



## PHILOSOPHIC PERCEPTION AND PATHETIC PLIGHT OF WOMAN IN THE POETRY OF JAYANTA MAHAPATRA

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### ABSTRACT

*Jayanta Mahapatra is a name in Indian English poetry which needs no introduction. Perhaps any discussion of Indian English Poetry is incomplete without reference to his poetical works. He is regarded as the Father of the modern and post modern Indian English poetry. His is the case of a writer who is recognized abroad and commands more respect overseas before receiving attention at home. His broad canvas depicts social discrimination and degeneration of moral values in his world famous poems Hunger, Myth and India which are flawless and excellent examples of majestic poetry. His most philosophical poems The Moon Moments and Total Solar Eclipse are characterized by a stark realism. His vision of women is basically that of a sacrificial and suffering lot, destined to be a living human offering to God and to men's world of carnal need.*

**Keywords :-** Frustration, Discrimination, Philosophical, Exploitation, Prostitution, Poverty, Existence, Aspirations.

### INTRODUCTION

Jayanta Mahapatra is a name in Indian English poetry which needs no introduction. Perhaps any discussion of Indian English Poetry is incomplete without reference to his poetical works. He is regarded as the Father of the modern and post modern Indian English poetry. His poetry saw the light of day in various parts of the world, ranging from Chicago to Victoria, and from Manchester to Melbourne, before the Indian Government honoured him with the Sahitya Akademy Award (1981) for his popular book of verse *Relationship*. His is the case of a writer who is recognized abroad and commands more respect overseas before receiving attention at home. He did to Oriya poetry what Ram Dhari Singh Dinkar had done to Hindi or Kazi

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Nazrul Islam to modern Bengali verse. His popular release The Lie of Dawns – a collection of poems was published in 2009 and in the same year he was conferred the 'Padma Shree Award' by the President of India.

A distinguished recipient of honorary doctorate and D.Litt. degree, Jayanta Mahapatra started writing poetry at the age of thirty eight, quite late by normal standards, authored about 18 volumes of poetry and managed to carve a quite, tranquil poetic voice of his own distinctly different from those of his contemporaries. The poet himself states: *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.* A fact worth noticing about Mahapatra's poetic output is that his poems reveal an increasing concern on the part of the poet with contemporary reality with all its social connotations. There is a remarkable poise about the way he organizes the things. His dominant concern is the vision of grief, loss, distress, frustration, dejection and rejection. The vision of tragic consciousness does not seem to operate in the work of any other Indian poet in English as disturbingly as in that of Jayanta Mahapatra. He is a poet of ailing and aching heart pining for what is not. Orissa is the hub of Jayanta Mahapatra's iconoclastic perambulations. His poetry soars above the oriya soil he is rooted in. His broad canvas depicts social discrimination and degeneration of moral values in his world famous poems *Hunger, Myth, India* and *The Accusation* which are flawless and excellent examples of majestic poetry. There is also a large chunk of his poetry which shows his universal outlook. The poems like *A Whorehouse In A Calcutta Street, Lost* and *The Logic* are examples of poetry which has a universal appeal. His vision as a poet is certainly dark, tragic and undoubtedly pessimistic in its approach. Even his most philosophical poems *The Moon Moments* and *Total Solar Eclipse* are characterized by a stark realism. In *The Moon Moments*, he refers to the need of socialism and of a universal acceptance of the doctrine of the Brotherhood of Man. We regard this view as realistic because every great statesman has emphasized these concepts, and mankind is daily moving towards these ideals, though at a snail's pace. In *Total Solar Eclipse*, he depicts both points of view—the scientific and the superstitious. The scientific view is indicated by the reference to the moon's quietly moving along its course; and the superstitious view is indicated by the reference to "the fearsome Brahmin" performing various rituals in order to ward off the evil which the solar eclipse predicts.

In poem after poem what we notice is a veiled criticism of the callousness and ruthlessness of tradition, of the indifference of his society to suffering, of the insulated and fossilized Hindu culture to which he bears an uneasy relationship. Images of inertia, helplessness, restlessness and decadence frequent his poetry. The universe that he inhabits is static, languid, almost unchanging, but it is also corrupt, violent and predatory. The poet himself is impotent to change this world, but can only meditate on it with the deepest compassion. Mahapatra's is a

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brooding, interrogative poetry in which profound questions are raised without the answers being necessarily supplied. His poems *Dawn at Puri* is a poem of experience, religion and faith. It deals with a very beautiful picture of the seashore of Puri, the most sacred place in the myths and history of Orissa. The poem that opens with the image of a 'skull' has fantastic images and metaphysical conceits in it.

*Endless crow noises  
A skull on the holy sands  
tilts its empty country towards hunger.*

The phrase 'holy sands' stands for the seashore of Puri, the abode of Lord Jagannatha. Generally on the holy sands, there are beautiful objects. But in place of beautiful things, the holy sand is littered with 'skull' and 'endless crow noises'. The 'skull' in question could be that of an unburnt corpse, but to the poet's eye it suggests the hunger of an entire nation. The 'skull' also denotes the modern man who lacks love, sympathy, and other healthy values of life. It also shows how today man has become dry and monotonous like a skull. On economic and political plane, it suggests the hunger, drought and poverty. The term 'holy' before 'sands' contains a mild irony on the holiness of the religious places.

In Puri, there is a stretch of beach called Swargadwara, or gateway to heaven, where the dead are cremated. Many pious Hindus consider it auspicious to die in Puri because it is considered to be presided over by Lord Jagannath—an incarnation of God Vishnu. The description of the funeral pyre and its process of cremation at the end of poem is very pictorial and pathetic. The pyre where the mother of the poet is being consumed is in accordance with her last wishes. It shows the wish of every pious Hindu to be cremated at Puri.

*And suddenly breaks out of my hide / into the smoky blaze of a sullen solitary  
pyre / that fills my aging mother. / Her last wish to be cremated here / twisting  
uncertainly like light / on the shifting sands.*

Jayanta Mahapatra's They have been allotted with two prominent categories – an angel at home and a whore at bed. They have been used as a tool for sexual satisfaction or relaxation. The poet most conspicuously deals with sexual exploitation of the fair-sex in his globally acknowledged poem *Hunger* where a fisherman father pimps his fifteen year old daughter for the sexual gratification of a lustful customer only for a few coins. It is sheer poverty which has driven the father and the daughter to adopt this method just to keep their body and soul together. The protagonist despite his own disgust, succumbs to the temptation and has sex with the daughter of the fisherman. But what he experiences at the end is a sort of horror as

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the act is utterly degraded, losing all its sense of joy, comfort or pleasure. Instead, it evokes a sense of disgust and self-loathing in the speaker.

*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.*

The poet, from behind his persona, clearly indicts the system which allows such careless prostitution to happen where destitution is the cause of prostitution. And it is this extreme poverty and deprivation that the poet focuses on and exposes.

Silence is a word that gets endlessly repeated, one might say consecrated, in Mahapatra's poems; there is no doubt that it has "gripped his sleeves" too. But no where has he made silence more eloquent than in this poem. The young man does not speak; the girl does not speak; even the fisherman speaks in a matter-of-fact tone which has the ominousness of silence. A poignant drama is enacted before our mind's eye, and in this way, the travail of a whole nation is embodied within the compass of a short lyric. Mahapatra himself states : *What appears to disturb me is the triumph of silence in the mind.*

Mahapatra, in many of his poems, deals with brothels, brothel—mongers, and the plight of women forced into the profession of whoredom. In the poem *The Whorehouse In a Calcutta Street*, the poet's vision of woman is painted nearly a mechanical tool of man. The protagonist is invited to enter into the brothel saying that he should think himself to be the owner of the place. He is tempted by being told that there he would meet all the women whom he wanted to have and whose faces he has seen in the advertisements on the public hoardings and the posters in a most alluring manner. Here the poet critically evaluates the working of the mind of the customer whose conscience is ambivalent towards his morals. On the one hand, he wants to satiate his sexual desire, while on the other hand, he repulses from the sin of womanizing. The whore reluctantly offers her body to the customer for the basic needs of her survival. She tries to please the customer with her artificial and mechanical fondling which she does professionally. She is a victim, a passionless tool, a mere money-earning machine devoid of the sense of love and emotions. Her response is brazen indicating her helplessness and her absolute indifference to what happens to her. The customer feels shocked when she requests her somewhat harshly and in a tone of rebuke that he should hurry up with the process and let her go.

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*Like a girl holding on to your wide wilderness, / as though it were real, as though the renewing voice / tore the membrane of your half—woken mind / when, like a door, her words close behind: / 'Hurry, will you? Let me go', / and her lonely breath thrashed against your kind.*

Mahapatra here effectively underscores the pathetic conditions of those unfortunate women who, despite their false chatter, do have deep feelings. Hunger and male exploitation seem to have driven them into the flesh trade which they have accepted with a kind of stoic resignation. It is often been pointed out, and rightly too, that Jayanta Mahapatra has, in his mental make up, something of the existentialist outlook on life. He is a close observer of men and things, and finds:

*Everyman, every beast  
Trapped, deaf in his own sleep.*

The tragic vision of life he presents in the poetry is extremely horrifying which transports the reader to that inner core of existence: *Where there is nothing of the paradise charm that man has long been dreaming of.* The poem *A Missing Person* brings out the sombre and philosophic vision of Jayanta Mahapatra. A deeply philosophical and profoundly reflective poet conveys the idea that human beings are not always aware of what they are so far as their nature and character are concerned. Each one of us has an existence which is visible, and each one of us has an existence which is invisible. The poet here makes a distinction between the body and the spirit. The body is visible, but the spirit is invisible. 'Spirit' in the poem means the essential personality of a human being. One can see one's body in a mirror but one can't see or fathom one's inner personality and character which is the sum total of all that a human being is, all that he or she does, and all that he or she thinks. Self-knowledge is totally missing. The phrase 'The darkened room' is again symbolic of tragic gloom that envelops the Indian people, particularly her women-folk, the victims of exploitation since times immemorial. The protagonist in *A Missing Person* is a helpless woman whose inner self is not imaged in the mirror. She is tired and bored-waiting as usual at the edge of sleep-holding in her hands an oil lamp shedding a dim yellow light which enables her to see her body reflected in the mirror, but no light is shed on her inner personality or psyche which is invisible. The poet regrets that her inner sufferings and frustration are never externalised and never understood. It is again one of those lyrics in which silence is more eloquent than speech itself.

*In the darkened room / A woman / Cannot find her reflection in the mirror / Waiting as usual / at the edge of sleep.*



Jayanta Mahapatra is a poet of human relationship and raises his situations from the regional to universal. He employs symbols, imagery and epithets to present the human conditions, which are not only the conditions of our Indian society but of the whole world. He is the master penetrator into the core of the female heart. In his poetry the human relationship centres round man-woman relationship and the stress has been laid in presenting woman as the sufferer. In *Indian Summer* he presents the gloomy state of a woman who comes into the house of her husband with hopes and fears, tension and anxiety but still has the dream in her vision. All her hopes and aspirations come to naught when she is dejected in the bed and loneliness becomes her husband's substitute. She thinks that the 'funeral pyres' can only accomplish her wishes :

*The good wife / lies in my bed / through the long afternoon; / dreaming still,  
unexhausted / by the deep roar of funeral pyre.*

Similarly, the poem *Logic*, extremely overpacked with meaning, is essentially an indictment of a male scholar, immersed in his mental reflections; and the woman persona is deeply pinned down by the use of logic by her better half:

*Make me small and edible love. / This scalp hurts not from the steep drag / of  
your hands but from my own practised drivel.*

In his yet another poem *Widow* Mahapatra depicts a realistic picture of widow who is the most sufferer in our Indian decorum. There are places in Orissa where a widow is not allowed to have her food with the rest of the family members. She has to lead painful, tortured and humiliating existence, deprived of all the carnal and colourful desires of life.

*Her skin breaks into fickle shadows / That trial her to the corner of the little  
room / where a stone icon stands. Weary with vermilion / In an exotic drapery  
of hopes.*

Mahapatra portrays the destiny of a widow with minute observation of the "jackals" roaming in our Indian society who increase her grief and 'feed' on her 'intestines' :

*Like jackals, malicious women around her, / sniffing the smell of the left over  
death, / feed on her scandalous intestines / through rain and summer, the  
spectacle or order, / through unreality and beguiling concern.*

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