8.1  Introduction
   38.8.2  The Text
   38.8.3  Analysis
38.9  Let Us Sum Up
38.10 Answers to Self-check Exercises

38.0  OBJECTIVES

After having read this unit you will be able to:

- talk about life and works of A.K. Ramanujan and Jayant Mahapatra;
- analyse critically three poems of A.K. Ramanujan – Self-Portrait, Chicago Zen and On the Death of a Poem;
- examine two poems of Jayant Mahapatra – Hunger and A Rain of Rites.

38.1  INTRODUCTION

In this unit you are going to read three poems of A.K. Ramanujan and two poems of Jayant Mahapatra.

Ezekiel and Parthasarthy praised A.K. Ramanujan as the best of Indian poets. Ramanujan’s poetry reflects form without having any formal structure and a
range of technique beyond those of any Indian English poets. His poetry blends Indian as well as European models into new form. Through his poetry he has shown that Indian poets can work within their own literary tradition and yet can be modern. His poetry very successfully exploited south Indian Brahmin roots and contrasted it with his modern life in America.

In the first poem of this unit entitled Self-Portrait, Ramanujan probes into the human identity. In the second poem, Chicago Zen, the persona in the poet suggests the intuitive knowledge of Zen Buddhism as the solution to the problems generated by a modern kind of life represented by American city, Chicago. In On the Death of a Poem, his third poem, Ramanujan seems to regret the loss of meaning which all poems must suffer from due to linguistic limitation in which they are compulsorily born.

Jayant Mahapatra quite like a teacher of physics did a thorough analysis as to what constituted a modern poem. Sound, image and theme, thus discovered, were the elements on which he organized his poetry. Unlike other modern poets who often used topics from urban life, Mahapatra made use of the rural landscape and local tradition. His Christian birth and the Hindu cultural background account for many of his poems expressing a sense of alienation.

In this unit Jayant Mahapatra’s poem Hunger expresses the moral paradox of the human beings whose hunger of belly overweighs the hunger of sex. Mahapatra’s another poem A Rain of Rites which you are going to read is a lyric of troubled soul and undefined unhappiness. The poet does not get the answers of many of the questions of his life like one in this poem “What holds my rain so it’s hard to overcome?” Yet the poem is an attempt to balance inner world with that of the outer.

38.2 A.K. RAMANUJAN (MARCH 16, 1929-JULY 13, 1993)

An Indian poet, writer, translator, philologist and playwright Attipate Krishnaswami Ramanujan was born in Mysore in 1929 into a Tamil Brahmin family. His father was a professor of Mathematics and mother a housewife. He was born in a multicultural background where Tamil, Kannada and English were spoken.

He was educated at Marimallapa High school and Maharaja College, Mysore. He did his masters in English from the University of Mysore and taught in various colleges in south India mostly in Belgaum. He obtained diploma in Theoretical Linguistics from Deccan College Pune in 1958. Next year he went to Indiana University on a Fulbright fellowship to do his Ph.D. in Linguistics.

In 1962 he was appointed to the University of Chicago where he remained till he died during a minor surgery in 1993. Gradually he got identified with the university’s department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations where his works as a translator and interpreter of Indian epics, oral narratives and devotional poetry won him MacArthur Prize fellowship or genius award in 1983. For his contributions to Literature, the Govt. of India awarded him Padmashri in 1976.

There were long intervals between his publications. Of his poetical works the most notable are The Striders (1966), Relations (1971), Selected Poems (1976)
and Second Sight (1986). His collected poems came out in 1995 which included The Black Hen as its fourth and last section. But it was his artfully made five volumes of Translations from Tamil, Kannada and Telugu that made him internationally known.

These are The Interior Landscape (1967), Speaking of Siva (1993), Hymns for the Drowning (1981), Poems of Love and War (1985) and When God is a Customer (1995).

Towards his latter phase of life, he turned his attention to another rich area of Indian life, culture and folklore. Together with his essays on literature and culture these have been published in Collected Essays (1999). Folktales from India (1994), a selection of oral narratives from twenty-two Indian languages, is one of his last publications. His writings in Kannada which included three collections of verse and a novella along with his translation of U.R. Ananthmurthi’s novel Sanskara (1976) were some of his other contributions to literature.

Ramanujan’s poetry is largely autobiographical and reminisces his family and Hindu heritage. Indian myth, history, culture, heritage and above all, its topography and environment form the myriad threads of his poetic fabric. His poetry often deals with a contrast between the East and the West, the anxiety of an exile and constant search for native roots.

Regarding his poetic ingredients, Ramanujan himself admitted that Linguistics, English, and Anthropology provided the outer forms of his poetry such as meter, logic and other ways of shaping experience. Similarly his long stay in India as a student and teacher, his frequent visits, field trips, personal and professional pre-occupation with Kannada, Tamil, the classics and folklore gave him substance as well as the inner forms like images and symbols for his poetry.

Ramanujan’s poetry is image-oriented. His imagery is particular, precise, concrete, vivid and realistic and hence different from those of others. His poetry is marked for its psychological realism and masterly craftsmanship. The terseness of his diction, his consummate skillfulness in using rhymes and assonance, his sharp etching of crystalized images and his masterly control in handling English language make Ramanujan one of the most significant poets in India.

**Self-check Exercise I**

Answer the following questions in the space provided. Read the answers (38.9.2) after doing the exercise.

1) In what sense was A.K. Ramanujan an Indian English poet?

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A.K. Ramanujan and Jayant Mahapatra
38.3 SELF – PORTRAIT

38.3.1 Introduction

The poem *Self-Portrait* you are going to read is a highly philosophical poem. It is one of Ramanujan’s most obscure poems. Here Ramanujan himself may be the speaker who says that he resembles everyone but himself. Perhaps he means to say that though he is a man having numerous identities, none of them can be regarded as his true identity. The speaker is not able to portray himself in definite terms. The law of optics says that we see only visible reality: but the speaker observes that even so-called visible reality is so invisible. His self bears just a little stamp of his father or ancestors but the self is still a mystery.

Though written just in nine lines and one sentence the poem opens a vast speculative world. The lack of any rhyme and rhythm in the poem is quite in keeping with the indeterminate nature of the self-portrait the poet would like to paint. He dramatizes the self whose essential passivity allows it to resemble others over an indeterminate stretch of time.

Now go through the poem-
38.3.2 The Text

I resemble everyone
but myself, and sometimes see
in shop – windows
despite the well-known laws
of optics
the portrait of a stranger,
date unknown,
often signed in a corner
by my father.

Note:
I resemble everyone/but myself : The statement seems extremely paradoxical. Here the poet perhaps means to say that a man has numerous identities none of which can be regarded his true identity.
The well-known laws/of optics : This means we see only what is visible to us; if we have normal vision, we would see things as they really are.

38.3.3 Critical Appreciation

The poem “Self-Portrait” by A.K. Ramanujan is an introspective poem. By looking at window-shop, the poet looks at himself and feels the loss of identity as to who he is. It is significant to note that what this poem from the Striders (1966) conveys is the usual theme of modernist poetry in general.

The poem is not as simple and direct as its title suggests. When you read the poem the first question that will arise in your mind is as to whose self-portrait does the poem refers to. The question complicates further when we learn that the portrait is of unknown date having only its creator’s sign below in the corner. This may refer to the fact that ancestral root or biological factors are merely partial source of human identity. Similarly the self-portrait’s unknown date may refer to inexplicable nature of the human existence.

“I resemble everyone/but myself” is the thesis statement of the poem which though seems contradictory in itself is a fact of life. Before we analyse this statement, you may be curious to know as to who the speaker of the poem is.

A look into the poet’s biographical detail may give us some clue. In this context it is important to note that the poet had been living in the USA for more than five years when he wrote this poem in 1966. Since he was becoming Americanized, he perhaps felt he was no longer an Indian except his ancestral roots in India. Here taking reference from his personal experience, the poet seems to have universalized the concept of ‘Self-Portrait’. This self-portrait refers to every sensitive individual who often suffer from lack of tune within himself. Coming back to the thesis statement, you may note that it refers to universal oneness of the human beings. This means externally the human beings are one and the same; their thought-pattern, hopes, fear and anxiety shows universal oneness. But the problem is individual’s own inner contradictions. An individual is not a true reflection of his own self.

The poem, therefore, talks of personal reconciliation in this world of contradictions. The poet believes poetry has transformational power and can
change people’s day-to-day philosophy of life. If an individual would become his true-self, he would be able to live his life with better insight and fulfillment.

As discussed above, the title refers to the self-portrait of the poet and through him those of every individual. The poem is written in the first person narrative and the emphasis on the personal pronoun “I” and “my father” very appropriately refers to the speaker’s quest for identity.

The poet draws concrete image of a stranger seen in shop-windows which he wants the readers to see. This vision of a stranger cast a multiplicity of images seen in passing shop-windows. The sight-image of a dateless self-portrait signed in a corner by its creator becomes an objective correlative of the true self-portrait of the poet and through him that of all human beings.

The poem does not mention specific name of any character. It focuses on reality rather than fantasy. Like many other confessional poems, it too is written in monologue. The mood of the poem is reflective and tone serious. The poem is written in open form, with no definite line-length, rhyme and meter. This kind of form is quite in keeping with the theme of the poem which is the quest for true identity of an individual. This poem of Ramanujan like the confessional poems of Nissim Ezekiel serves for him as therapeutic balm.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-check Exercise II</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Answer the following questions in the space provided. Read the answers (38.9.2) after doing the exercise.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1) What does the line “I resemble everyone/but myself” imply?</td>
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<td>2) Who do you think is the speaker of the poem?</td>
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<td>3) What does the ‘Self-Portrait’ with “date unknown” and “often signed in the corner by my father” imply?</td>
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38.4 CHICAGO ZEN

38.4.1 Introduction

Chicago Zen like Ramanujan's self-portrait is a complex poem. Chicago Zen is an incoherent poem rich in suggestion and wider in implication. This poem like self-portrait you just read is seemingly meaningless and therefore complex. The speaker of the poem passes on the listeners certain suggestions. They are asked to keep their houses neat and clean and all their children named. He also requests them to be careful while crossing the pavements lest they should stumble down. He also tells his listeners that countries can neither be reached by jet nor by boat but only by answering the questions ‘walls and small children ask’ and finally by answering ‘all calls of nature’. He also suggests them to keep a watch on their steps especially while climbing up or down on floor from a staircase. All these suggestions seem too common even trivial. You should go through the poem again and again to understand what might be the wider implications of the suggestions. You will know some of these while reading the critical appreciation of the poem.

38.4.2 The Text

The poem appears to be a monologue. The speaker may be the persona in the poet looking for his own philosophy of life while he encounters the modern ways of life in Chicago. Zen Buddhism which focuses on meditation and intuitive knowledge seems to offer him some of the solutions to his problems. The poem is written in free verse and dramatic style. With the help of images, in an ironical mode of treatment, the poet very effectively presents the dilemma of modern life and a solution thereof.

Glossary

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tr>
<td>Zen</td>
<td>A Buddhist sect which believes in meditation and intuitive knowledge. Indian word Dhyana (meditation) became Cha’n in China and Zen in Japan.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tidy</td>
<td>arranged neatly and with everything in order.</td>
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<td>Frothing</td>
<td>Full of a mass of small bubbles especially on the surface of a liquid; Foam.</td>
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<td>Thumbnail</td>
<td>the nail on the thumb.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lobster</td>
<td>a sea creature with a hard shell, a long body divided into eight sections, eight legs and two large claws.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Louse</td>
<td>a small insect that lives on the bodies of humans and animals: head louse.</td>
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<td>Antipodes</td>
<td>a way of referring to Australia and Newziland, often used in a harmonious way.</td>
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<td>Hashish</td>
<td>a drug made from resin of the hemp plant which gives a feeling of being relaxed when it is smoked or chewed.</td>
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<td>Parasols</td>
<td>a type of umbrella that is used for example on beaches or outside restaurants to protect people from hot sun.</td>
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<td>Threshold</td>
<td>the floor or ground at the bottom of a doorway, considered as the entrance to a building room.</td>
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38.4.3 Analysis

The poem *Chicago Zen* is written by A.K. Ramanujan while he lived in Chicago, one of the largest cities of America. The poem is an account of the poet’s conflict between his Indian soul and the modern American culture he encountered in Chicago and its resolution. Like Nissim Ezekiel’s *A Poem of Dedication* which you have just read, A.K. Ramanujan’s poem too narrates the progress of poet’s mind, how he comes to terms with life. Taking clue from the Zen Buddhism the poet turns to meditative and intuitive knowledge. He becomes more careful towards sanitation and caring towards “all his children”, watchful on “traffic lights” while taking steps especially “at first high threshold” and “on sudden low” and especially when he wishes to reach his country.

If you observe the poem closely you may come to the finding that the title of the poem *Chicago Zen* does not refer to a simple and direct meaning. Here Chicago may symbolically represent the modern culture of America and Zen Buddhism with its intuitive knowledge and meditation as its solution, to come to terms with life in the face of modernity.

In the poem the words ‘you’ and ‘your’ recur several times to emphasise what the speaker suggests is very important and not easy to grasp. Here the speaker or the poet knows it because he himself sat for meditation. The poem is a monologue where the speaker is persona in the poet talking to himself. You may note that the closing lines of the poem “…and watch/for the last/step that’s never there” is very impactful in the sense it keeps the readers guessing its meaning. The poem’s written in the second person narrative. The mood of the poem is brooding and tone ironic. The theme of the poem is to give readers a lesson that they should be watchful, caring and reflective in approach when faced wish the humdrums of modern life. The rhythm of the poem is conversational like scenes from a drama. Since the poet examins the poet’s personal experience, the poem is confessional and a kind of monologue. The poet very beautifully creates concrete images and successfully blends their different types:

“The traffic light turns orange
on 57th and Dorchester, and you stumble,
you fall into a vision of forest fires,
enter a frothing Himalayan river,
rapid, silent.” Through the play of light in the city the poet waves another beautiful image:
“on the 14th floor,
Lake Michigan crawls and crawls
in the window”.

The poem is divided into four stanzas. Through the two instructions that the poet passes in the first stanza on “tidy your house especially living room” and “do not forget to name all your children” perhaps he means to say that in this busy life our house including all our family members should be a very important concern for us all.

The speaker continues his piece of advice even in the second stanza. The speaker wants his listeners to remain watchful of their steps because “sight may strike you blind in unexpected place”. In the second stanza itself we see another scene: “your thumbnail/cracks a lobster louse on the windowpane/ from your daughter’s hair/and you drown, eyes open/towards the Indies, the antipodes”. The cracking of lice from daughter’s hair reminds the poet of the eastern countries perhaps of India where life is so leisurely and full of concern and care.
In the third stanza the speaker explains how “country can not be reached by jet” “nor by boat on jungle river’. Neither can it be reached by “consuming hashish behind the Monkey-temple” “nor by any /other means of transport”. The series of negatives accelerate the impact of what could be the viable means of transport. The speaker emphasizes, country, (the soul of it) can be reached:

“but only be answering ordinary/black telephones, questions/ walls and small children ask, /and answering all calls of nature”

The poem is ironical in tone. The most striking example of irony in the poem is that it is not possible for a human being to reach country (to reach its soul) by jet or boat. It is possible to do so only by answering black telephone calls and answering all calls of nature. Here irony arises by play upon words “answering telephone calls and by “answering all calls of nature”.

Here black telephone perhaps refers to baseline telephones. We talk over it only when free from our work, we are comfortable at home. What do we answer to walls and children? Perhaps the questions of walls are the questions we ask ourselves usually when alone and those of the children are innocent questions like who they are, why someone is the other and why the countries are not one and the same etc.

The concluding stanza emphasizes the word ‘watch’ because what Nissim Ezekiel in his A Poem of Dedication says, it empowers us with better sight. The poet makes his reader alert about their steps:

“Watch it, I say, / especially at the first high/ threshold.” The second point is at “the sudden low/one near the end of the flight / of stairs”. The third point the poet wants people to be careful at is: “for the last/Step that’s never there”. All these steps may refer to our routine ups and downs in our life. Figuratively it may also refer to our spiritual progress in life.

**Self-check Exercise III**

*Answer the following questions in the space provided. Read the answers (38.9.2) after doing the exercise.*

1) **What does the title Chicago Zen refers to?**
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2) **Give examples of images the poet creates?**
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38.5 ON THE DEATH OF A POEM

38.5.1 Introduction

The poem *On the Death of a Poem* you are going to read is different from A.K. Ramanujan’s other poems in theme. Here the poet examines the cognitive process of mind through which a poet conceptualizes and expresses a poem in linguistic terms. The poet realizes that much of the truth that a poet experiences personally is lost in the process of its linguistic representation. This experience is not unlikely for the poet who was also a professor of Linguistics in which the limitation of language in capturing and presenting reality becomes a professional concern.

The process of conceptualizing a poem passes through three phases. Firstly, the images consult one another. These images like conscience-stricken jury, having allowed deliberation of multiple contending views, passes on value-judgment. The third phase comes when the images are expressed in linguistic terms “in a sentence”.

Now Go Through The Poem.

38.5.2 The Text

*On the Death of a Poem*

Images consult
one
another,
a conscience
stricken
Jury,
and come
slowly
to a sentence.

Glossary

**Image**: a mental picture that you have of what sb/sth is like or looks like.

**Conscience-Stricken**: feeling guilty about something you have done or failed to do.

**Jury**: a group of members of the public who listen to the facts of a case in a court and divide whether or not somebody is guilty of a crime.
38.5.3 Critical Appreciation

This short poem of A.K. Ramanujan talks of the process of conceptualization and formulation of a poem. This process begins in the mind of the poet when “images consult/one/another”. This core personal experience of the poet now moves to a stage of “a conscience-stricken jury” where they have to arrive at a value-judgment. A poets creative mind acts as a jury where it undergoes a lots of aesthetic and moral conflicts. As the images arrive at value judgment and linguistic consensus, they go on narrowing down their choices. This final process results into linguistic verdict “and come/slowly to a sentence”.

The “images consult/one/another” refers to the fact that within poet’s mind various possibilities are internalized. Similarly “a conscience-stricken/Jury” refers to the poetic process in the mind of the poet in which there is give and take of views among themselves. After enough discussion and debate the “poetic jury” passes on a final judgment which in written forms appear as poems. Thus, the poet turn multiple perspectives on the birth and status of a poem. The magnitude of truth that the poet experiences before suffers acutely when reduced to sentences or a poem. This is what the poet refers to by title On the Death of a Poem.

Perhaps the poet is in search of a more judicious, secular and subtle kind of theory and practice of poetry. By referring to word “jury” the poet refers to a sense of value-judgment and also that judicial verdict has a linguistic limitation. But while decoding meaning of a poem its interpretation goes much beyond linguistic signs.

The jury may know certain facts and may have wider connotation of a case but for the practical reasons, they deliver judgments based on limited and certain verified facts. Here the poet jury too suffers the same dilemma.

The speaker in the poem is a persona in the poet. The poem is written in the third person narrative. It is written in one sentence spread over three stanzas of three lines. The gaps between the stanzas indicate the gap in processing the meaning of a poem itself. The mood of the poem is reflective and tone serious. The poem personifies the stanza one and two till the final poem is delivered. It is as if Ramanujan wants to hold and propose the view that “the poem is a process of images operating upon one another before being given a fixed order”.

Self-check Exercise IV

*Answer the following questions in the space provided. Read the answers (38.9.2) after doing the exercise.*

1) Do you agree with the title of the poem as ‘On the Death of a Poem’? Give reasons.

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2) Give examples of use of personification in the poem.

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38.6 JAYANT MAHAPATRA (OCT. 22, 1928…)

One of the best-known Indian English poets Jayant Mahapatra was born in 1928 in Cuttack in the state of Orissa. He was born in a lower middle class Christian family. His father Lemuel was an inspector of Primary schools and mother a housewife who always had disagreement with the views and beliefs of her son. Though born and brought up in Christian tradition, he dealt all his life with dominant Hindu amphitheatre outside.

He had his early education at Steward European School Cuttack, honours in Physics from Ravenshaw College and first class master’s degree in Physics from Science College, Patna. At the young age of twenty one years he became a lecturer of physics. From his school days he grew as a lover of books. He began to learn English from his school days where he had opportunity to be taught by British, Australian teachers and a few Anglo-Indian poets. But he learnt English by reading Walter Scott, Edgar Rice Burroughs, H. Rider Hoggard, Faulkner and Hemmingway.

As a poet Jayant Mahapatra as has made his indelible mark on the Indian English poetry. Although his poetic career began late around 1938, he wrote profusely which more than compensated the loss on this account. His first book of poetry Close The Sky, Ten by Ten appeared in 1971 and was followed by Svayamvara and Other Poems (1971), A Rain of Rites (1976), Waiting (1979), The false Start (1980), Life Signs (1983), Dispossessed Nests (1986), The Poems Selected (1987), Burden of Waves and fruit (1988), The Temple (1989), A Whiteness of Bone (1992), The Best of Jayant Mahapatra (1995), Shadow Space (1997), Bare Face (2000) and Random Desert. Relationship (1980) a long poem in twelve sections, was selected for Sahitya Akademi Award of 1981. This was the first honour of its kind given to a volume of Indian English poetry. Jayant Mahapatra has also written short stories and essays and his three volumes of translations from the Oriya. In 1979 he edited Chandrabhaga, a literary bi-annual for fourteen years.

The finest multicultural poet writing in India, Jayant Mahapatra lived all his life in Orissa. No wonder, therefore, that Oriya landscape especially Puri and Konark has a strong presence in his poetry. But it is not these places but the mental, moral and spiritual life depicted in them that stamps his poetry as Indian. Except English language everything in his poetry is Indian. Mahapatra insisted that he should be considered as an Oriya poet who writes in English. Once he wrote, “Orissa is my land, my roots are there and my people. But my training was in English”. His perceptions of self and the outside world is the broad theme of his poetry. His poetry also reflects the poet’s efforts to correlate his inner as well as the outer self.
We observe so many influences on his life. He said, “You can’t separate yourself from history or myth”. Division of Orissa particularly multiple distribution of its parts among other states, the second world war, and his alienation from the dominant Hindu world had deeply influenced his poetry. As a poet Jayant Mahapatra was influenced by Robert Bly and American poets of 1960s and 1970s in using the landscape as a means of expressing his subjective feelings. Like romantic poets he employed nature or external objects as a stimulus to the deep ruminations of the self echoing deeply traditions of Wordsworth, Keats and Shelley. Similarly his acquaintance with the works of William Carlos Williams (1883-1963) and Ezra Pound (1885-1972) helped him to build up a belief that the logic of poem was ultimately in his inner relations rather than in its being narrative or argumentative. Jayant Mahapatra also read his favourite poets Pablo Neruda, North Eastern poets like Anjum Hassan, Robin Ngangom and Desmond. He was also influenced by the field poetry of William Carlos Williams, James Wright and the surrealists.

Jayant Mahapatra’s poetry is modernist both in the sense of theme and in the use of imagery. His images are conventional and often thought-provoking. Like his other contemporary Indian English poets, he too writes in free verse, having irregular stanza and without rhyming scheme. The tone of his poetry is almost colloquial and conversational. But the dictions he uses are often difficult. Despite everything, his poetry is different from the main-stream Indian verse”.

**Self-check Exercise V**

*Answer the following questions in the space provided. Read the answers (38.9.2) after doing the exercise.*

1) **Who was Jayant Mahapatra’s father and what did he do?**

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2) **What was Jayant Mahapatra’s educational background?**

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3) **Mention some of his important works.**

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38.7 HUNGER

38.7.1 Introduction

Hunger, the poem you are going to read depicts a pathetic scene in which you observe how hunger of belly forces a fisherman to offer his daughter for sex. The poem very powerfully presents the dialectics of the hunger for food and the hunger for sex. According to Mahapatra, “the poem is based on a true incident; it could easily have happened to me on the poverty–ridden sands of Gopalpur-on-sea. Often have I imagined myself walking those sands, my solitude and my inherent sexuality working on me, to face the girl inside the dimly lit palm frond shack”.

The poem unfolds in four dramatic scenes and has even a snatch of conversation. The gravity of the Hunger and the simplicity of treatment has made it one of the remarkable poems of Indian poetry in English. The poem is also marked for its profoundly human document of the experience established by the words and their arrangement.

Now go through the text.

38.7.2 The Text

It was hard to believe the flesh was heavy on my back,
The fisherman said: will you have her, carelessly,
trailing his nets and his nerves, as though his words
sanctified the purpose with which he faced himself.
I saw his white bone thrash his eyes.

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.

In the flickering dark his lean-to opened like a wound.
The wind was I, and the days and nights before.
Palm fronds scratched my skin. Inside the shack
an oil lamp splayed the hours bunched to those walls.
Over and over the sticky soot crossed the space of my mind.
I heard him say: my daughter, she’s just turned fifteen…
Feel her. I’ll be back soon, your bus leaves at nine.
The sky fell on me, and a father’s exhausted wile.
Long and lean, her years were cold as rubber.
She opened her wormy legs wide. I felt the hunger there,
the other one, the fish slithering, turning inside.

**Glossary:**

**trailing his nets** : dragging his nets behind him as he walked homewards.

**and his nerves** : he also seemed to drag his nerves; he tries to keep his nerves or mind under control as he controlled his nets.

**sanctified** : consecrate; give the appearance of being right or good.

**I saw his white bone thrash his eyes** : his white bone (teeth) thrashed (punished) his eyes; one bone thrash his eyes part of the body rebuking another part of it.

**Hope lay perhaps in burning the house I lived in** : the speaker’s sense of guilt was so intense that he thought the only way to regain his peace of mind would be to burn his house in remorse.

**Silence gripped my sleeves** : the speaker found himself speechless.

**Froth foam Palm frond** : the leaf of a palm.

**shack** : a humble cottage; a roughly built cabin.

**wile** : trick

**slithering** : slipping; creeping.

**sling** : a device by which a man whose hand or forearm has been injured can support the arm so that it does not have to hang.

**38.7.3 Critical Appreciation**

The poem you are going to read is a narrative poem containing outlines of a full-length story. In this poem the poet talks about two basic human urges – the hunger of the belly and the hunger of the sex. Packed in compact structure the poem shows the paradoxical situations in which the human beings are trapped. The poem also shows how poverty forces the fisherman’s daughter to prostitution.

The opening line of the poem “It is hard to believe the flesh was heavy on my back”, is a topical sentence and the whole poem is its illustration. The speaker for the first time experience the overpowering urge of sex; that was why it was hard for him to believe the power of sex. The speaker finds himself before a poor fisherman who is willing to ‘compromise’ on his daughter. The fisherman offers his daughter in a very casual manner, “will you have her”. He said so while “trailing his nets and nerves” as though his words ‘sanctified’ the purpose with which he faced himself. However, the fact that he tries to control his nerves or mind speaks of his inner conflict. This is also clear form the speaker’s observation of the fisherman: “I saw his white bones thrash his eyes.” Here the word “thrash” is used metaphorically and the word ‘sanctified’ is ironically because the helplessness of the situation in which the fisherman and his daughter is placed makes this word meaningless.
In the second stanza the protagonist followed the fisherman “across sprawling sands”. This indicates that the protagonist had already some information of the flesh-trade there. But his movement was not very comfortable. His “mind thumping in the flesh’s sling” shows his mental agitation. He continues to think that the only hope for regaining his mental peace after his act of sexual conduct would be through “burning the house he lived in”. Here “the house” may refer to the mental state he lived in. As he proceeds towards his goal he felt as if “silence gripped my sleeves”.

The rhythm of the poem speeds up as the story moves to its climax. Already gripped with a sense of guilt, the speaker suffers with a sense of pathos when he sees “In the flickering dark his lean-to opened like a wound”. “Wind was I” and “Palm fronds scratched my skin” shown how the speaker’s sex-sick movement had turned him quicker. The concluding line of the second stanza “Over and over the sticky soot crossed the space of my mind” turns the speaker’s inner state of mind into concrete visual picture.

The fisherman’s deliberate mentioning of his daughter’s age that “she is just turned fifteen” in the opening line of the last stanza suggests that perhaps he had turned professional. The second line of the stanza is very expressive. ‘Feel her’ is too obvious a suggestion for sex. When he says he will be back soon, he means to say he is going away. This is further clarified when he informs the speaker “your bus leaves at nine”. At that moment the speaker felt as if “the sky fell on me”. This shows that the speaker was not a professional kind and therefore it was a shocking experience for him. The way the girl opened her “wormy legs wide” convinced the speaker that the girl was indulged in prostitution out of compulsion.

The poem is written in the first person narrative. The speaker is a male persona and talks directly to the fisherman, the second person. The phrases “In the flickering dark”, “an oil lamp splayed the hours bunched to those walls” and “your bus leaves at nine” suggests that it was an evening time. “The trailing of the nets”, “across the sprawling sands” and “the froth his old nets had dragged up from the sea” create an image of fishing on a shore.

The mood of the poem is brooding and tone somber. The title Hunger has been used ironically. The poet shows his remarkable capacity to condense his material in a very short space. The poem is remarkable not only for the compactness of its structure but also for the choice of befitting words and their most effective arrangements.

**Self-check Exercise VI**

*Answer the following questions in the space provided. Read the answers (38.9.2) after doing the exercise.*

1) What does the last sentence of the first stanza “I saw his white bone thrash his eyes” imply?

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2) What does the speaker in the poem mean when he said, “Hope lay perhaps in burning the house I lived in”.

3) What was the speaker’s mental state while going to the shack?

38.8 A RAIN OF RITES

38.8.1 Introduction

A Rain of Rites is the title poem of Jayant Mahapatra’s collection of poems published in 1976. What the poet says about much of his poems holds true for this poem also: “Today’s poem utilizes a number of images and symbols to form a whole, leaving the reader to extricate himself with the valid meaning or argument from them.” He adds, “a seemingly obscure poem does in its content, contain the hidden voice for its ultimate understanding.” The persona in the poet regrets that his past experiences holds him back shattering all his good impulses that arise in his mind before they rain or rejuvenate.

Written in fourteen lines the poem is divided into four stanzas, first three of four lines each and the last one of two lines only. Since the poem is written in free verse it does not reflect any rhyming scheme or metrical arrangement. This pattern of poem befits the theme of the poem which ends on a note of interrogation.

38.8.2 The Text

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

The rain I have known and traded all this life
is thrown like kelp on the beach.
Like some shape of conscience I can not look at,
A malignant purpose in nun’s eye.

Who was the last man on earth.
to whom the cold cloud brought the blood to his face?
Numbly I climb to the mountain – tops of ours  
Where my own soul quivers on the edge of answers.  
Which still, stale air sits on an angel’s wings?  
What holds my rain so it’s hard to overcome?

Glossary:
kelp : a large brown seaweed.
conscience : feeling of feeling of guilt or anxiety.
Numbly : deprived of feeling through cold or shock etc.

38.8.3 Analysis

A Rain of Rites is a poem written by Jayant Mahapatra who lived himself a life of alienation. The title of the poem is symbolic in meaning. In the poet’s scheme of sin and expiation, A Rain of Rites may refer to hoped-for expiation. It may also refer to a process of purification.

In this poem Mahapatra uses symbols from his environment to articulate an inner space of feelings. For example his symbols of ‘rain’, ‘sky’, and ‘cloud’ very articulately express the poet’s inner feelings which arise during solitude and silence. This poem suggests more than is said as it reveals areas of the mind unstructured by rational concepts and logic.

The poem reflects the poet’s question which ends in uncertainty and defeat. The poem is lyric of a troubled soul; of a weary and undefined unhappiness. Bruce king remarks. “The monsoon season, which provides symbols for A Rain of Rites is both a time of grey skies, disasters and depressions and also a period of renewal, birth, regeneration, after the dry, stifling Indian summer. But the rains brings no renewal to the poet. In the poem a contrast is made between the surprising moments when the sun shines through the clouds of the grey rain and the poet’s lack of illumination and renewal:

“Sometime a rain comes,  
Slowly across the sky, that turns upon its grey cloud, breaking away into light  
Before it reaches its objective”.

You may note that when the opening stanza talks symbolically of ‘rain’, the poet uses the word in two different senses: one in the sense of past experience and the other in the sense of purifying agent.

In the second stanza the speaker regrets “The Rain I have known and traded all this life/ is thrown like a kelp on the beach.” He perhaps means to say that the experiences of the past he has known proved useless ‘like a kelp on the beach.’ He adds another simile to illustrate the same subtle point. He says that since he is some shape of conscience, therefore, has a sense of right and wrong; he is not supposed to misunderstand the truth and look for right in a wrong place like looking for “a malignant purpose in a nun’s eyes”.

The stanza three asks a question as to who the last man was “to whom the cold cloud brought the blood to his face”. The poet perhaps refers to the person having right impulse whose thoughts were refined and the loss of it had saddened the man. The speaker wishes to say that it was long-long ago that loss of such human values outraged the human being. The poet examines his own inner feelings to
A.K. Ramanujan and Jayant Mahapatra

denote the time over which the human beings lost their innocence and were overtaken by experience. The poet devoid of any feeling approaches this question with shock:

“Numbly I climb to the mountain-tops of ours
Where my own soul quivers on the edge of answers”.

The speaker fails to get the exact answer. Therefore, the last stanza ends on a note of interrogation. The speaker finally wants to know as to why the stale air or old memories “sits on angel’s wings” and they move with the fastest speed. He would also like to know as to what is that holds our rain or past impressions so that “it’s hard to overcome”.

The poem uses the images of ‘rain’, ‘sky’, ‘clouds’ and ‘kelp on the sea’. They are related to the rainy season which symbolizes both devastation as well as regeneration. Although the dictions chosen by the poet is simple but their arrangement into phrases, clauses and sentences makes the overall meaning of the poem complex as are the speaker’s inner feeling. The images are created with the use of similes. For example, the poet compares the uselessness of the past memories with seaweed on the beach. Similarly he compares himself with some shape of conscience. In the title ‘A Rain of Rites’ we marks some internal rhyme as we mark it in the second line of stanza three where the poet uses ‘cold cloud’.

The theme of the poem is the loss of human innocence or rejuvenating force within because of the worldly experience we gain which keeps us going in life. This raises the same question which Nissim Ezekiel raises in ‘A Poem of Dedication’ wherein the speaker says:

“And rivers what a man can hope to win by simple flowing, learning how to flow”.

The poem may also be studied in terms of the poet’s own personal life. The listening, waiting, questioning solitude is a reflection of Mahapatra’s being unable to be part of the traditional Hindu Culture around him. A Rain of Rites balances his inner with outer world. The poem appears to be a reflection on relation with and alienation of the self from external realities in a world without apparent purpose. This is existentialist dilemma of most modern literature. The poem is written in the first person narrative. There is enough gap between the lines of the poem because it expresses the narrator’s inner landscape. Because the poem reflects upon intuitive knowledge, much remains unsaid which the readers are supposed to reveal. The overall mood of the poem is regretful and tone somber.

**Self-check Exercise VII**

*Answer the following questions in the space provided. Read the answers (38.9.2) after doing the exercise.*

1) What does the title *A Rain of Rites* refer to?

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2) Why the speaker cannot look at a malignant purpose in a nun’s eye?

3) Why does the poet leave the poem on a note of interrogation?

38.9 LET US SUM UP

In this unit you read about the life and five poems of A.K. Ramanujan and Jayant Mahapatra. You will also have a glimpse of the kind of poetry they have written. Above all, you will be in a position to analyze the poets’ other poems.

38.10 ANSWERS TO SELF-CHECK EXERCISES

Self-check Exercise I

1) A.K. Ramanujan was born and educated in India. At the age of thirty he left for the USA where he studied and worked all his life as a faculty in the University of Chicago. He not only spent formative part of his life in India, he continued to visit his mother land all his life besides representing it in literature. In his writings we mark a comparison of Indian life and culture with those of America.

2) See para 2 and 3 of 38.2.

3) See para 4 of 38.2.

4) See para 5 of 38.2.

Self-check Exercise II

1) This line means that the human beings, their hopes, fears and anxiety are universally the same. The human being’s own self is contradictory and is not in harmony with itself.

2) Here the poet himself seems to be the speaker. When he universalizes this question, it becomes a question of identity of every individual.

3) The above lines suggest that the time since the human being exist is unknown. The ancestral identity of a man is merely a superficial kind of knowledge of human identity.
Self-check Exercise III

1) See para 2 of 38.4.3.

2) The poem creates the images of ‘forest fires’ and ‘the frothing Himalayan river, rapid and silent’.

3) The poem is ironical in treatment. The most striking example of irony in the poem is “country cannot be reached by jet or boat”. It is possible to reach a country (its soul) “only by answering black telephone calls” and “answering all call of nature”. We mark here the play upon words.

Self-check Exercise V

2) See para 5.

Self-check Exercise VI

1) This sentence shows although the fisherman spoke it in a spur of moment as it he was a professional but reality comes out when we observe that his white teeth did not agree with the other part of his body.

2) The speaker felt that the act he was involved in was morally degrading. He suffered from a severe sense of guilt and thought that he can purify himself only by killing himself. This may also refer to a state of mind having burning desires.

3) See para 3 of 38.7.3.

Self-check Exercise VII

1) See para 1 of 38.8.3.

2) Because it would mean looking for answer in an unexpected place or looking for right answer in a wrong place.

3) The poet leaves the poem on a note of interrogation because his quest as to why the past always prevails over our impulses of the present remains unresolved.