
Navigating Social Realism in the Poems of Jayanta Mahapatra

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ABSTRACT

Jayanta Mahapatra, one of the most distinguished poets of India who believed poetry as the best medium for the expression of experiences of real-life. He has made enormous contributions to contemporary Indian literature. He was one of the three prominent figures in the arena of Indian poetry in English, who are regarded as the founding fathers of Indian poetry in English, together with A.K. Ramanujan and R.K. Narayan. The subject matter of his poetry is always inspired by the realities of the society what he himself was a witness. He attends to the anguish and suffering of people at the back of the queue. The marginalised and downtrodden people are the characters of his poems. Extreme poverty, starvation, prostitution, patriarchy etc. are the major focuses of his poems. He is a poet born and brought up in the temple town of Cuttack, he tries to comprehend the reality of human nature. He attempts to start a dialogue between religious ceremonies and daily life problems of common folk. In order to gain a deeper understanding of society, Mahapatra's poetry serves to reveal socioeconomic facts. Its goal is to depict its members' true sociopolitical and sociocultural characteristics. He begins with his capacity to create new connections and weave new meanings that cause his heart to resonate emotionally.

The melancholy and dismal tone of Mahapatra's poetry stems from his understanding of the poverty and suffering of the Indian people, as well as the condition of women under male dominance. Such human miseries are visible in his most celebrated poems, like, "Hunger," "The Whorehouse of Calcutta Street," and "A Missing Person." The poem "Hunger" is based on a real-life experience of Mahapatra when a poor fisherman offers his daughter for the sexual gratification. The poem echoes two kinds of hungers; one for food another lust. In his poem "Life Signs," he addresses socioeconomic circumstances more specifically in his speech. He documents the misery that rituals, extreme poverty, hunger, droughts, and immorality inflict on humanity. He even talks of the misery and devastation caused to the humanity because of wars in his poem, "Dhauri," which describes the bloodshed resulted from war of Kalinga. He as a poet of the land, is conscious about human values and human dignity. The present attempts to explore the undercurrent of idea of social realism in Mahapatra's poetry.

India is a very diverse country with a wide range of geographies, ethnicities, languages, and religious beliefs and a society which believes in coexistence. It has a glorious past and a rich cultural legacy which has suffered from invasions and colonization, which has had a significant impact on the dynamics of society and the economy. Mahapatra has been very to the socio-political transformation of our country, especially in the state of Odisha, and their impact of these developments on the lives of the common people. Mahapatra's poetry illuminated the social conditions of his own region in the modern era. Despite its wide range of faiths, India has always been able to maintain its cultural cohesion and respect for all religions.

Modern Indian poetry has emerged as a crucial component of Indian literature's post-

independence age, offering an honest and transparent approach to portraying the societal realities of modern-day India. It demonstrates that poetry can be the most effective medium for expressing a person's deepest feelings and portraying every social injustice that exists in society. In addition to joy and happiness, there are also strong emotions associated with terrible situations like starvation, poverty, estrangement, and anguish that result in a critical situation for the community. Mahapatra's poetry places a great deal of importance on these kinds of sensations and emotions, which serve as the poem's primary theme source. In the poem *Hunger*, he uses insightful lyrical imagery to examine the problem of hunger and starvation from a variety of perspectives and highlights the facts of this societal catastrophe. It deals with a number of subjects that have been exposed by his views, and because it is based on an actual event, it highlights the social realities of the society. He is extremely worried about the issues of poverty and malnutrition in his community.

She opened her wormy legs wide. I felt the hunger there,
the other one, fish slithering turning, turning inside.

(Hunger, *The World Poetry Archive* 20)

Through his other poems, *The Whorehouse in Calcutta Street* and *Man of His Night*, which address the difficult subject of male prostitution and the abuse of women, the dark side of a significant issue in contemporary society is brought to light. Mahapatra employed poetry as a means of expressing the painful reality of famine, which caused the hardship for the majority of his contemporary time period. It highlights the hardships and struggles that women actually face in a world that is controlled by men. In his writings, women are portrayed as goddesses, but the same figures are also shown to have other faces and to be sex workers in order to feed their appetites. Despite their pessimistic viewpoint, the issue the poet addresses in his poetry highlights how important it is to recognize the pains of women. Indian literature lacked this theme for a considerable amount of time. Mahapatra used the imagery technique to visualize it in his poems, particularly in *The Whorehouse on a Calcutta Street*. In the same poem, masculine morality is ridiculed through the imagery of sea weed, which grows after enormous tidal surges overflow its loud bounds.

the sweet, the little things, the imagined,
...comes back to you, ...

(qtd. Sharma and Talwar 185)

In Mahapatra's other poem, *A Country*, the main socioeconomic problems of hunger and poverty are attempted to be visualized, not only in India but also in other Asian nations like Turkey and Colombia. This poem exposes the socio-political and socio-economic contexts that give rise to social divisions between the affluent and the destitute, as well as between the ordinary and the spectacular. One group is silenced in a society where voices are heard, crushed beneath the power of another. In this poem, *A Country*, the poet addresses societal challenges of the day where he tries to bring the reality of Marxism and Naxalism.

...graceful Naxal girl
who appeared nowhere that winter
holding a knife as old as history.

(qtd. in Sarangi & Jha 105)

One of the main themes of Mahapatra's poetry is the portrayal of the woman in a world where men rule. The truth is that men don't give a damn about a woman's feelings or emotions; to them, she is just a sexual object meant to satiate their physical needs. Mahapatra writes in his poem *Idyll*,

Woman's eyes tempt confessions for her husband
... As they stretch out to sleep

(Idyll, Mahapatra)

Mahapatra discusses women's identities in patriarchal Indian society, in his poem *A Missing Person*. In the poem, he portrays an image of a woman standing in darkness in front a mirror, holding a lamp in her hand. The woman is unable to find herself in the mirror. This imagery is the representation of the place of a woman. She doesn't find a meaning on her own. The mirror is the symbol of the day-to-day life of a woman in the society dominated by men.

in her hands she holds
the oil lamp
whose drunken yellow flames
know where her lonely body hides

(A Missing Person, The World Poetry Archive 6)

The key socio-economic concerns facing modern Indian society are symbolized by the poet's combination of poetic craftsmanship and cerebral imaging approach. *Today* is a poem by Mahapatra that appears in his collection *False Start*, where he employs temporal symbols that have emerged. The image of flag is a metaphor for certain dark symptoms of life and the poet's imagination that are flickering. In another poem, *Ash*, he talks about the death, which is the ultimate truth of life on earth, where the image of birds opening their wings and soaring across the sky is used to represent death.

The birds flutter towards rest around tree,
.....
floating away like ash.

(Ash, Mahapatra 9)

Mahapatra conveys a profound feeling of personal experiences in most of his lyrical volumes, whereby he shares his own struggles and sorrows. The majority of Indian English literary poets have drawn on their own lives to highlight the socioeconomic realities of the society. Mahapatra also takes into account the scenery of his native Odisha and his own early recollections. He has been paying close attention to how people in Odisha think. He discovers that they are firmly entrenched in their superstitions and religious rites. The superstition among the populace around solar eclipses is connected to temple priests and is represented by crocodile imagery.

Secure by shadowy layers of sleep,
So out of date, in the alleviative belief
... by a rabid civilization.

(qtd. in Prasad 288)

Conclusion

Through the imagery in his poetry, Jayanta Mahapatra argues about the powerlessness of the people and exposes its socioeconomic realities in the society. Mahapatra's use of pictures to illustrate both the positive and negative sides of society in all of his poems is a commendable aspect of his poetic style. He highlights the pitiful conditions that exist in society, including deprivation, famine, prostitution, patriarchy, political unrest, loneliness, and naive religious convictions. Thus, it can be observed that he has masterfully employed powerful imagery to depict the social realities of contemporary India.

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