
Depiction of the 'Whore Image' in the Poems of Jayanta Mahapatra: A Critical Analysis of Select Poems

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ABSTRACT

The present research paper has been written with the primary objective to investigate Jayant Mahapatra's numerous poems that throws light on the dark side of the society. He keeps a critical eye on the whore image through his works. His works focuses on the depictions of the abject and pitiable circumstances of such women who have been objectified for sexual gratification. Such women are forced to such pathetic and horrendous condition without having another option for their survival. This paper focuses on the real life experience and the treatment they receive from this patriarchal society which is sexually perverted and seeks physical pleasure and mental relief among the prostitutes. He has focused on the intimate desires of the male sex and laid bare the cruelty of it over the female prostitute with distinct picturization of the receiver's anatomy and the act in itself without letting it slip into the erotic realm of the literary creation. He refers his female characters in third person. Very rare they have been addressed by their names. They exist without any name which exhibits the unnoticed, unappreciated and insufficient existence in the society. They have been viewed through male centered lens and suffer sexual, physical objectification. The dark and dull moment of the life of prostitutes has been documented. The prostitution business has been filled with the plight of women where they have been trapped in the trade of sexual gratification in sexually perverted society. He used his literary craft in sensitizing the well-to-do world of the plight of the destitute and desperately worked to bring a positive change through his writings.

Jayanta Mahapatra, a well known and widely acclaimed name in the literary circles of English poetry has penned down varied poems which mostly have focused upon the life of common human being's plight. However, he has very sensitively touched upon and empathetically written about the plight of women, especially the downtrodden women, the destitute and the prostitutes. He has focused on the intimate desires of the male sex and laid bare the cruelty of it over the female prostitute with distinct picturization of the receiver's anatomy and the act in itself without letting it slip into the erotic realm of the literary creation. His poems reveal the real life experience and self realization of the plight of the women and the treatment they receive from the society in contrast.

This paper focuses upon the representation of the pathetic conditions of such women who have been objectified by the men for their sexual gratification and have been forced to such a pitiable condition or who had no other options left except to submit for the cohabitation for survival.

Jayanta Mahapatra wrote and made his medium of writing in English, he made his space in the English literary world with his choice of the subjects. His poems were vivid but reflect an obscurity in the slant meaning they held which further fires the curiosity of the reader and ultimately lays him with a gratifying impression. Capturing the times which have been mired with the struggle for survival for the most and many who have been in the desolation for ages would not have been without its due challenges. However Mahapatra fared well and mostly outstanding in sensitizing its readers over the representation of the crises of those times. He barely laid the ultimately reality of human relations, its society, the male and female psychology and fierceful dominance of one over the other in the contemporary times.

The remarkability of Jayanta Mahapatra has been the unabashed and forceful representation of the issues with a constructive vision of the future. The anxieties of the people in desperate times especially the marginalized women who had minimal options to survive and demand than what the men had, if at all the marginalized men had, has been contrasted in various poems of Mahapatra who has pitifully penned down the alienation they suffered. The existential crisis of the desolate women has been very effectively shaped by Mahapatra in his evocative poetry. He has keen eye for the psychological state of the populace and he bestows enough power in his pen to reverberate the philosophical yet real narration. His panoramic vision over the plight of the people and the resounding hollowness which troubles the character and the reader equally with the horrors of life, the gloominess of the future and the grey vision one has for the present.

Jayanta Mahapatra through his numerous poems has thrown light on the dark side of the society which is sexually perverted and seeks physical pleasure and mental relief among the prostitutes. On one side Mahapatra has brought to light the male attitude against the sexual gratification through immoral deeds and on the other side he has also laid focus on the dead moral values of the prostitutes too who do not bother to explore other options of livelihood, rather they choose an easy way out even though they have had their troubled pasts and suffered the criminalities related to it. Mahapatra does not criminalize sex, rather he is worried over the sexual perversion the society is degenerating into and he considers its wide impact on the generations to come. He too considers the piousness of the physical relation but considers the momentary gratification through flesh trade to be infectious and decaying for the society at large. This ultimately leads to social and moral disillusionment.

The crises in the lives of women and their bleak future has been encapsulated by various poems of Jayanta Mahapatra among which the prominent poems which have introduced the whore image are "Absence"; "The Twenty fifth Anniversary of a Republic: 1975"; "The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street"; "Slum"; "Man of his Nights"; "Morning Signs"; "The Lost Children of America"; "The Bride"; "After the Rain"; "Something Spreading Itself"; "Summer's End"; "The Vase"; etc.!

Mahapatra keeps a critical eye on the whore image. If it is evaluated from the perspective of the pleasure seeker then Mahapatra seems to be agonically unsympathetic towards the prostitutes who sell their bodies for a set duration and have no feelings towards their customers either divine or spiritual. It is dealt as matter of mere utilization of the services and the product they offer which can be analogically correlated to the use of a hotel room which remains vacant for the next customer when the earlier one is done with it. There is no room for emotional bonding of any sense or of respectability for oneself as one is pathetically used to such a situation and life. The prostitutes seem to be free of the traumatic guilt which they would have had when they were forcibly initiated into such a trade. This has lead to the further deep rooting of the social malaise where one does not ever try to escape such a life and the trade persists and grows.

An analysis of the celebrated poem "*The whorehouse in a Calcutta street*" which was written at a later stage of his poetic career, the image of the whore is drawn bolder and laden with the commercialization of the trade. The prostitute has grown rather powerful and unemotional with the brutal objectification of her body without any heed to the emotional connect which a man as a client would even desire or deserve. In this poem Mahapatra paints the sheer frustration of the client through the revelation of his softer side and the quest to find some more learning about the woman and to relieve oneself through some communicative exchange which gets debunked and nullified by the stony, parched, barren side of the habituated woman's nature which got eroded off with the emotional quotient she could ever be naturally assumed with. Mahapatra writes,

You fall back against her in the dumb light,
 trying to learn something more about women —
 while she does what she thinks proper to please you,
 the sweet, the little things, the imagined;
 until the statue of the man within
 you've believed in throughout the years
 comes back to you, a disobeying toy-

...

When, like a door, her words close behind:
 "Hurry, will you? Let me go,"
 and her lonely breath thrashed against your kind. (Prasad 223)

The unemotional host-client relationship is reflected through the hurried expression of the naturalized whore reflected through the expression, "Hurry, will you? Let me go." She wants to cash in the opportunity she has with the maximum number of clients she could encounter on the given day so as to make as much money as is possible as it the only source of her income and livelihood. The time however little she saves with each client gives her the maximum opportunity for increased income.

Similar is the expression in another poem which depicts the commercial mindset the prostitutes adopt without any attachment to the customer they serve. In the poem titled '*Man of his Nights*', Mahapatra remarks, "The plump whore he has just left has brazenly gone to work on a new customer."

Similarly, Mahapatra picturizes another whore image of a girl who is wanted and appreciated by many and men eager to her companionship. He writes in the poem '*Dusk*' thus,

A girl's wanton laugh
 Suddenly shatters the silence.
 A flame of evenings.
 "Smell here," she says,
 Lifting up her arms to her companion,
 "the strong scent the man used. (224)

In another magnum opus writing he produced was the poem *Hunger* which was widely discussed and debated. Here he portrays the extreme poverty and hunger which has been one of the major factors behind the menace of prostitution. This poem highlights the realist image of the contemporary poverty ridden India where a father offers his daughter to flesh trade sighting no other option for his and his daughter's survival. The disillusionment and despair of the duo has been very emotively carved out in the poem *Hunger*. He says,

It was hard to believe the flesh was heavy on my back.
 The fisherman said: will you have her, carelessly...
 I heard him say; my daughter, she's just turned fifteen...
 Feel her. I'll be back soon; your bus leaves at nine. (46)

On one hand this poem signifies the hunger for sexual gratification but on the other side it stands in contrasts with the hunger for food. The helplessness of the father has been contrasted against the lust of the man seeking favours. Balachandran remarks, "Poverty and their social status destroy the holiness of relationship between the members of a family and a father does what he should not have done." (Balachandran 6)

Mahapatra also throws light over the law keeping machinery which carries out their routine work in the name of duty to curb the business, though those who run it are smarter and habituated by the tricks of the trade and are successfully able to skip the clutches of the

administration. In the poem '*The Twentyfifth Anniversary of a Republic*' he writes,

The prostitutes are younger this year:
At the police station they're careless to give reasons
For being what they are
And the older women careful enough not to show their years. (Prasad 225)

Very rarely Mahapatra names female characters in the poems and mostly they are referred to in the third person. They normally exist without any name which is another reflection on their meager and unappreciated existence in the society and are generally viewed through the male centered lens and suffer androgenous objectification. However in this poem '*The Twentyfifth Anniversary of the Republic: 1975*' where 'Kamala' has been simplistically portrayed as "the three-rupee-whore" who is unhesitatingly dreamt by the first person narrator who reveals "In my dreams when I fondle Kamala's brazen breasts/ my hands encounter the blind flowers at a desecrated tomb."

Yet in another poem '*Slum*' Mahapatra characterizes the sexual hunger of the powerful men who prey on poor slum dwelling women given their helpless and pathetic situation, in-defensive for themselves. He writes,

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. (224)

Mahapatra has documented each and every moment of the life of the prostitutes, be it the buzzing business at the dusk or the lull at the dawn. He is tormented with the dark and dull life of the prostitution business and the pain through which the young girls and old women engaged in it undergo. In the poem '*Morning Signs*' he reflects,

Voices of girls travelled with wind and rain,
Reach my ears and arouse a dormant hurt:
The smell of damp sheets and semen here,
Haggling for nearness beginning again
In a familiar room. (225)

Mahapatra in the poem '*The Lost Children of America*' has satirically equated the whores with the 'corrupt politicians' who trade in their realms by making use of common spaces which are equally frequented by the whores and politicians for their business. Both run their business on the squalor and filth of the society and survive. He satirizes,

Here
in the dusty malarial lanes
of Cuttack where years have slowly lost their secrets
they wander
in these lanes nicked by intrigue and rain
and the unseen hands of gods
in front of a garish temple of the simian Hanuman
Along river banks splattered with excreta and dung
In the crowded market square among rotting tomatoes

fish-scales and the moist warm odour of bananas and piss
 passing by the big-breasted, hard eyed young whores
 who frequent the empty silent space behind the local cinema
 by the Town Hall where corrupt politicians still
 go on delivering their pre-election speeches. (225)

Madhusudan Prasad analyses the poems of Mahapatra and comments, "These images of women which constitute a vital part of Mahapatra's poetry underscore his overriding obsession with loss, absence, silence, hollowness, grief, death, time and sexuality and serve as an occasional ironical, though muted, commentaries on contemporary religious, social and political milieu, echoing through the stagnant silence pervading his poetry a dirge of rage and frustration, powerlessness and helplessness. (221)

With an analysis of few of the select poems we get a clear image of not only the contemporary times through which modern making of the Indian civilization underwent but also we could study and come close to the thoughtful, sensitive, deeply pained Jayant Mahapatra who had a secure and carefully etched empathy for the plight of the common people especially the women. The whore image painted by Mahapatra has sensitively evoked the plight of such women who have been trapped in the trade and has at the same time unraveled mostly the cruel fanatasies of the male dominance which has kept the trade alive for their sexual gratification. He used his literary craft in sensitizing the well-to-do world of the plight of the destitute and desperately worked to bring a positive change through his writings.

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