

Elements of Literature and Creative Communication
Prof. H S Komalesha
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur

Lecture - 25
A K Ramanujan

Hello there, welcome to our continued discussion on Indian English poetry. If you quickly recall we have been discussing some of the major Indian English poets over the last couple of classes. We discussed Nissim Ezekiel, we discussed Kamala Das, we discussed Eunice De Souza and in this class, we are going to discuss another equally significant poet. But of course, before we get to know the poet, I think it's better we get ourselves acquainted with his poetry, but it is said that great poetry happens not because of the poet, but in spite of him or in spite of the poet. Just think about it. The best poetry happens in spite of the poet because great poetry has the capacity to kindle within us something atavistic - something which is deeply hidden deep within our core. So, we are going to read one such poem and maybe after that, we can get to know the poet.

(Refer Slide Time: 01:53)

What can you fathom from this poem?

The day after the first rain,
for years, I would home
in a rage,

for I could see from a mile away
our three Red Champak Trees
had done it again,

had burst into flower and given
Mother her first blinding
migraine of the season

with their street-long heavy-hung
yellow pollen fog of a fragrance
no wind could sift

no door could shut out from our black -
pillared house whose walls
had ears and eyes,



So, here comes the poem, let us see what we can gather out of this poem we have been discussing poetry for very many classes now. So, see if you can spot some important devices, literary devices the poet uses and what is the poem trying to project portray.

The day after the first rain,
for years, I would home
in a rage,

for I could see from a mile away
our three Red Champak Trees
had done it again,

had burst into flower and given
mother her first blinding
migraine of the season.

With their street-long heavy-hung
yellow pollen fog of a fragrance
no wind could sift

nor go no door could shut out from our black-
pillared house whose walls
had ears and eyes.

(Refer Slide Time: 03:02)

scales, smells, bone-creaks, nightly
visiting voices, and were porous
like us,

but Mother, flashing her temper
like her mother's twisted silver,
grandchildren's knickers

wet as the cold pack on her head,
would not let us cut down
a flowering tree.

almost as old as her, seeded,
she said, by a passing bird's
providential droppings

to give her gods and her daughters
and daughters' daughters basketsful
of annual flower

and for one line of cousins
a dower of migraines in season.



Scale, smells, bone—creaks, nightly
visiting voices and were porous
like us

I am sure you are noticing here how the house is being compared to human life like they have eyes, ears, scale, smells, bone creaks and all that. Please go on noticing various other literary devices and see how using all of them the poem brings alive the verbal picture here. And there is also if you have noticed there is a kind of a hidden conflict which is brewing in these lines and probably in the next couple of stanzas the conflict you becomes all the more evident see if you can spot that conflict and how that propels the entire poem it pushes the poem forward.

But mother, flashing her temper
like her mother's twisted silver
grandchildren's knickers

wet as the cold pack on her head
would not let us cut down
a flowering tree.

Almost as old as her seeded
she said by a passing birds
providential droppings

to give her gods and her daughters
and daughters daughters basketful
of annual flower.


And for one line of cousins
a dower of migraines in season.

So, using simple language the poet presents a picture that dramatizes a kind of a minor conflict that happens there and how the poem gets its impetus from this conflict and all that.

(Refer Slide Time: 04:54)

So, we can probably say that...

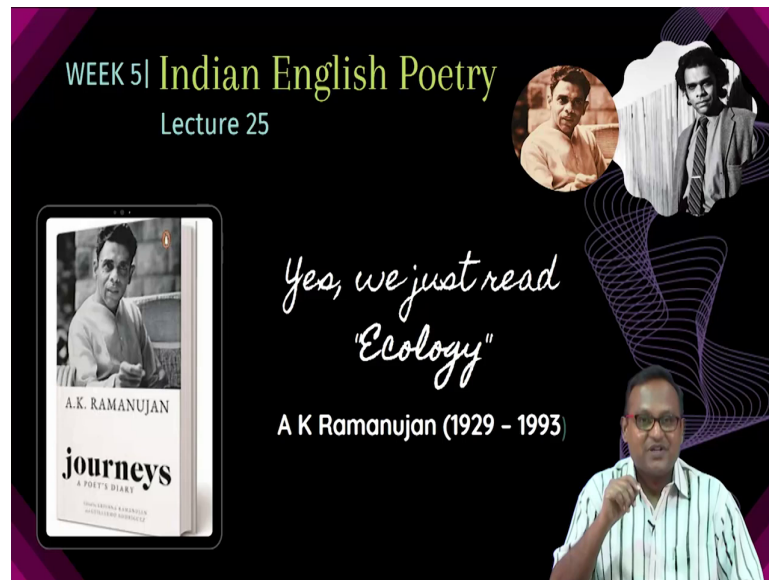
- The author is an **Indian poet** (he is talking about **champak** after all) and is completely at home with composing poetry in English
- It seems a lot like an **enjambed poem**, doesn't it?
- It is also written in **free verse**; employs several poetic devices such as simile, metaphor, personification
- The poet has poignantly captured people's **ambivalent relationship with nature** and the conflict that ensues from it.



If you are a sensitive reader, you will have noticed that the poem makes use of certain words and certain images, for instance, champak tree well this is something that all of us are familiar with. Therefore, could it be an Indian poet or at least somebody who is well versed with the flora and fauna of India? And because the poem is written in English this poet must be well versed in Indian English poetry because the poem reads so well so smoothly. So, you have learned to identify just based on reading the poem you have already begun identifying and constructing the background. So, looking at the structure well it looks like an enjambed poem, of course, you learned this word during one of our quiz shows - enjambment is a poetic device where a particular line runs across several lines. In fact, here cutting across stanzas, you can even say that this entire poem is one single sentence. So, beautifully, rhythmically, enjambed. Definitely, it makes use of free verse, it is not written in any particular meter or does not follow any particular rhyme scheme, therefore, it is a free verse. And you will have also seen the poet fluently making use of simile, metaphor, personification, and various other literary devices. And of course, thematically speaking the poem projects an ambivalent relationship that exists between nature and especially the poetic persona and how there is a kind of a difference even in the poem how the mother opposes her son's idea of cutting the tree despite the inconveniences it causes her she wants to retain it and how that builds a little tension. The religious reasons behind her sentiment not to cut the tree

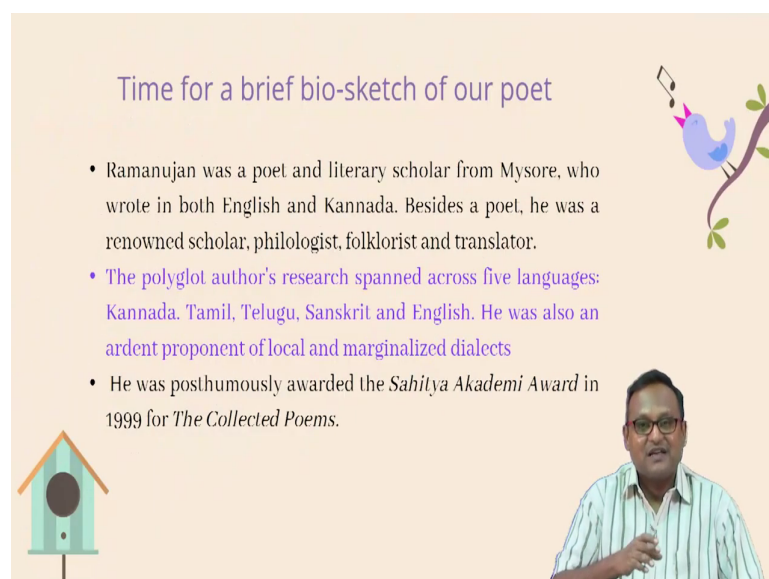
and all that you will have noticed. See how using different images and words the poem portrays an entirely complex life situation here. So, if you have spotted these things or at least some of them well you have really learnt to read a poem in its proper spirit.

(Refer Slide Time: 07:50)



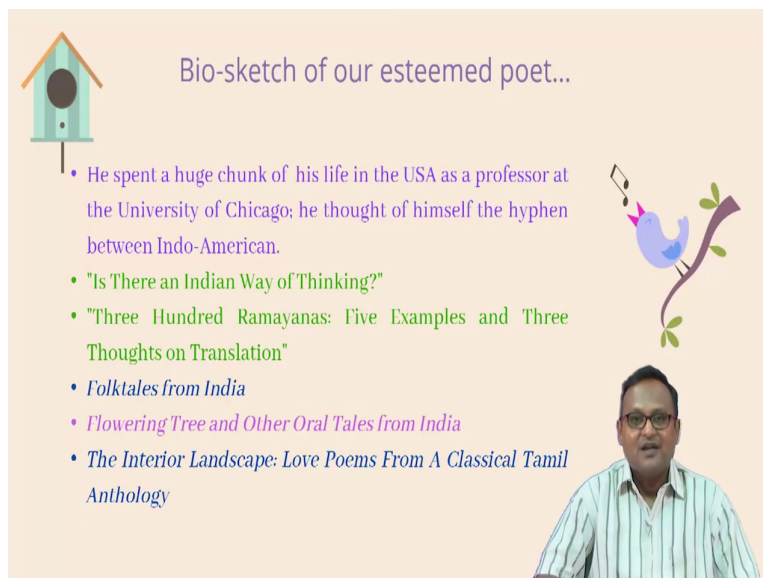
You are right, the poem we just read is called “Ecology”, one of the most anthologized poems by the gifted Indian English poet called A K Ramanujan, who lived for about 60 years and within that such a short span of time he produced remarkable works that have an indelible mark on the future poets.

(Refer Slide Time: 08:24)



So, he has left a kind of an extraordinary literary legacy. So, now is the time for us to get to know the poet a little better, now that we have identified him as A K Ramanujan, from Mysore, Karnataka. He was a student of Maharajas college and of course, then he moved on to various other places before he went and finally, settled in the US, he taught at the University of Chicago for very many years. He was a polyglot. He was well versed in several languages especially Kannada, Tamil, Telugu, Sanskrit, and English. He could read in all the five languages and write in at least three of them and whatever he has written in these three languages it is really very significant. And he was also posthumously awarded the Central Sahitya Akademi Award for his collected poems.

(Refer Slide Time: 09:50)



Bio-sketch of our esteemed poet...

- He spent a huge chunk of his life in the USA as a professor at the University of Chicago; he thought of himself the hyphen between Indo-American.
- "Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?"
- "Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation"
- *Folktales from India*
- *Flowering Tree and Other Oral Tales from India*
- *The Interior Landscape: Love Poems From A Classical Tamil Anthology*

As I said after spending a couple of years teaching across India then he moves on to the US and where he begins to teach at the University of Chicago and where he strengthens the department of South Asian studies. Some of his seminal essays that are widely read include - *Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?*, *Three Hundred Ramayanas Five Examples*, and *Three Thoughts on Translation*. If you recall this was in the eye of a storm for different reasons nevertheless it is a remarkable scholarship the literary piece displays a remarkable scholarship and opens up new vistas for understanding epistemological constructions.

He was not just a poet, he was a playwright, he was a linguist, philologist, be precise folklorist and all that so his contribution again we can call him a multifaceted personality, a genius in many fields. So, some of his collected works include 'Folktales from in India',

‘Flowering Tree and Other Oral Tales from India’. Beautifully edited tales if you really want to immerse yourself in extraordinary tales of India you can go through them.

(Refer Slide Time: 11:36)

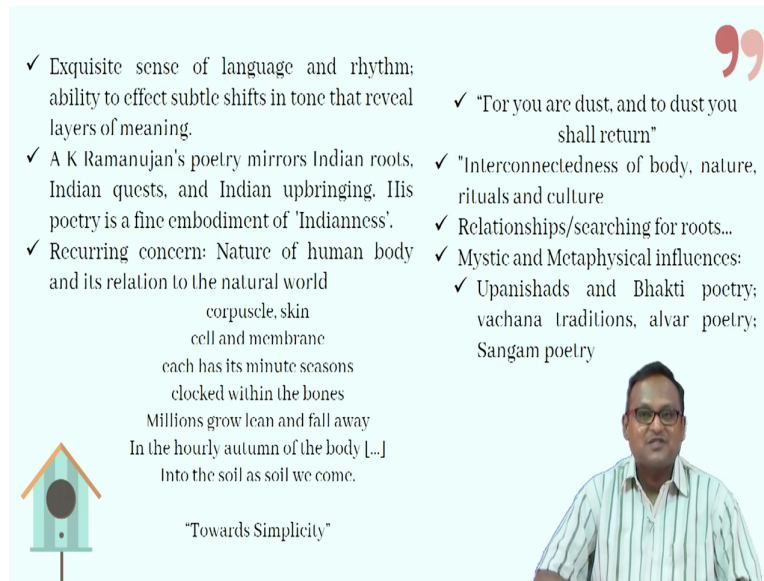
Bio-sketch of our esteemed poet...

- His translated work *Speaking of Siva* is a selection of free-verses from the Vachana movement, a mid-twelfth century Bhakti movement that began in Karnataka that considered Siva as the supreme god
- Ramanujan's 4 volumes of poetry:
 - *The Striders* (1966)
 - *Relations* (1977)
 - *Second Sight* (1986)
 - *The Collected Poems* (1995)
- After his sudden demise in 1993, his wife and friends published his *Uncollected Poems and Prose* in 1995.



And he was also an acclaimed translator, his translations from Tamil and Kannada are masterpieces they are read by students of literature in general and students of translation studies in particular for their remarkable rendering of the Kannada Vachana poets and Sangam poetry from Tamil in fine English. In fact, the poem in these translations are recreations of ancient classics. And apart from these scholarly ventures he has also written a couple of poetry collections - “The Striders” which came out in 1966, followed by “Relations” and his “Collected Works”(1995). And after his death, his wife and a couple of his friends bring out uncollected poems and prose, all of these are some of his important books.

(Refer Slide Time: 12:41)



- ✓ Exquisite sense of language and rhythm; ability to effect subtle shifts in tone that reveal layers of meaning.
- ✓ A K Ramanujan's poetry mirrors Indian roots, Indian quests, and Indian upbringing. His poetry is a fine embodiment of 'Indianness'.
- ✓ Recurring concern: Nature of human body and its relation to the natural world
 - corpuscle, skin
 - cell and membrane
 - each has its minute seasons
 - clocked within the bones
 - Millions grow lean and fall away
 - In the hourly autumn of the body [...]
 - Into the soil as soil we come.

"Towards Simplicity"

- ✓ "For you are dust, and to dust you shall return"
- ✓ "Interconnectedness of body, nature, rituals and culture"
- ✓ Relationships/searching for roots...
- ✓ Mystic and Metaphysical influences:
 - Upanishads and Bhakti poetry;
 - vachana traditions, alvar poetry;
 - Sangam poetry

A K Ramanujan's poetry is appreciated in the literary circles, in the critical circles, because of it is an exquisite sense of language and rhythm. In fact, his poetry imitates extraordinary cadences of the English language in such a way that it becomes a verbal melody. If you read his poems properly you can hear the entire language dancing, you can hear the language dancing - please pay careful attention to that sentence and see if it makes any sense. A K Ramanujan's poetry reflects many moods, many sentiments, especially because of his exposure to the western tradition and because he eventually settled there. There was a kind of constant anxiety to seek out his roots which is the reason why he goes on to translate from Kannada and Tamil which are his roots. So, you can say that his poems are a fine embodiment of an Indianness and if you wish to spot a couple of recurring themes in him of course, you cannot confine a poet to a few themes, but of course, a poet is also preoccupied with certain concerns that haunt him. So, some of those concerns for Ramanujan were the relationship between the human body and the nature around. So, this equation is found across all his poetry collections in several poems across his collections. So, here is an excerpt from a poem called "Towards Simplicity" from his second collection of poems.

Corpuscle skin
cell and membrane
each has its minute seasons
clocked within the bones,
millions grow lean and fall away

in the early autumn of the body,
into the soil as soil we come.

Look at how the internal, the organic, and the mechanical functions of the body, and how it finds some kind of parallels in the vocabulary of nature around internal atoms, then the clock the biological clock that he is talking of. Finally, 'into the soil as soil we come' - is not it the great philosophy that almost all religions preach that we are dust and to dust, we shall return that is what all schools of philosophy discuss, at the end of the day from this journey between cradle and grave all that remains is how beautifully we engage ourselves with the world around that is the only part we can call life. So, this kind of interconnectedness of body-nature rituals and culture is what excites the poet. Therefore, you can call him in a sense a mystic, because you find in his poetry a lot of metaphysical and mystical influences. He was deeply influenced by the cosmopolitan outlook that is present in the Indian Upanishads especially and he was greatly influenced by bhakti poetry he was an extraordinary translator of some of the finest bhakti poetry of India especially 'Vachana' poetry and 'Alvar' poetry, 'Sangam' poetry. So, you can call him a confluence of the best of the east and the west that you can find in his poetry that is why he becomes a remarkable poet.

(Refer Slide Time: 17:18)

OXFORD

Uncollected
Poems and Prose
A.K. RAMANUJAN

edited by
Molly Daniels-Ramangan and Keith Harrison

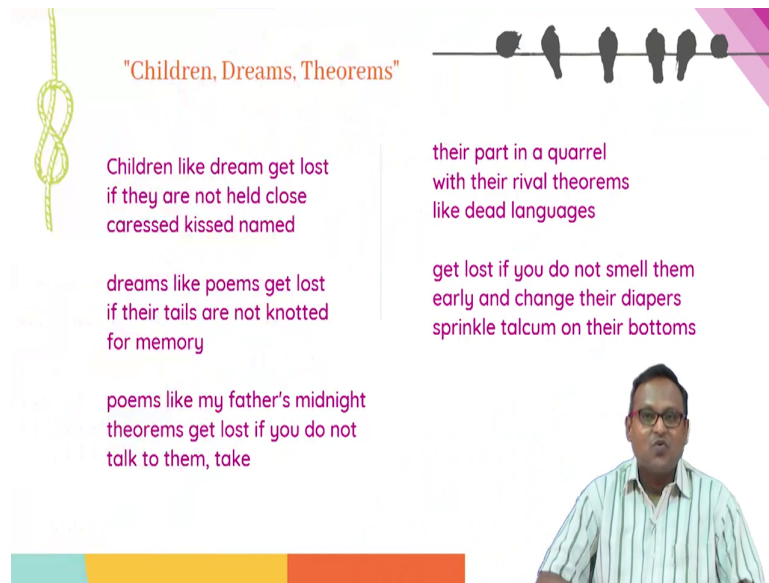
We will now read
another poem of
Ramanujan and
take note of...

- Themes, style and tone
- Poetic techniques; especially

Interesting usages of rhetorical
devices that we learnt last week

So, this is, in general, a bit of background to the poet, now that we know the poet a little bit better let's go and explore one more poem of his.

(Refer Slide Time: 17:29)



"Children, Dreams, Theorems"

Children like dream get lost
if they are not held close
caressed kissed named

dreams like poems get lost
if their tails are not knotted
for memory

poems like my father's midnight
theorems get lost if you do not
talk to them, take

their part in a quarrel
with their rival theorems
like dead languages

get lost if you do not smell them
early and change their diapers
sprinkle talcum on their bottoms

“Children, Dreams, Theorems”

Whenever we discuss any poem like this please go on spotting something that is familiar, based on your understanding of these classes. If you can spot some poetic devices and some patterns using which the poet portrays his or her inner turmoil, then you have achieved a remarkable feat.

Children, dreams, theorems - look how he compares all of them children, dreams, theorems.

Children like dream get lost
if they are not held close
caressed kissed named,

-again even in this poem lines are beautifully enjambed and pay closer attention to the internal rhythms of the English language and how they flow like water-

Dreams like poems get lost
if their tales are not knotted
for memory,

poems like fathers midnight

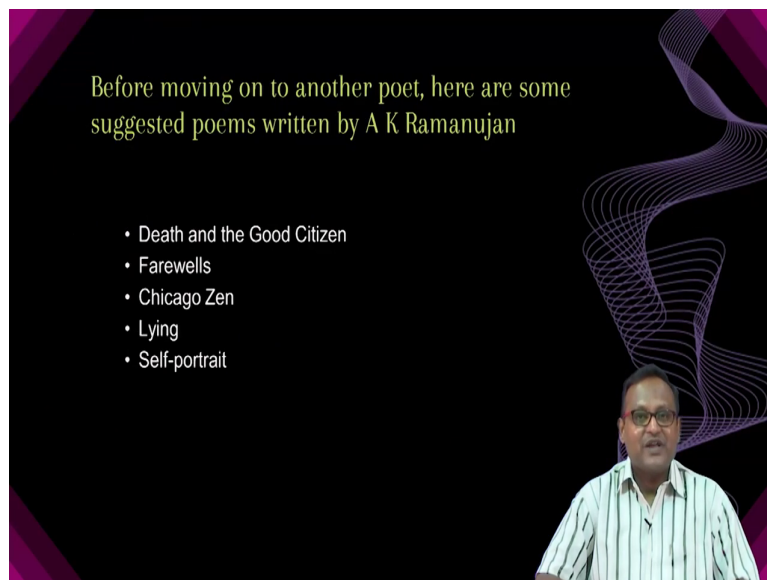
theorems get lost if you do not
talk to them take

their part in a quarrel
with their rival theorems.
Like dead languages

get lost if you do not smell them
early and change their diapers
sprinkle talcum on their bottoms.

Again, beautiful similes, metaphors, personifications, and how languages die if you do not care for them how you if you do not care for them if you do not change the diapers, sprinkle talcum on the bottoms. I am sure it is rich with the imagery of a small baby like how we tend to the baby and care for it we need to tend to the language and care for it something like that.

(Refer Slide Time: 19:23)

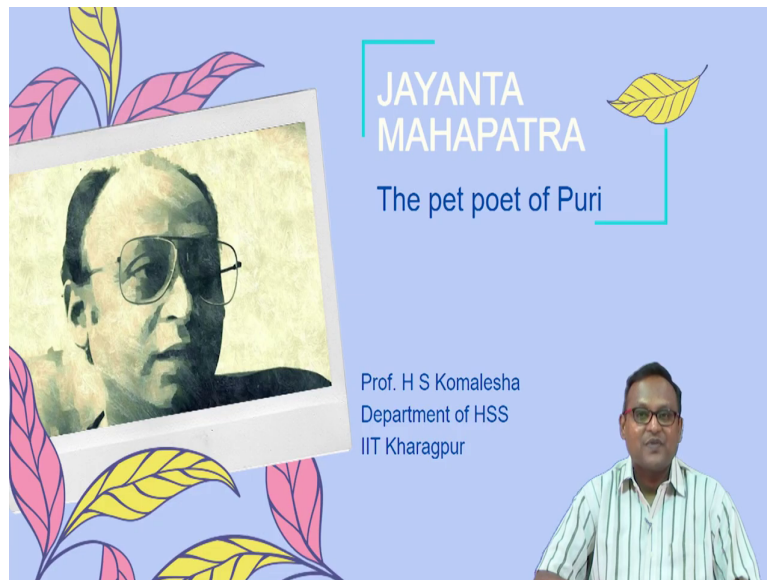


Yeah, before we end the discussion on A K Ramanujan here are some more poems that you can pick up it is easily available these poems are easily available even on the internet you can

please read them if this poet interested you can please read some of these poems, “Death and the Good Citizen”, “Farewell”, “Chicago Zen”, “Lying”, “Self portrait”, “Obituary”.

So, I am sure the poet has already piqued your interest. So, it would be really wonderful if you can follow him up and read some of his poems that are freely available on the internet.

(Refer Slide Time: 20:08)



From A K Ramanujan let us move on to another significant Indian English poet called Jayanta Mahapatra of course, the tag line says the ‘pet poet of Puri’, because he was based around Puri, Konark, Cuttack, Bhubaneswar. So, the poet is influenced by, in fact, he went on to say that the poet in him was born because of his close association with Puri and Cuttack. If not for these cities, the poet in him would not have come out at all. That is why we call him the pet poet of Puri, Jayanta Mahapatra - a remarkable poet.

(Refer Slide Time: 20:49)

Life and Achievements

- Born into an illustrious Odia Christian Family of Cuttack in 1928, First Indian poet writing in English to receive the Sahitya Akademi award in 1981; Padmashri in 2009; Allen Tate Poetry Prize; SAARC Literary Award;
- This professor of physics was one of the foundational authors of Indian English poetry and he flourished independently from the Bombay circle of poets.
- He believes it is Cuttack and the banks of Puri that made the poet in him spring to life. The veteran poet lives in Cuttack, Odisha.



Well by birth, he was born in a Christian family in Cuttack in 1928 and again the singular distinction is here that he is the first poet to have received the Sahitya Akademi award which is one of the top-notch awards in India for writers is the first poet Indian English poet to have to receive that honour. By profession, he was a professor of physics, yet he was drawn toward the world of language than towards the universe around therefore, he is a remarkable poet. So, with his extraordinary background in physics, the way he explores the philosophical dimensions of the subject through language is something remarkable. Yeah, he still lives in Cuttack and is a remarkable poet.

(Refer Slide Time: 21:59)

Life and Achievements

- Mahapatra has authored 40 poetry books in Oriya and English. *Shadow Space, Relationship, Bare Face, A Rain of Rites* are some of his wellknown poetry collections.
- In books such as *Green Gardener* and *Door of Paper: Essay and Memoirs*, one can find Mahapatra writing in fine prose. He is also an Odia to English translator.
- Mahapatra is also the editor of the literary journal *Chandrabhaga: A Magazine of Indian Writing*
- He has been featured in several national and international poetry anthologies and is currently a fellow of the Sahitya Akademi.





I am sure when you read some of his poems you will realize how great a poet Mahapatra is. Mahapatra is one of the prolific writers we have in India because he has more than 40 books to his credit. In fact, he is a bilingual writer like many of our Indian English writers. Remember we said Kamala Das was a bilingual writer, Arun Kolatkar was a bilingual writer and that continuing that legacy we have here Jayanta Mahapatra, like A K Ramanujan, they are all bilingual writers. In fact, some of them are even multilingual writers. So, with more than 40 books to his credit, some of his well-known poetry collections include 'Shadow Space', 'Relationship', 'Bare Face', 'A Rain of Rites', something like this. And he has also written some remarkable memoirs and that is something that we have to keep in mind. His contribution is also in the journal that he edited in an influential journal that he edited called *Chandrabhaga*. In fact, *Chandrabhaga* is synonymous with quality Indian English poetry even to this day. In a sort of speaking *Chandrabhaga* offered many young Indian English poets a rite of passage and they had to pass through that in order to be considered major Indian English poets the journal provided them with that kind of rite of passage. So, that is his remarkable contribution to Indian English poetry.

(Refer Slide Time: 23:56)

True poetry has the ability to 'liberate' both poet and reader from their necessities and produce in their minds an effect beyond the ordinary."

"I shall go on writing my poems as the sun goes on shining — both on the President's gardens and on the rat-riddled shacks in my town"

"My poems deal with the life within myself where the mind tries to find a sort of coherence from the mass of things in the world outside it"



For him, poetry liberated not just the poet who wrote it, but also the reader who read because it produces in their minds an effect beyond the ordinary. That is precisely what he meant when he said that - poetry for him was a liberating force not just for the poet, but also for the readers. And he went on to say that:

“I shall go on writing my poems as long as the sun goes on shining both on the president’s, gardens and on the rat riddled shacks in my own town.”

Now, look this is the beauty of poetry right I said earlier, poetry at its core is egalitarian - it does not discriminate between the huts of the poor people and the mansions of kings and presidents and prime ministers. So, a poet in that sense is a true democrat, a true egalitarian, and his or her poetry embodies that spirit of oneness.

“My poems deal with the life within myself where the mind tries to find a sort of coherence from the mass of things in the world outside it”.

Again these are some lines by Jayanta Mahapatra .

(Refer Slide Time: 25:26)

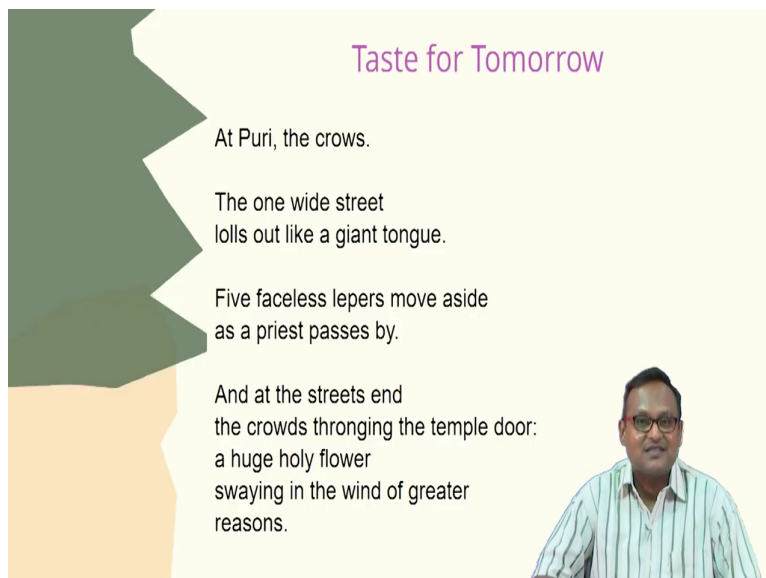


1981 'Sahitya Academy Award' Winner
Relationship
Jayanta Mahapatra

Let's read his poems now...

So, let us go and quickly take a look at at least one of his poems before we end this class ok.

(Refer Slide Time: 25:32)



Taste for Tomorrow

At Puri, the crows.

The one wide street
lolls out like a giant tongue.

Five faceless lepers move aside
as a priest passes by.

And at the streets end
the crowds thronging the temple door:
a huge holy flower
swaying in the wind of greater
reasons.

So, a “Taste for Tomorrow”, this poem is set in the backdrop of Puri.

“At Puri, the crows”

Use of a minimalism in words economy of expression.

“The one wide street

lolls out like a giant tongue”

how beautifully compares the street to a giant tongue and how it rolls out like a giant tongue.

“five faceless lepers move aside
as a priest passes by



and at the streets end
the crowd thronging the temple door
a huge holy flower
swaying in the wind of greater
reasons.”

Look how beautifully the poet juxtaposes the mundane with the divine. So, here is the temple door which can lead you on to a different portal, and the crowd of people are thronging the door and there is there are a couple of lepers, there is a priest who comes by - how beautifully the poet juxtaposes the mundane, the routine, with the magical and the divine.

(Refer Slide Time: 26:56)

Dhuli

Afterwards when the wars of
Kalinga were over,
the fallow fields of Dhuli
hid the blood-spilt butchered bodies.
As the earth
burrowed into their dead hunger
with its merciless worms
guided the foxes to their limp genitals.
Years later, the evening wind,
trembling the glazed waters of the River Daya,
keens in the rock edicts the vain word,
like the voiceless cicadas of night:
the measure of Ashoka's suffering
does not appear enough.
The place of his pain peers lamentably
from among the pains of the dead.



I have another remarkable poem “Dhuli”.

Dhuli is an important historical place, Dhuli is a place where it is said Ashoka's great Kalinga battle seemed to have been fought. Historians identify where Ashoka's great the

Kalinga Yuddha seemed to have taken place and where Ashoka realized the futility of war and bloodshed later he renounced violence, embraces Buddhism and in order to expiate for his sins through wars he spreads Buddhism and all that - this is the Shanti Stupa that you find in Dhauli. So, this poem is a remarkable tribute to that .

Afterwards when the wars of
Kalinga were over
the fallow fields of Dhauli
hid the blood-spilt butchered bodies,
as the earth
burrowed into their dead hunger
with its merciless worms
guided the foxes to their limp genitals.
Years later the evening wind
trembling the glazed waters of the river daya

In fact, river daya is again there in Dhauli its just about 10-15 kilometers away from Bhubaneswar the capital of Odisha. Notice how the poet, using these geographical markers, evinces the poetic spirit of kindness, the kind spirit, and how even years later how whatever Ashoka did cannot do justice to the number of soldiers he killed in the war. Or maybe it is too late and too little, probably the poet feels and that is why he says the measure of Ashoka's suffering does not appear enough.

Thank you very much; I am glad that we could discuss very many Indian English poets. Of course, the list is not exhaustive it is just illustrative if Indian English poetry interests you along with the poets we have discussed you can even read the poetry of Agha Shahid Ali, you can read the poetry of Ranjit Hoskote, you can read the poetry of Karthika Nair, Arundhati Subrahmanyam, all of them are remarkable young writers including Jeet Thayil. So, you can read some of these poets and enjoy. So, next week we come up with some more discussion of poetry this time from around the globe until then take care. Bye.