

Feminist Concern in the Selected Works of Jayanta Mahapatra

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Abstract:

The recipient of the very first Sahitya Akademi Award for English poetry for his anthology *Relationship* in the year 1981, Jayanta Mahapatra is a physicist by profession and at heart he has always been a poet. He has almost touched every emotion of the mankind through his poetry. The touch of the culture of the Orissa state can be seen largely in his poetry as he belongs to that region. If we talk about him being feminist or not, then the answer can directly be a “yes”. He has been an observer of the trauma and sufferings that women face in the contemporary Indian society. It pisses him off that women have to go through traumatic experiences on a daily basis just to survive in society which is driven by men. In his poems like, “Indian Summer”, “Logic”, “The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street”, “Dawn”, “A Missing Person”, etc. he paints a picture of Indian women in different roles and how they still have to struggle in their day to day life and how their lives become pathetic in the social set up India which is patriarchal in nature. The present paper aims to analyze Mahapatra’s poetry through the lens of feministic concern and how his poetry makes people understand the situation of women around.

Keywords: trauma, patriarchy, women, suffering.

Jayant Mahapatra is a well known Indian poet writing in English and belongs to Orissa region due to which the touch of Orissa culture is largely seen in his works. He has died recently in august 2023. Being the first person to have awarded the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award for English poetry, he has contributed a large amount of great work in the Indian writing in English and especially in the field of Poetry. He is also the recipient of the fourth highest honour in India, Padma Shri in the year 2009 but it was returned in the year 2015 due to some ongoing protest in the country.

Though Mahapatra started his writing career late, but he has been celebrated for his short stories and poetry when they got recognition in the international journals. Through his literary works he was able to touch and highlight social issues especially issues and concerns related to Indian women.

Feminist concerns can be seen in his poems like *Indian Summer*, *Logic*, *Hunger*, *The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street*, *Dawn*, *A Missing Person*, etc. It is indeed fascinating to witness the realness in his works which are written to highlight the issues and sufferings faced by Indian women. He has variety of women who are victims at the hands of the patriarchal social norms and conditions which are not in the favor of women and they certainly do not talk about the well being of women who, by the way, make the half of the population. In his views the problems and traumatic condition of the women can be given recognition and ultimately the solution to their problems by writing about it and letting people know about the sufferings they have to undergo in their day to day lives. In his works he has talked about

different kinds of women in the Indian society like housewives, prostitutes, little girls, rape victims and working women as well. He chose to write about the different kinds of women so that he would be able to showcase the different problems faced by them.

In his poem *Indian Summer* he ironically talks about a “good wife” who is supposed to be in her husband’s bed in the afternoon and pretends to be happy around him because this is what is expected by men from their wives, “the good wife lies in my bed through the long afternoon dreaming still, unexhausted by the deep roar of funeral pyres.” (*Indian Summer*) Mahapatra’s poem *Hunger* highlights the disgusting reality of the poor class people in Indian society. It is pathetic to see that the poor class has to go so much down to even fulfill the basic needs of the mankind. The poem shows how a poor father makes his daughter a prostitute for the sake of some financial support from somebody who wants to have sexual satisfaction. His daughter is just 15 years old and supposed to earn money for her family. This is something which can be seen in almost all the poor family that they are ready to sacrifice their daughter or her dignity for the sake of some money. In Indian Hindu culture women are seen as ‘Devi’ but in reality women are the ones who have to suffer for every inconvenience in the society which is driven by men. It is disgusting to see that now women are seen as the thing to only satisfy the sexual needs of men. In the Indian patriarchal system it becomes really easy for men to subjugate and get anything they want from them, “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 wife. Long and lean: her years were cold as rubber. She opened her wormy legs wide. Felt the hunger there, The other one, the fish slithering, turning inside. (*Hunger*)

In his work *The Whorehouse in A Calcutta Street* he discusses the dilemma of a person who goes to a brothel. He goes in there to inquire and observe the mindset of prostitutes. He is amazed to see that the women who are working as prostitutes see their work only through the lens of professionalism. There is no emotion involved and they do everything for the sake of their ‘business’. When the person is in front of the prostitute he expects some emotions but she only tries to sexually please him and get done with the ‘work’ she has been assigned to and move on to the next customer. She does this work only for money and her work does not touch her private self for a moment. It shows the ugliness of the work industry which makes women to opt for this work which ultimately makes them dead inside.

Dream children, dark superfluous; you miss them in the house’s dark spaces, how can’t you? Even the women don’t wear them - like jewels or precious stones at the throat; the faint feeling deep at a woman’s centre that brings back the discarded thing: the little turnings of blood at the far edge of the rainbow. (*The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street*)

Rape victims in India have to not only face the brutal crime of crime but also the harshness of the people as if it were them who committed the crime. This shows the hypocrisy of the patriarchal society where it is the woman who is accused of the crime rather than the man himself. Mahapatra showcase this brutal reality of rape victim in his poem *The Lost Child of America* and also how the so called saviors become the one to harm. It shows how a small girl is raped by a priest’s son first and molested again and again by the policemen later on. “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.” (P.33, *The Lie of Dawns*) It is disgusting to see that even small girls have to go through these heinous crimes. The criminals do not have a single idea as to how they have destroyed the mental and physical health of another mankind.

In the poem *The Logic* he showcases the aloofness and a deep gap in the relationship of wife and husband. He presents the mental void in the woman as: “Reviewing your cosy composed gesture troglodytes had to find out, you will not sleep with centuries any more as with your women, no more than you would find me to be proof of you. (The Logic)”

Likewise in the poem *Lost* it can be seen that women have no voice of their own and they depend on their physical gestures to convey certain things. When a woman is disappointment with the fact that she cannot get satisfaction in her love and married life then she tries to find peace in her own self. She becomes more indulged in herself and tries to explore her inner self. In the poem *A Missing Person* says, “In the darkened room a woman cannot find her reflection in the mirror waiting as usual at the edge of sleep” (A Missing Person)

In his very famous poem *The Twenty-fifth Anniversary of a Republic* he also talks about the contemporary women who feel that wearing traditional attire and following traditional Indian culture is not ‘fashionable’. It pisses him off that women in Indian are still wanting to follow western culture. He expresses his dislike by saying, “What is wrong with my country? The jungles have become gentle, the woman restless. And history reposes between the college girl’s breasts: The exploits of warrior-queens, the pride pieced together From a god’s tainted armours... Mina, my pretty neighbor, flashes round and Round the gilded stage Hiding jungles in her purse, holding on to her divorce, And a lonely Ph.D.”

In the poem *Shadow Space* he talks about the miserable condition of the women in India who are widows and have to lead a life after their husbands’ death according to the norms and condition of the society. They have behave and dress up in a certain manner and cannot have the basic happiness because in Indian society if a woman is a widow then she cannot live like she used to do formerly. This shows the hypocrisy of the patriarchal social norms as a man does not have to do all these things if his wife is dead. He enjoys all the luxuries as before. “Silent white walls of forbearance sit up And begin to climb the stairs Of her long inauspicious loneliness. (Shadow Space, pp. 20)”

Thus, through all these poems Mahapatra has shown the the condition of different kinds of women in India and also through his writings he wanted to get these women the recognition they needed to address their issues and sufferings. Women are seen as merely object to male lust and exploitation. At every step they have to compromise and struggle for everything they wish to achieve. Even for the sake of normal life they have to go through a lot of struggle in day to day life. Mahapatra also wants women to take stand for themselves because at the end of the day if they themselves do not get up and raise their voice against the traumatic condition of women then nobody can do this for them. Through his poetry he wanted to highlight the situation in front of the women too who are not aware of the fact that they are suffering unconsciously because in the patriarchal system all these things seem normal to women including the fact that men have all the rights over them. Before their marriage they have be under the supervision of their father or brother and after the marriage the power to control their lives shift to the husband. It is really delightful to see that Mahapatra being a male has observed the condition of the opposite sex so beautifully and with so much realism.

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Bio-note:

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