



JAYANTA MAHAPATRA'S CONCEPTION OF POETRY AND TREATMENT OF THEMES: AN APPRAISAL

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Jayanta Mahapatra's conception of poetry and treatment of themes depicting the various images of women by bringing out the themes of love, sex, death, exploitation, male-lust and loneliness which occupy the major part of his poetry. It also describes poverty and the sufferings of the people especially treatment of women as victims of lust and love in a patriarchal society imparting tragic touch to Mahapatra's poetry.

Keywords : *conception , treatment , poetry , poverty , victims , tragic vision*

INTRODUCTION

Jayanta Mahapatra is considered to be one of the distinguished Indian English poets in the modern literary scenario. He was born in Cuttack in 1928. Educated at Stewart School and Ravenshaw College, Cuttack and Science College, Patna, he taught physics at Ravenshaw College, Cuttack. He started writing poetry at the age of forty in 1968 and therefore he was called "a late bloomer is an eloquent expression of the eternal silence of the unknown. Elucidating his own conception of poetry, he wrote:

"..... for me a poem is a knit together by an inconceivable silence, which is intangible substance, of which words are but manifestations; words which can build the poem waits to burst out of one with a childlike pang on its way to becoming the language of a poem. For this silence is a sound I will remember always, as it seems to move through my days, and I feel it like armour I scathe myself in, to protect myself from the outside world"

DR. P. AISHWARYA VIDHYA

1 Page



The poet experiences this silence within and it opens out “a thousand memories, a thousand longings, as these in turn come into being a poem”. He expresses this eloquent silence through myths, symbols and metaphors. Being a prolific writer, he has to his credit publication of the following volumes of poems 1. “Close the Sky, Ten by Ten” 2. “Swayamvara and other poems” 3. “A Rain of Rites” 4. “Waiting” and 5. “The False Start”. Poverty, hunger, love, women, sex, starvation constitute major themes in his poetry.

Such themes are studied from various angles and different points of view and their varied and poignant realities are brought out with intensity and credibility in “Hunger”, “The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street and Man of His Night”. These poems are also three different studies of male sexuality and the exploitation of women. Picturization of poverty and the sufferings of the people especially treatment of women as victims of lust and love in a patriarchal society impart tragic touch to Mahapatra’s poetry. The image of woman as victim of cruel forces is vivid in many of his poems. Women are pictured as sex objects as portrayed in the poem “After Noon” : “The two big arsed srikakulam women who have strayed into a shop for four kilos of rice ignite lust in the shopkeeper who ogles at them with “wide hunger in his eyes” and “Fans himself in the legary of his dream”. Not only those other women but the even the wife is pictured as a sex object as it is seen in the poem Idyll:

“Something in a woman’s eyes tempts confessions for her husband as they stretch out to sleep”

Each might she is exploited by the man to bury his ‘hurt’ inside her. The man never cares for her feelings. She is an object of sex to fulfill his physical needs. In the poem “Hunger”, the poet-protagonist brings in the exploitation of a fisherman’s daughter who is helpless and a passive tool. Hunger leads to exploitation and the father’s spiritual anguish is brought in the line; “the white bones thrash his eyes” and like “her ears were cold like rubber” and “she opened her wormy legs wide”. The paternal attitude of the father and his plea to live against poverty are expressed through these lines:

“My daughter, she’s just fifteen..... Feel her, I’ll back soon. Your bus leaves at nine.

These two lines express many things: “The father’s exhausted wife as a plea to evade poverty, the daughter’s youth and the easy commerce that eventually corrodes the immaculate vale of relationship” (Niranjan 233) the fifteen year old girl is exploited because of hunger and starvation. Starvation makes her sell her flesh to earn her bread. The poet exposes the social reality and voices the utter helplessness through the image of a victim girl who is raped in a temple and again in a police station:



“In the Hanuman Temple the priest’s pomaded jean-clad son raped the squint-eyed fourteen-year fisher girl her father found her at a police station assaulted again over again by four policemen” (The Lost Children of America)

Again in the poem, “The Morning Sign”, the same contemporary scene is pictured by the poet. Here also a woman is raped and killed. But he shifts his attention from the innocent victims to prostitutes. The whole is also a victim, a mere tool and money earning machine. Hunger and male exploitation have driven her to flesh trade as in the poem “Absence”:

“When the widows shut down on your things my hands quiver with glances of my thousand eyes as your long eyes touch my paid-out pain and revenge the presence from your presence”. Again, the whore image is presented in the poem, “The Twenty Fifth Anniversary of a Republic: 1975”. The image of a village whore Kamala who sells her flesh just for three rupees. The poet treats the whore with sympathy as he says:

“In many dream when I fondle Kamala’s brazen breasts, my hands encounter the blind flowers at a desecrated tomb”. (P 31)

The man visits the whore with a keen desire for communication, as he wants to learn something more about woman but his desire is frustrated as seen in the poem “The Whore House in a Calcutta Street”:

*You fall back against her the dumb light to learn something more about women
-----and her lonely breath thrashed against your kind”. (P 48)*

In the poem, “Dusk”, again the image of a whore is that of a girl who innocently laughs and shatters the silence. She lifts her arms to her companion. Poor women who are living in big cities are victimized for sex by the ‘jackals’ (sex-hungry men) as in the poem “slum”:

“The familiar old whore on the road splits open in the sugary dusk, her tired breasts trailing me everywhere: where jackals find the rotting carcass and I turn around to avoid my fiery eyes in the glass there stands only a lonely girl, beaten in battle, all mine sadly licking the blood from my crazed smile” (P 63).

In his early poems, he treats the whores as mere victims and pleasures to fulfill the needs of the male. But later the whores are pictured as powerful individuals whom the poet equates with the corrupt politicians. The image of women is portrayed in such a way to bring forth the



contemporary situation prevailing in India. Not only does he portray the male exploitation but also pictures the women as described in the poem, “Night of Rain”:

“The river’s edge/where our homeless women have put up their huts”.

Women are caught in a net like a shoal of fish. Like the fishes caught in a net, women are also chained by the religions, superstition and ignorance. The innocent, ignorant women who merge themselves in superstitious beliefs are representative of the present day India. Not all, but most of the women belong to this group. The Indian women have a link with the natural order and passively wait for what the world will only let them do. The Indian women’s blind unshakable faith in Hindu religion is again portrayed in “These Women”. The poet exposes the weakness of women and satirically questions women’s attitude:

“What do they live for beyond the veils of innocent prayer the climb up and down the holy stairs?”

Mahapatra not only brings out woman’s blind faith in religion, but also the passivity of women. In some of his poems, he tries to explore the isolation and loneliness of women. The Indian women are preoccupied with absence, silence and hollowness. In a poem entitled “A Missing Person”, the lonely woman is pictured as waiting as usual at the edge of sleep”:

“In her hand she holds the oil lamp whose drunken yellow flames know where her lonely body is hidden”.

The mother is no other but a representative of the Indian woman. The loneliness of her mother is keenly observed by the poet and he experiences the insecurity. The picture of the mother reflects the attitude of the mothers in India. Again, the image of a lonely woman who longs for the past experience and her nostalgic attitude is well-pictured in the poem entitled “Old Earth”:

And in her eyes the dim flower of her days glows from the old earth at its roots”. (P 43)

Here, Mahapatra focuses on absence and loneliness in the life of an Indian woman who thinks about her bygone days. She derives pleasures by thinking about her past but not the present. She is satisfied by doing so. In the poem, “The Whore House of a Calcutta Street”, the women is pictured as a passive tool. The poem is an important social document focusing attention on the hunger and misery of the Indian poor. The encounter between men and women is typical in Mahapatra’s poems. Commenting on the poem, K. A. Paniker writes:



“Mahapatra’s treatment of sex and love is quite a contrast to the calculated cynicism of Ezekiel, the flaunting melody of Kamala Das or the sly indulgence of Shiv. K. Kumar” (P 6)

By depicting the various images of women, he brings forth the themes of love, sex, death, exploitation, male-lust and loneliness which occupy the major part of his poetry.

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