

Temporal Imagination And Cultural Survival: The Echoes Of Past In The Poems Of Jayanta Mahapatra And Shanta Acharya

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Abstract

This paper examines the varied modalities of temporal imagination in selected poems of Jayanta Mahapatra and Shanta Acharya, accentuating how poetic imagination negotiates the interrelation of past, present and cultural continuity. Creative literature frequently emerges from a sustained engagement with historical memory, ecological change and the evolving patterns of human survival. Within this framework, the study argues that temporal awareness in poetry functions not merely as recollection but as a critical interpretive lens through which cultural endurance and civilizational transformation are articulated. Mahapatra's poetry constructs a layered temporal landscape where personal memory, historical residue and cultural symbolism converge. His recurrent engagement with ruins, temples, myths, and material remnants of history reflects an acute sensitivity to decay alongside the persistent miracle of survival embedded within cultural spaces. His poetic method often juxtaposes past realities with contemporary conditions, thereby revealing the ethical and existential consequences of human actions across time. In contrast, Acharya's poetry demonstrates a reflective engagement with memory shaped by diasporic distance and cultural retrospection. Her work revisits India through intimate recollections of place, history, and emotional belonging, while simultaneously acknowledging the fragility of cultural continuity and human experience. Although their nostalgic orientations differ, Mahapatra's being rooted in lived regional memory and Acharya's shaped by transnational recollection, both poets demonstrate a shared concern for the preservation and reinterpretation of ancient traditions within modern consciousness. This study therefore interprets temporal consciousness as a dynamic poetic strategy that mediates intergenerational dialogue, cultural preservation and ethical reflection. By analysing selected poems, the paper highlights how engagements with history, memory and myth contribute to a deeper understanding of how the past informs present realities, while also emphasizing the responsibility associated with sustaining inherited cultural knowledge systems.

Keywords: Temporal consciousness, mythic memory, sense of decay, memories, civilizational continuity, survival

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Introduction:

Temporal consciousness and cultural memory are fundamental aspects of human experience, shaping individual and collective identities across time. Temporal consciousness refers to the perception and structuring of time, which influences how people understand history, memory, and personal existence (Ricoeur, 1984). It encompasses the human ability to navigate the past, present, and future, allowing for a continuous sense of self and cultural belonging. Cultural memory, on the other hand, involves the transmission of historical narratives, traditions, and collective experiences across generations, preserving and reinterpreting the past within the socio-cultural framework (Assmann, 2011). The interplay between these two concepts reveals how societies negotiate their historical consciousness and engage with processes of decay and survival. Being an integral part of temporal consciousness, myths in a piece of work acts like a chain that binds the past and the future which embodies the values, beliefs, and knowledge of a culture. According to William Righter in *Myth and Literature*, "Myth is the embodiment of human aspiration and its appropriate imaginative form" (Righter, 1975). In volumes of poetry

Mahapatra expresses his temporal consciousness through the decay, ruins of forts, walls and particularly the stones. In previous researches the idea that has been revealed through stones is the past culture, memory and foundation and history of Odisha. This paper tries to explore not only the foundation but how it is still a question to the present to recognise the connection and presence of it, examining how myths influence the perception of time. From the very beginning of Mahapatra's poetry a recurrent picture can be seen through the obsession with stones. Despite the fact that it works like a memoir of Odisha's foundation and history it depicts something unique. It shows the evolution of society through stones. The functional activity of stone like it observes the people around it through ages. It sees the world changing people dying things decaying and environment shifting. The structure of stones changes from temple to mountain but its focus has been on human life constantly and continuously with variations. Shanta Acharya is an authentic voice and a critical observer in observing the subject matter of her poetry. Her poetry observes history, travels through myth and the quiet beauty of nature's reclamation inviting her readers exploring the vibrant past and

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search themselves within the empires of decayed monuments. Myths in Acharya's poetry provide sense of cultural continuity, linking present generations with their ancestors. The mention of Hindu Goddesses and Gods, the festival and rituals in Acharya's poetry offers a framework for understanding historical events and personal experiences within a broader temporal context.

Literature Review

Suraj Kumar Saw (2015) in his research paper, "Multiple Movements of New Diaspora: Tracing Transnationality in the Poetry of Shanta Acharya" conceptualizes diaspora within the framework of globalization and late capitalism, emphasizing the shift from unidirectional migration to multidirectional transnational networks sustained by advanced transportation and communication technologies. It argues that "new" diasporas maintain dynamic connections between homeland and host societies, thereby reconfiguring identity as flexible, networked and dispersed across multiple locations. Focusing on Indian diasporic poetry, particularly the works of Shanta Acharya, the study highlights how her poetry reflects lived experiences across Asia, North America and Europe. Rather than emphasizing mere nostalgia or rupture, the paper situates Acharya's oeuvre within a transnational framework that affirms interconnectedness, hybrid belonging and continuous cultural negotiation.

B. Rajani (2021), in her research paper "'Home' as a Motif in Select Poems by Writers of the Indian Diaspora", explores the theme of "home" in post-independence Indian diasporic writing, emphasizing nostalgia, exile and cultural displacement. It argues that early diasporic writers construct India through idealised memory while struggling to negotiate belonging in foreign spaces. The paper contrasts Sujata Bhatt, whose work highlights nostalgia, with Shanta Acharya, who presents a more realistic and reflective assessment of exile. It further notes that writers who migrated in the 1970s shift focus from longing for homeland to issues such as gender, racism and social injustice. The study is useful for understanding the evolving concept of "home" in Indian diasporic literature.

Amit Ranjan and Alka Viswakarma (2024) in their research paper "Indian Sensibility and Indigenization: The Poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra" examine the poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra through the framework of Indian sensibility and regional rootedness. The authors argue that Mahapatra's poetic vision is deeply grounded in the cultural, historical and geographical landscape of Odisha, which gives his work a distinctive indigenous identity within Indian English poetry. They highlight his late entry into poetry, emphasizing the spontaneity and emotional intensity that shape his creative expression. The article demonstrates Mahapatra's departure from conventional poetic forms and his idiosyncratic style,

portraying him as a poet of place, memory and cultural consciousness. While the study effectively highlights the importance of localization and Oriya ethos in his poetry, it remains largely thematic and appreciative in approach. Nevertheless, it contributes to Mahapatra's scholarship by reaffirming the centrality of Indian sensibility and indigenous experience in shaping his poetic imagination.

Research Objectives

1. **To examine the modalities of temporal consciousness** in selected poems of Jayanta Mahapatra and Shanta Acharya, with particular attention to interrelationship between past, present and historical continuity.
2. **To analyse the role of memory and nostalgia** in shaping poetic representations of personal experience, cultural inheritance and collective history.
3. **To investigate the poetic representation of decay, survival and civilizational endurance**, especially through images of ruins, myths, temples and cultural landscapes.
4. **To interpret temporality as an ethical and philosophical framework**, revealing the consequences of historical transitions and contemporary socio-cultural transformations.

Modalities of Temporal Consciousness in the Poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra and Shanta Acharya

In the words of B.K. Das "The force of the poem rests in its peculiar evocation of myths and ordering of experience, not in what can be abstracted from it. What is important in the poem from the point of view is the key in which the poem develops taking history and myth as its ingredients and as an intellectual experience in which feelings and ideas grow one out of another. This poem springs from the desire on the part on the past to preserve the history and myths of his land of birth and memory's image become the part, they themselves take on the poignance of art. There is an attempt to create myth on modern terms and to acclimatize English language to an indigenous tradition. The landscape of the place has been successfully integrated into the texture of the poem." (Das, 82)

Jayanta Mahapatra's poems deal with majorly the themes of poverty, culture, history, humanity, culture, crafts, loneliness, philosophical and social issues. He explores perspectives and significance of life. His poetry explores ephemerality of existence, collects the essence of the decayed stones, temples, mountains, cemetery, fort, river etc. The echoes of the erosion of past reaches to the poet and he voices the transient nature of the things and existence on earth with the passage of time. The poet talks about the ruins of the present Konark which provides a sense of historical continuity as well and helps the communities maintain a link to their past. He notices the ruins in Beauty and "The burnt granite of the fallen Konark" and the decaying stones:

This must be the myth of every happiness,
The high wind that flings the flowers into disarray,
The adamant bones which keep rolling in the dust
Of the dark butterflies,

The cry of the wounded sun silenced among
The ruins of Konark. (Lie of Dawns Poems 1974-2008,
71)

He explores the themes of past and the relationship of contemporary human beings with it, and each place becomes speaking stone for him and later for his readers. Not only the sand-stone walls of Konark the cemetery as well has much story to tell. In the poem *The Abandoned British Cemetery at Balasore* where it reflects the sombre tone intertwined with sacrifices of the past. Through a visit to this ancient cemetery that is in its ruins Mahapatra portrays how it is the eyewitness of the deaths which is history now and also witnessing the present with its decay and fall. It represents the truth and reality of life. When Mahapatra is saying that the people are forgotten it also lights on the fact that society works this way. The decay is neither glorifying the past nor it is a symbol of emptiness rather through the decay it shows the ability of creation like death is a sign of life and the acceptance of the way of life that is the destruction of once was a creation. The stones serve as a portal to memorable times, it reveals the tragedies and triumphs of the individuals throughout history, echoing silently through generations. It is not a story of an individual it is a symbol of a collective memory and a reminder of the devastation and chaos of the diseases like cholera and plague against which the human experience is laid bare. The grief entails:

Who watches now in the dark near the dead wall?
The tribe of grass in the cracks of my eyes?
It is the cholera still, death's sickly trickle,
That plagues the sleepy shacks beyond this hump of earth,
moving easily, swiftly, with quick power
through both past and present, the increasing young,
into the final bone, wearying all truth with ruin. (27)

Ultimately, this vision is an indication of the interconnectedness of the humans shared emotions and the global health crises. The complexities and predicaments of modern man that leads to fragmentation and disillusionment is portrayed by Mahapatra through imagery of decay and loss. The universal nature of life and the inevitability of death inviting the reader to contemplate the resilience of the human spirit. The loss of life and decay explained in *A Country*:

And not understanding myself,
not understanding you,
like the still strange shapes of hills in the distance,
I, too, listen to the faraway wailing of hyenas
aware of the dying countryside around them,
tortured by hunger and the rock of decay in the air
after the age-old myths have been told all over again.
(52)

The decay and loss in the past in Mahapatra's poetry come with variations. It is not only for their fragmented

pictures but they also add meaning to the emotion of people, form a relationship with time and brings responsibility to human life. Mahapatra personifies the loss and says that the loss never gives up it follows the person with time:

My voice crouched in the shadow of split blood
hangs on a branch like a droplet of water
and quivers only to become

secret start, slow flower, again. (The False Start)

Excluding the history, legends, sacrifices, forts, traditions that are decaying find place in Mahapatra's poetry there is a voice that continues the vision of decay with the poem "The Poet's Death". The poem reflects a transcendent vision that draws parallels between decay and renewal as a natural process and a natural aspect of life. This vision promotes a deeper meaning of life through the symbol of white peacock which symbolises the soul's journey to an eternal realm while revisiting the known places. The poem addresses the poet's word as pure which refers to the timeless identity because of his artistic creations. Here the decay and restoration together voice the mortality of human beings and the immortal vision of art and poetry with its true essence:

When the sun went down,
the elegant white peacock
crossed the land it had once known,
as though restoring word to their purity.
Beyond the windows of the room,
a flock of wingless pigeons took flight. (The Lie of Dawns, 188)

Mahapatra uses stone to symbolise the enduring nature of Indian civilization, standing as silent witness of past generations and the continuity of tradition. It represents the passage of time, the persistence of memory and the shattered present.

"My existence lies in the stones
Which carry my footsteps from one day
Into another

Down to the infinite distances." (Relationship, 59)

In this aspect of temporal dimensions, the poems of Mahapatra analyses the present that differs from past but not disconnected from it. The object detection and selection are deep and sharp which demand a healthy active output by preserving and by realising its depth. His poems always cite agencies of nature for the execution of union of thoughts of the readers and gives a deeper understanding of how present circumstances reinterpret the emotional narratives. In the poem *This is the season of the Old Rain* the title itself shows how the poet puts the past environment at centre to show that the present times' rain is lacking the characteristics of old rain. With the present circumstances and struggle with acknowledging or accepting current realities it suggests a present coping through the symbol of the thriving jasmine in response to unpleasant truths. The poet feels the ongoing process of life amidst decay:

This is the season of the old rain,
always with much to answer before time is done
with decay and death and shutting our minds

to the plot of the jasmine which thrives in backyards on the edge of stark water. (Lie of Dawns 47)
Shanta Acharya was born and educated in India, where she completed an MA in English and then she moved to Oxford later she becomes a visiting scholar at Harvard. Being a poet of social awareness and cultural conscious Shanta Acharya depicts with lively images from the festivals of India to the social issues like infanticide, oppression, absurd relationships, honour killings. With these themes and expression, the poetry of Acharya evokes a sense dilemma in the memory of the past and the present consciousness of existence in the contemporary society. She includes Diwali, Dussehra, shiva Ratri and these rituals in her poetry symbolise philosophical beliefs and her rootedness. In these poems she reflects her personal childhood memories and experience that shaped her current self. Despite of these diverse cultural landscape of India the essence of human condition is portrayed through two contrary yet related factors in Shanta Acharya's poetry. She on the one hand shows the destruction of human body and also shows an acceptance towards death as a fact of human life. She bestows all these factors on time. Acharya in the theme of temporal consciousness says in the poem "Highgate Cemetery",

I wander among the dead in a cemetery town,
Exploring winding paths where angels carved in stone
direct me through green alleyways. (Imagine, 113)
In this poem Acharya concentrates on the constant change in the society as well,
Every day our little world changes a little bit,
whether we like it or not is quite irrelevant. (113)
Historical past in poetry encompasses the customs, traditions and the societal norms and explains how historical events shaped the civilizations over time. Acharya adds the everyday customs, festivals, sculptures, and architecture that reflect the aesthetic values of India including myths, legends and emotional experience. Her explaining past things is not limited to the culture and history, she talks about the environment that once relatively stable and there were large areas of untouched wetlands, forests and other ecosystems for wild life with minimal human impact. She addresses the pollution, climate change, habitat loss in many of her works. In the poem *Survival* there is a glimpse of environmental shifts by addressing the 'unforgiving world' while describing the survival techniques of creatures. This juxtaposition highlights the continuity and change within the atmosphere. The poem covers the activities impacting water and land with the construction of roads, factories that leads to habitat destruction, deforestation for crop fields, soil degradation, water contamination and habitat loss. Acharya tries to show the wildlife adapting to city environments:

Crabs, lobsters, beetles, scarabs,
snails, turtles, tortoises-
all se-contained, sensitive creatures-
supporting their crosses on their backs

negotiate in an uncertain,
unpredictable, unforgiving world,
making themselves at home everywhere,
being eternally prepared. (Imagine, 88)

Acharya's poems attract the reader for its natural instincts and smooth progress. In the poem *Perhaps*, she again explores the reduction of natural areas causing displacement of wildlife. She also addresses the efforts and understanding to protect endangered species and restore degraded ecosystems but the desire to grow and discover new things resulting displacing wildlife and fragmented habitats:

We pine for what we are not
and cannot be. Yet the moment
we are what we wanted to be, we want
to move on, our desires already spent. (87)

Acharya's poetry reflects the past philosophical thoughts and ideologies that influence ethical perspectives. In the poem "Hindu Women" Acharya reflects on the roles and expectations of women in Hindu society, both historically and in contemporary times. It examines the traditional values and compares it with modern aspirations and situations of women. It highlighted the myths of worshiping goddesses and how those are reshaped by changing social norms. The poem evokes the Indian mythology with depictions of Hindu Goddesses in various forms, each embodying different aspects of existence, such as care, anger, creation, preservation and destruction. It shows the gentleness, compassion, wisdom, patience, devotion, dedication, balance and harmony. The poem *Not one of the Myths* shows that myths evolve over time. She also sheds light on the area of the nuances of life and its complexities, reflecting the changing contexts and needs of society. She discusses the complex and multifaceted nature of myth about whether humans are merely participants within these myths or possess identities that extend beyond mythological constructs. Acharya addresses the myth as a moving aspect from time to time and human play their roles within the time and the renewal begins. It depicts the circular movement of the world as:

Not one of the myths we make
will outlast the muting of our breath.
What comes and goes in silence
represents time's landscape of self.
So long estranged from myself,
I have created an illusion-
carefully camouflaged
to welcome our re-entrance. (Imagine, 49)

Acharya involves myths in her poetry that is rooted in beliefs and cultural practices which offers a vision of the world, the reasons behind certain customs or rituals. The rituals often help to understand the human behaviour, natural phenomena and to interpret the world around them. In the poems like "Dussehra in Cuttack", "Night of Shiva", "Meeting Shiva and Parvati", the voice is more subjective than objective as they all are based upon Acharya's personal and emotive perspective. The myths contain lessons as well as warnings that are derived from

past experiences and wisdom, guiding behaviour and ethical standards. The interpretation of festivals and rituals focus on their symbolic meanings, exploring philosophical and moral insights. In the poem *Dussehra* in Cuttack Acharya gives details about various aspects of the festival like the fervent crowds, symbolic effigies of the demon Mahisa and various pictures like 'rickshaw', toys, 'opera-glasses' which is a blend of personal reflection and cultural observation. She by elaborating the customs and view of marquee in the city Cuttack she addresses Odisha as a land of myth and its ability to convey universal truth that is the win of good over evil and the concept of woman empowerment:

Back at home I re-enacted
our adventure into this land of myths,
my choreography inspired by
deep admiration for such a sublime woman-
my head filled with fantastic figures,
some with her tongue sticking out
in shame and surprise when discovered
with her foot placed firmly on
her husband's chest, a garland of skulls
enhancing her terrible beauty. (Imagine, 22)

The Night of Shiva takes the reader closer to a supreme power and also the positive environment of a productive festive outcomes. Acharya's thoughts on the Indian Gods and Goddesses and the desire to be there is a symbol of expressing the purity of human growth and development. They not only describing Indian festivals, Gods or the homeland it is about the spiritual growth and peace that one can get in any place. Although the hold an identity of a particular locality it conveys sensibility with a capacity of balancing aesthetics and consciousness. The poem celebrates the myth of Shivaratri in ancient Hindu folklore which is a major Hindu festival observed with great devotion and reverence typically involving fasting, night-long vigils, and the chanting of Shiva's names. Along with the broad explanation of the mythical reference the poem involves a deep understanding of the ritual's religious, cultural and symbolic aspects. The vivid imagery reflects the transformative power of dedication, emphasizes spiritual significance and leads the devotees to understand 'notions of humanity'. Moving forward with the mythical interpretation Acharya personifies the deity in *Ganesh Puja* making him more approachable and intimate. The poem attempts to confess that these mythical tales have been forgotten over time and it should be revived to reconnect with cultural and spiritual wisdom. It sets a scene of transition from communal worship to solitude:

The puja ceremoniously done
the worshippers leave, one by one.
Even the priest retires to his daily chores.
I shall sit with you
lonely boy with the elephant trunk,
recreating myths
the years have forgotten to share with us. (Imagine, 20)

Findings

The present study yields several significant findings regarding temporal imagination and cultural survival in the poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra and Shanta Acharya:

1. Myth as Temporal Bridge:

Both poets employ myth not as static inheritance but as a dynamic medium that connects the mythic past with contemporary lived experience. Myth functions as a temporal bridge that sustains cultural continuity while enabling reinterpretation.

2. Interdependence of Past and Present:

The analysis demonstrates that past and present in their poetry are not separate chronological phases but mutually constitutive forces. Individual and collective identities are shaped through continuous negotiation between memory and modern reality.

3. Cultural Survival through Reinterpretation:

Cultural endurance in their works does not depend on rigid preservation. Instead, survival emerges through reflective engagement with inherited traditions, allowing them to adapt within changing socio-historical contexts.

4. Layered Temporal Perception:

Time is perceived as layered and multidimensional rather than linear. Personal memory, historical consciousness and mythic imagination intersect to create complex temporal landscapes.

5. Temporal Consciousness as Ethical Inquiry:

The poet's engagement with history and memory implicitly raises ethical questions regarding responsibility toward cultural heritage and the preservation of collective identity.

6. Distinct Yet Convergent Modalities:

While Mahapatra's temporality is regionally grounded and materially embedded, Acharya's is shaped by diasporic reflection and psychological reconstruction, both ultimately converging in their commitment to cultural continuity.

Conclusion

Both the poets Mahapatra and Acharya through myths illustrate how past and present shapes individual, society and collective identities. This study tries to enhance the poetic contributions and invites further contemplation on the dynamic nature of temporal awareness in Indian English Poetry. It explored the modalities of temporal consciousness in the select poems of Jayanta Mahapatra and Shanta Acharya, revealing the nuanced ways in which time is perceived, experienced, and articulated in their works. The poetic vision of these two poets, demonstrate the intricate interplay between the tangible and the intangible, crafting unique literary landscapes where mythic past and lived present coexist harmoniously.

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