

“An Indian Woman Piled Up To Her Silences”: A Reading Of Jayanta Mahapatra's Select Poems

Dr. V. Kavitha Elzie

Assistant Professor in English

Christopher Arts and Science College, (Women)

Surankudi, Nanguneri, Tirunelveli Dist.

kavithaelzie29@gmail.com

Abstract

Every age throws up new problems or issues which provide the artist with his or her themes for treatment in their favorite art form. Art is termed today as an "autobiography of society" as it gives expression to the hopes and aspirations, fears and frustrations of the people. W.H. Hudson rightly observes, "that literature is a social product and inevitably reflects the life of the era out of which it springs" (94). So art has a social function as it recreates human life in its moments of pain and pleasure. Jayanta Mahapatra, one of our times finest idiom makers, is rather a late bloomer of the twentieth-century Indian English poetry. He is perhaps one of the least studied of the major Indian English poets though he has to his credit seventeen volumes of poetry. Most of Mahapatra's poems issue out of the pangs he experiences at the tragic plight of the poor and the vulnerability of women and children. He is deeply disturbed by the distress of destitute, deceived and deserted women. Longsuffering wives, jilted beloveds, harassed harlots, rustic lasses, urban ladies and victims of rape and dowry figure prominent in many of his poems. The paper to be presented shows that patriarchy prevails preventing women from full enjoyment of the fruits of the freedom conferred by democracy. Peace and security still elude women back at home and in society at large.

Keywords: *Modernism, Vulnerability, Alienation, Indian Literature.*

Introduction :

There is no woman
who is not alone,
no woman who is sure
she has found her way
to her real purpose of life

(Mahapatra, "The Hall of Offerings" Temple 58- 62).

Jayanta Mahapatra, one of our times finest idiom makers, is rather a late bloomer of the twentieth-century Indian English poetry. He is perhaps one of the least studied of the major Indian English poets though he has to his credit seventeen volumes of poetry including his recently published collection, The Lie of Dawn: Poems 1974 - 2008(2010). But that he turns out to be the first Indian poet in English to receive the coveted Central Sahitya Award in 1981 highlights the necessity for one to study him in greater detail.

Most of Mahapatra's poems issue out of the pangs he experiences at the tragic plight of the poor and the vulnerability of women and children. He is deeply disturbed by the distress of destitute, deceived and deserted women. Longsuffering wives, jilted beloveds, harassed harlots, rustic lasses, urban ladies and victims of rape and dowry figure prominent in many of his poems.

The paper to be presented shows that patriarchy prevails preventing women from full enjoyment of the fruits of the freedom conferred by democracy. Peace and security still elude women back at home and in society at large.

Mahapatra is highly critical of the politicians who are responsible for the poverty of the masses and the plight of the women and children. In an ironically worded poem,

“Heroism” of Shadow Space, the poet's vision of society after the attainment of Independence is rather gloomy. The poet exposes the emptiness of the “talk of freedom,/ freedom from want, social injustice and greed”. This talk is held against the backdrop of “the bleeding heartland”(1-3). Mahapatra has captured in many of his poems the painful reality of life for the poor. Mahapatra is so used to seeing poverty and pain around him that in his poem Relationship he writes, “and the suffering of the world returns/ like winter's persistent asthma / year after year”(two 36-38).

The poet responds to current social disasters in which the poor suffer most. In “Death of a Nameless Girl in Bhopal, December 1984” from A Whiteness of Bone, he says:

There has always been starvation here, man;
yes, we are used to it. This pain was new; one
of the loose ends. And obviously
sanity seems necessary. (21-24)

Mahapatra extends his vision to encompass the pathetic plight of women and the heavy burden that they have to bear.

One could see such a powerfully realistic picture of a victim in his favourite poem “Hunger” which deals with juvenile prostitution to stave off hunger. In this poem, the fisherman-father being a victim of penury, unscrupulously allows his fifteen-year-old daughter to resort to prostitution:

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. (16-21)

The fisherman-father finds no other way to eke out his income. By thus giving these realistic descriptions, Mahapatra does not create any emotion or passion in us, instead he makes us pity such kinds of women in society. Commenting on these lines, Niranjana Mohanty says, “... the poet has expressed many things: the father's exhausted wile as a plea to live against poverty, the daughter's youth, and the easy commerce that corrodes the immaculate veil of relationship” (“Dialectics of love” 246).

In “The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street” from the same collection, Mahapatra vividly brings out the nature of man and the modern Indian sex worker. They men quest for communication but they always get frustrated. The nature of the modern whore is dexterously verbalised in her mechanical words, “Hurry, will you? Let me go” (41). Mahapatra in “Man of His Nights” of Life Signs, gives a similar picture of a modern Indian harlot as, “The plump whore he has just left/ has brazenly gone to work on a new customer” (6-7).

In all these poems, though an authentic treatment is given, Mahapatra makes one see the fact that these modern Indian women are forced to accept this profession of prostitution just for their bellies' sake and thereby they place themselves in the hands of the customers. In these three poems, the woman as Ayyappa Paniker points out, “is passive “and “not an active sharer in the guilt; she takes to it mechanically, tired and bored, without even professional game” (125). She has little passion and her flesh is only a commercial commodity for the customers like the flesh of the goats slaughtered by the butcher whose heads the man coming from the brothel sees in “Man of His Nights.”

Along with seduced women and whores, destitute women also find place in Mahapatra's poems. Mahapatra himself says in “The Twenty-fifth Anniversary of a

Republic,1975” of A Father's Hours, “The destitute everywhere are still my sense of guilt” (IV 7). The poem “In a Night of Rain” from Life Signs is a realistic portrayal of the destitute woman in society, “A mist of embarrassed thoughts slowly sweeps/ the dark space at the river's edge/ where our homeless women have put up their huts”(3-5).

The sad plight of the homeless woman with “A ten-year-old” daughter who has only winter in life is presented in “Summer” of Arian of Rites. What “the cold ash! of a deserted fire”“Under the mango tree” seems to symbolise is the loss of her youth and hope in life. It is written:

The home will never
be hers.
In a corner of her mind
a living green mango
drops softly to earth. (10-14)

In “Bazaar Scene” from Shadow Space Mahapatra very strikingly brings out the “poverty of fate” which he views in a little girl that steals a rotting mango from a vendor's basket for her malnourished and crippled brother (18). It is through such sketchy but highly suggestive references that Mahapatra draws his reader's attention to the plight of the destitute urchins of India.

“Slum” from The False Start presents the pitiable images of slum-dwellers who really rest “on pain and plain despair”(8). “The familiar oldwhore” and the “lonely girl, beaten in battle” could be seen in their different pursuits. The poet's vision of life is somber and his frustration results in bitter anger mixed with biting irony in lines such as:

so we would go on
reading the epics in the lamplight,
sucking our mothers' dry and drooping breasts,
watch the thin moon blend into that darkness
where gigolos and pimps and cocksuckers
jabber excitedly in a language of monstrous flowers.

(Three, Relationship 26-31)

Mahapatra in “Walls” of Shadow Spaces speaks of the dreams and illusions that three teenage girls grew up with and how they were all shattered” ‘as the ground swelled up so fast.” The poet goes on to say that they “did not seem to matter any more.” The reader could visualize how “the slow cold ache/ of parading themselves before their prospective grooms/ came into them again” (17-24). How their youth and hope are blighted in their destitution and despair are memorably limned in these words of the poet's question, “What is there in the hands/ when the hands can't hold the body anymore?” (48-49).

In an interview with Abraham, Mahapatra himself has aired his view on the condition of women in society thus:

Perhaps, the status of the Indian woman in our society today has gone down. It is pathetic indeed to read accounts of the degradation our women are subjected to in the daily newspapers. Cases of rape, murder, mutilation continue to fill the pages, and one sits helplessly, feeling this pain one is not able to do anything about. ...I can see the pain in the eyes of women as they pass by the road every day; their eyes seem to say: we are the beasts of burden, like cattle. It is about this pain I would like to write because I can't do anything else . . . (155).

Madhusudan Prasad rightly points out, “Mahapatra dexterously deploys the images of women to zero in on contemporary social ambience, cultural decay and collapse of the old values”(103).

Mahapatra after analyzing the reasons for such miserable condition of women in society, seems to blame it all on the cruel forces in a loose administrative framework and corrupt social structure. As a result, in India women are not treated as independent individuals. They become puppets not only in the hands of womanisers in society, but also in the hands of their own kith and kin. The images of women employed in Mahapatra's poetry remind one of the collapse of old values, cultural decay and current social situations.

“Widow” of Shadow Space is a poem about the lonely life of a widow who is the subject of scandal for the malicious women around her. In “Still Life” we get a glimpse of a neighbour being killed and a battered housewife seeing self-immolation to be “definitely easier/ than death through constant beatings and torture” (19-20). In “June Rain”, he speaks of “the tragedy of chaos” which he sees around him –the rape and murder of a woman, the Establishment with its peck of lies, laws remaining unenforced.

In the 19th section of Dispossessed Nests Mahapatra with a heavy heart writes about a man who

...knows only two ways
for dealing with a stray woman:
he rapes her
and he kills her. (12-15)

In “The Lost Children of America” from Life Signs for instance there is the image of a girl who is raped in a religious place like a temple that is held sacred and also later cruelly raped repeatedly in a police station that is supposed to provide the victim with protection. He highlights the cruel fact that lawlessness has reached its zenith and cultural values have crumbled down in the dust in the present-day Indian society:

In the Hanuman Temple last night
the priest's pomaded jean-clad son
raped the squint-eyed fourteen-year fisher girl
on the cracked stone platform behind the shrine
and this morning
her father found her at the police station
assaulted over and over again by four policemen
dripping of darkness and of scarlet death. (112-119)

Here the father is helpless to oppose the corrupt administration. Mahapatra boldly points out the pitfalls and corruptions in Indian society through the image of the woman who was raped and killed in his poem “Morning Signs”:

Before the morning paper comes I know
that Lata's rapists and killers
have been set free, for that is how
it has always been. (13-16)

The irony in the lines, “that is how / it has always been” gives a pungent attack on the post-Independent administration.

The plight of the long suffering Indian housewife whose identity she misses could be seen in poems like “A Missing Person” from A Rain of Rites:

In the darkened room
a woman
cannot 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. (1-9)

With this humanist view, Mahapatra's voice of cry is heard in many unanswered questions in poems like "The Twentyfifth Anniversary of a Republic, 1975", where he asks, "What is the order of life?/The tubercular servant-girl trips over the edge of the present" (XVI 3-4). In another poem called "A Country" in Life Signs he asks, "... why do I wear myself out/ feeling for the girls who die/ before their breasts are swollen with milk"(13-15). His concern for the tubercular girl dying unmarried is seen in another poem called "Strike Your Secret Earth" from Waiting:

Forget the frail girl dying
blowly of tuberculosis
before the abashed, silken breasts
have swollen with milk. (19-22)

Mahapatra in "Possessions" of Shadow Space is very critical of our poets who "stand inside" and do not sympathize with the poor and expose social evils. They comment, "Poets will sip their tea in stupid-looking cafes/ or dangle in unknown fields/ like embarrassed scarecrows" (30-32). In several poems he sees only "The worn-out face of India" and her dumb and solitary poets have "weak eyes".

M.K. Naik says, "The first remarkable feature of Mahapatra's response to the world of external reality is that Nature per se does not seem to interest him much, for he appears to be preoccupied with the human condition for which forces of Nature often furnish apt metaphors" ("The two Words of Imagery" 99). He points out that the images of disease are frequently employed when the poet tries to articulate his anguish at the social ills of the time (102).

Thus current social occurrences are registered with sensitivity by Mahapatra. For instance, in "Story at the Start of 1978" from Waiting, the poet records the destruction caused by natural calamities. Then the landmarks in the country look like "diseased pelvises of time" (19). Mahapatra mostly has a tragic vision of life. In the eyes of Mahapatra, women seem to exist as a class and not as individuals. He does not project the woman's viewpoint so prominently. In many cases she exists without voice and name. She exists almost as a pawn controlled by the male world. His deep concern for the poor, the downtrodden and the suffering masses is patent in some of the significant images of women. These images evince Mahapatra's humanist attitude and sympathy for the weaker section of society.

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