

5.0 Thematic analysis of Jayanta Mahapatra's Poems

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Abstract

Jayanta Mahapatra was one of the most popular poets of the post-colonial Era. Hailing from Bhubaneswar, he finds a concrete and prominent place in Indian English Writing. Being a student of Physics, he had a deep analytical insight which helped him to deal with various aspects and issues of human nature and provide us an ample scope to go through psychoanalysis of his characters. Hence with this point of view the present paper aims to investigate the different issues and themes taken up by Mahapatra in his various Poems. Jayanta Mahapatra generally deals with the theme of hunger, philosophy, human suffering, sex, sensual sordid realities of life at Orissa, Indian sensibility, patriarchy, prostitution, naxal crime, human frustration and disappointment for which many poems can be cited as apt example.

Keywords Patriarchy, Naxal, Prostitution, Post Independence poetry, Indianness, Hunger.

Introduction

Jayanta Mahapatra was born in the year 1928 in Cuttack (Orissa). He spent most of his time in Orissa, hence his Poems relive and breathe with the experiences of his life spent in the same place. His Poems have been published in ten journals of national and international repute. His ten volumes of poetry are - *Close the Sky Ten by Ten* (1971), *Swayambara and other Poems* (1971), *A Father's Hours* (1976), *A Rain of Rites* (1976), *Waiting* (1979), *The False Start* (1980), *Relationship* (1982), *Life Signs* (1983), *Dispossessed Nests* (1986) and *Burden of Waves & Fruit* (1988). Jayanta Mahapatra's Poems explore the influence of local realities creating and analyzing the depth of one's feeling and sensitivity. For example, the poem *Hunger*, the dramatic monologue unfolding in four taunt stanzas, is based on the privation of a poor fisherman who drags his young teenager daughter into the profession of prostitution. The poem *A Country* pictures universal sufferings with a comment on all poverty-stricken Asian countries from Turkey to Cambodia and the poem is replete with socio-economic and socio-political undertones, making an implicit critique of the prevailing social scenario where vast disparities exist between the affluent and the poor. 'Puri' is a living character in several of his Poems like *Indian Summer Poems*, *The Strangers*, *My Daughter*, etc., the picture of Puri is portrayed with a number of symbols of reality.

Mahapatra's thematic concerns in his poetry are many and while dealing with the theme he has shown his excellence. The excellence of Mahapatra's treatment of his themes matches the dignity and the significance of his theme. The Orissa landscape, its culture and way of living, rites and rituals of people of Orissa constitute the most important and significant theme of his poetry. In other words, we can say that Orissa has the same place in his literary work as Wessex found a significant place in Thomas Hardy's work. Of course, the charge of regional

outlook laid against him just like Hardy but here Mahapatra appears more realistic and more spiritual in his visionary outlook. Mahapatra deals with human relationships, Indian social problems, poverty, love, sex, marriage, human nature and suffering etc. Thus, the thematic range of Mahapatra's poetry is large enough though it cannot be described as all embedded and embracing.

Orissa landscape, History and Culture

Dawn at Puri, TasteforTomorrow, Slum, Evening landscape by the River and Events are Poems which deal chiefly with the Orissa landscape, history and culture. Of these, *Dawn at Puri* is the most conspicuous, most realistic, perhaps the most interesting with its endless crow noise, a skull laying on the holy land, vast sea beach, white- clad widowed women waiting for their turn to enter the great holy temple etc. Here, Jayanta Mahapatra presents a picturesque description of of the seashore and the pilgrims waiting every day to visit great temple Jagannath. At the beach, there are numerous crows gathering here and there. In this noisy ambiance, the poet observes a 'human skull' resembling poor and hungry millions of our country. This image is purposely mentioned in the poem to make the readers aware of the problems of hunger and poverty prevalent in rural India. There after poet shifts his vision towards temple where he perceives the-

White-clad widowed women

Past the centers of their lives

Are waiting to enter the Great Temple... (Mahapatra Jayanta, Dawn at Puri, Line 3-5)

The poet sees a great religious yearning in their eyes as there is only way left for them to attain their salvation. At this stage of life only faith and devotion to the almighty can keep their spirit of living alive. In the next section of the poem again Mahapatra shifts his vision to the seashore and now he sees 'empty shells' lying there instead of crows.

The fail early light catches

ruined, leprous shells leaning against one another...

a mass of crouched faces without names, (Mahapatra Jayanta, Dawn at Puri, Line 10-12)

It is actually an instance of symbolism which suggests that the poet uses the image of the 'shells' purposely to compare the lonely and hopeless state of widows. Like the shells leaning against each other on the seashore the widows also gather at the temple and sit there in the manner of the shells. As the shells are left over part of the dead creatures so as these widows are devoid of and any hope and aspirations in their life. These living entities are dead in them and in the absence of these their body remains useless and dead like the shells. According to the poet they have '*crouched faces without names*'. Mahapatra in the last section of the poem depicts the last stage of life by producing the image of the '*sullen solitary pyre*'. The smell of the smoke coming from the pyre makes the poet's mother aware of the short syllable of her life. Her attitude towards death is significant in the poem. Instead of fearing, she has realized the mortality and prepares herself to embrace her approaching death by welcoming it. She wishes to die in her native land with which her bond is deep and unbroken. Another poem

'Taste for Tomorrow' also depicts the scene at Puri with its crows, the vast streets encroached by the lepers and religious minded peoples crowded on the streets, thronging the temple door. In fact, Puri figures out prominently in most of his Poems.

The Theme of poverty and starvation

Poverty, sex and social concerns come next in importance so far as Mahapatra's themes are concerned. In this context one of the most significant and internationally acclaimed poems is *Hunger*. Here, *Hunger* deals with both poverty and sex. In fact, sexuality here is closely interlinked with poverty. It is a poem about degradation and meanness of people who are underprivileged.

The poem explores the feeling of degradation in human nature where man is compelled by the necessities of life and instead of keeping the moral and social values he is bound to fulfill the desires and needs of the body like hunger. The poem clearly reveals the importance of food and appetite for sex, both are animal desires. The poem talks about the plight of a fisherman who found it impossible to provide food and shelter to his family by his own occupation. Helplessly he dragged his own daughter into the profession of prostitution and attracts clients to his own daughter for sexual gratification in order to making money. The poet hears the fisherman says,

I heard him say; my daughter, she is just fifteen...

Feel her. I'll be back soon; your bus leaves at nine.

The sky fell on me, and a father's exhausted wile. (Mahapatra Jayanta, Hunger Lines 16-18)

As soon as the fisherman leaves, the girl opens her 'wormy legs' wide,' and the customer feels the hunger there. This is the most tragic situation that hunger compels us to compromise our social values and ethos and in the absence of these animal instincts in human nature rises and compels us to commit crimes. The speaker in the poem is compelled by his hunger of body and the fisherman and his daughter are compelled by hunger of their stomach. The idea of 'hunger' runs through the whole poem, at the beginning it is of sex and sexual desire but in the end, it transforms into the hunger of belly that leads the people to do anything.

Elements of pathos and human suffering

From ages, the men have been ruling over women. The men have imposed a set of filthy rules, allegations against women, keeping in mind their own comfort, convenience and immoral lifestyle. In this way Indian women have been crushed under the patriarchal system since a long time. Many illogical rituals and systems are often imposed on them. It is a sheer injustice that a woman cannot remarry and always supposed to dress in white though a widower can relish the enjoyments of life without any restriction. Jayanta Mahapatra's poetic world is filled with various images of wives, beloveds, whores, village women and adolescent girls, who are epitome of silent sufferers. Mahapatra has a great reverence and veneration for women, who are ancient symbols of suffering and sacrifice. He also confides in mythical saying, "wherever women are revered, Gods dwell there." He views –

*'Our minds were tied to the myths
That womanhood was pure, one
With the repose of the gods* (Mahapatra Jayanta, Temple Lines 1-3)

Mahapatra gives voice to the Oriyan women in some of his poems. The poet feels that the male centered society of Oriya does not believe in the emancipation of women. A woman has never been more than a sexual object in the eyes of chauvinistic men. Women have been kept away from the basic needs and fundamental rights, their world have been limited inside the house. They have been merely treated as an object of sexual gratification. In the poem 'Hunger', the speaker asserts that " *the flesh was heavy on my back*". He experiences an intense desire for sexual satisfaction. Further, he approached to fisherman, who is willing to sell his daughter to satisfy the poet's hunger of sex.

The plight of ordinary women in their conventional and customary lives is pathetic. Mahapatra describes the position of Indian women with minute details. He presents women characters who struggle for their identity. They lead a meaningless and futile life. There is nothing in their life except darkness around them. The life is a living hell for them in which they are toiling hard and they tried to survive amidst sorrows and pains. 'A Missing Person' depicts such a tale of a missing village woman. Here, Mahapatra describes the scene with elaborate image-

*In the darkened room
a woman
Can not find her reflection in the mirror
waiting as usual
at the edge of sleep
In her hands she holds
the oil lamp
whose drunken yellow flames
Know where her lonely body hides.* (Mahapatra Jayanta, A missing Person, Lines 1-9)

Sex, Sexual exploitation and Prostitution

Just like an economist Mahapatra analyzes the importance of money. In the absence of it how poverty affects the social and economic condition of a person. Through his poetry he shows that how poverty seriously affects other aspects of life, sometimes compelling a woman to either go to hold knife to be naxalite or become prostitute. *The Whorehouse of Calcutta Street* elaborately deals with the theme of prostitution and sexual exploitation. It also deals with the pain and agonies of whores that they suffer in their everyday life. In the poem a customer enters the premises with a great hope of seeing pretty faces, 'The faces in the posters, the public hoardings.' Here, the customer is glad with the prospect of grabbing the opportunity to fulfill his sexual desires but on the other hand he is governed by the sense of shame and guilt. Mahapatra always remains realistic in his approach while describing an image or incident in his poetry. It is clear from the opening lines of the poem,

Walk right in. It is yours.

Where the house smiles wryly into lighted Street.

Think of the women

You wished to know and haven't. (Mahapatra Jayanta, The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street, Lines 1-4)

The following lines suggest that physically we are standing in the market where the things are not sold, but girls. Circumstances and situations play a dominating role in compelling one to take an altered path. Down with hunger and poverty sometimes it is hard to keep body and soul together hence helpless and needy women are dragged to the profession of prostitution. Here the prostitute accepts this profession only being compelled by poverty. It is known from her activities and behavior with a customer when she offers him her body just to please him as a sense of duty but soon after threatened him by saying that,

"Hurry, will you? Let me go."

and her lonely breath thrashed against your kind. (Mahapatra Jayanta, The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street, Lines 41-42)

The whore asks the customer in a harsh voice to hurry up and finish his turn so that she may be able to get another customer, which indicates that she doesn't derive any pleasure from this encounter and has no emotion and sentiments for the customer rather she acts like a machine, just to draw some money from this business she gratified the sexual desire of her customer. Love doesn't have any existence in these encounters which are entirely based on need and money.

Imagery as the primary pigment of Mahapatra's poetry

There is a spectrum of imagery and symbols in the poetry of Mahapatra. But it seems that imagery comes to Mahapatra naturally. His images are the tools through which he tries to communicate his inner vision and feelings more effectively and impressively. Many of his poems have dealt with images and symbols conveying the message to the readers, providing them an ample scope to think and meditate towards the bitter and ugly facts which are deep rooted in our society. His concerns with the locality gave him themes and he symbolizes those themes in his works. Like '*Dawn at Puri*' shows the locale of Puri and opens with the striking images

Endless crow noises

A skull on the holy sands

tilts its empty country towards hunger. (Mahapatra Jayanta, Dawn at Puri, Lines 1-3)

Mahapatra depicts with vivid images and symbols of the temple town Puri which is famous for Lord Jagannath, deity of Orissa. It is particularly famous for the chariot festival of Lord Jagannath which is attended by a large number of people. But here, Mahapatra tries to draw the attention towards the harsh reality of life that how poverty is affecting the life of Oriya people who belong to the land of famine and flood disaster through symbols and images

instead of glorification of temple and other rituals. The town of puri at dawn is covered with the 'endless crow noises' and 'a skull' on the holy sands suggests the death and hunger.

Another poem '*Indian Summer*' is remarkable for clear and exact imagery. The poem begins with the striking tones:

*'Over the soughing of the sombre wind,
priest chant louder than ever,
the mouth of India opens'.* (Mahapatra Jayanta, A Summer Poem, Lines 1-3)

The opening lines of the poem show the pessimistic approach of the poet. The poet is upset with the present condition; hence he tries to reveal his vision of grief, loss, dejection and rejection.

'*A Rain of Rites*' is another symbolic poem where the poet uses the metaphor 'rain' in the very first stanza of the poem to show his unfulfilled desires, happiness and contentment.

*Sometimes a rain comes
slowly across the sky that turns
upon its grey cloud, breaking away into light
before it reaches its objectives.* (Mahapatra Jayanta, A Rain of Rites, Lines 1-4)

The poet opines that the rain, he wishes to fall and bring happiness in his life never falls. In the process of coming down, the rain gets converted into light and then fails to accomplish its objectives.

Conclusion

While analyzing the poems of Mahapatra, one can easily perceive that he has touched all the aspects of life. Dealing with several themes he has emancipated life in a very crafty and peculiar way. He has shown his excellence while introducing several themes in his writings which are prominent and dominating in Indian society and culture. Issues and concerns which find a prominent place in Mahapatra's work as love, marriages, poverty, hunger, prostitution etc., has drawn the attention of the reader towards the bitter end of the society and provides us a philosophical and thoughtful vision which can lead us towards the betterment of the society and human beings.

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