

## The Marginalized Women in Jayanta Mahapatra's Poetry

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**Abstract:** *Since time immemorial and inception of human civilization, man has been in practice of framing rules and regulations for the society but not without fulfilling his own vested interests. Though woman has always been considered to be "one half of the sky", history is full of instances when she is meted out injustice, devoid of her basic needs and fundamental rights. This issue has been the greatest and most significant concern of many critics all across the literatures. Though the situation has improved a little over the passage of time, still a lot is needed to be done. The present paper is an attempt at throwing light on the portrayal of woes and worries of the abandoned and marginalized world of women in general and Indian women in particular in the poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra, the first ever winner of the coveted Sahitya Akedemi Award in 1981 for his book of verse Relationship.*

**Key Words:** *Woman, Fundamental rights, woes, worries, injustice.*

Jayanta Mahapatra (1928-), a physicist by profession and a poet by heart, is one of the widely read Indian poets writing in English who got recognition worldwide, and made history by winning the first ever Sahitya Akedemi Award for his *Relationship* in 1981. An Indian by heart, he has employed many recurrent Indian themes in his poetry which range from grass root level problems faced by common man and woman to the corrupt Indian political system. Jayanta Mahapatra is a poet of human relationship raising his situations from the microcosm of Orissa, India to represent the macrocosm of the world. In his poetry, the human relationship centres round man-woman relationship.

The sense of presenting the realities of woman's life has always been sensible and significant in the Indian scenario, so the pathetic conditions of women form a part and parcel of his poetry. He delineates them in all shapes and figures. The portrait of woman reoccurs in his poetry and the stress has been laid in presenting women as the sufferer. In "Indian Summer", he presents the depressing state of a woman:

*"the good wife  
lies in my bed  
through the long afternoon  
dreaming still, unexhausted  
by the deep roar of funeral pyres."*

Madhusudan Prasad rightly observes:

"Jayanta Mahapatra's poetic world is doubtless scattered singularly with various images of wives, beloveds, whores, seductresses, village women, city women and adolescent girls, having deeply

significant metaphoric evocations and spotlighting his tragic vision of life to which he is essentially committed. Demonstrating his vital poetic strategy and dimensional zing his deep humanism as well as his overriding thematic obsessions, Mahapatra's images of women indubitably form a tonal chord central to the mood of his poems."<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, the poem "Logic" is extremely over packed with meaning. It is essentially an indictment of a male thinker – a 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 the steep drag  
of your hands from my own practical drivell."*

Since time immemorial, the Indian society has ostracized prostitutes and prohibited them from being a part of decent and cultural society. This misery, experienced by them in daily life, gets reflected in Mahapatra's poem "The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street" while confronting the "cultural society". Mahapatra has a great respect and adoration for women who are an elemental symbol of suffering and sacrifice. In the words of Lucy Irigaray, "...the role that the woman has in the society "represents a sense of place for man" which means that she is nothing better than an object. She finds herself defined as a thing."<sup>2</sup>

But, at the same time, he is profoundly perplexed at perpetual and perennial problem pertaining to women. He discloses his disappointment and disgruntlement in this way:<sup>3</sup>

"Perhaps, the status of the Indian women in our society today has gone down. It is pathetic indeed to read accounts of the degradation our women subjected to in the daily newspapers. Cases of rape, murder, mutilation continue to fill the pages, and one sits helplessly, feeling this pain one is not able to do anything about... I can see the pain in the eyes of women as they pass by the road every day; their voice seems to say: we are the beast of the burden, like cattle. It is about this pain I would like to write because I can't do anything else."

Not only these ostracized women but also general woman, exiled at home, finds herself portrayed in his poetry. Whether a wife, a daughter, or a mother, the male-dominated world has set the limits of existence for the women. The wife is bereft of the freedom that she enjoyed before marriage. Her life is confined to her home, attending to her husband, children and serving her in-laws. She is neglected and marginalized both culturally and biologically. She remains lonely both socially and emotionally. Mahapatra tries to deplore this state of Indian women in the poem "Dawn":

*There is a dawn which travels alone,  
Without the effort of creation, without puzzle.  
It stands simply, framed in the door, white in the air:  
Waiting for what the world will only let her do.*

Mahapatra presents a meaningless and futile life of women struggling for their own identity, bound to survive amidst sorrows and difficulties, having nothing but darkness all around them, thus living like in a hell. 'The home will never be hers'; the girl's home belongs to her brothers, after her marriage she would go to her husband's home. Mahapatra ironically refers to the way the Indian woman is not given a space or voice of her own as an individual in her own right. In

the same way, the expectations in this young girl's heart to be and become an individual without limitation or constraints have come to an end; probably referring to the early marriages in the Indian villages. He confesses:

“And the picture of my mother, swathed in sari, holding on to the oil lamp in the shadows, the sooty flame swaying in the breeze, seemed to establish itself firmly in my mind. Strangely, these evenings stayed as though carved of black and polished bone. An inexplicable loneliness linked itself with the sad eyed oil lamp of my mother. They came to mean the same thing to me. Coupled with this was the frustrating, numbing pity felt for my cousin who was battered by frequent beatings from her drunken husband.”  
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In “A Missing Person”, Mahapatra presents a woman who is watching for her lover in the “darkened room”, and fails to find her “reflection in the mirror”:

*In the darkened room  
a woman  
cannot find her reflection in the mirror  
waiting as usual  
at the edge of sleep  
in her hands she holds  
the oil lamp  
whose drunken yellow flames  
know where her lonely body hides.* (A Missing Person. pp. 7)

In conversation with author Neeru Tondon, he clarifies:

“Married woman doesn't see her image in the mirror, when she looks, she cannot find her features. Yes, it is a loss of identity. A man was used to come drunk; and here, of course I have taken it from a real incident, he used to beat his wife in front of me; I mean it happened in my house. I had a cousin who used to come late in the evenings and I would open the door because I was there; he would come and beat his wife; I saw it as a mere spectator, so these things affected me.”

Another injustice, very frequently meted out to women, is again in the dominant men-made rules and rituals for a widow keeping in mind their own comfort and convenience at the cost of ordeal, abuse and exploitation of the latter. For instance, a widower can remarry but a widow can't; a widower is allowed to attend a marriage or any auspicious occasion in society but a widow can't; a widower can wear all kinds of colourful clothes whereas a widow is compelled to wear only white sarees and to remain without make-up and all. Any such act, as practiced and performed liberally by a widower, is termed “immoral” for her. Thus, only a widow remains in manacle of culture and convention to tolerate miserable and desolate life. What a gross inequality and injustice! The poet explores this:

*Silent white walls of forbearance sit up  
And begin to climb the stairs  
Of her long inauspicious loneliness.* (Shadow Space, pp. 20)

The destiny of a widow finds more woes and worries in the form of a lecherous and “jackal” man:

*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.*

The blind follow of the Western culture, the uncultured behavior and moral depravity of Indian women leaves Mahapatra frustrated. School, college and office going girls and women feel “shame” and “inferiority” in wearing traditional garments and clothes but they feel “elated” and “elevated” in making themselves naked and stripped to the extreme and, perhaps, this is one of the reasons of increasing incidents of eve teasing. So, in sheer frustration, he is appalled ‘what is wrong with my country?’ in the poem “The Twenty-fifth Anniversary of a Republic”:

*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.*

Perhaps, no woman would take up the profession of prostitution willingly. There are certainly some inevitable circumstances which compel women to adopt the profession of prostitution. In order to satisfy his hunger a poor and penniless fisherman, without hesitation, strikes a deal for the flesh of fifteen years old daughter. The poet wants to highlight that the so-called civilized society has abundance of such incidents where innocent and adolescent girls are dumped into this trade. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this is a stark reality of a contemporary society of independent India:

*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. Felt the hunger there,  
The other one, the fish slithering, turning inside.* (Hunger)

With evening approaching, a contrast is witnessed about “timing” when offices get closed and common people return homes after the day-long job and it is the time when prostitutes open their “shops”, having attired “elegantly”, and wooing the customers on the roadside. The poem “Slum” portrays this scene:

*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.*

In “The Whore House in a Calcutta Street”, the woman is painted fed up with monotonous and wearisome sex, nearly a mechanical tool of man to whom she requests:

*“Hurry, will you? Let me go,  
and her lonely breath thrashed against your kind.”*

Mahapatra presents how ‘the rape of a young girl’ took him aback:

*Last year on the bend of the Debi River  
The rape of young girl  
Shocked us like ripe mangoes  
Dropping from bare trees in winter.* (A Whiteness of Bone, pp. 60)

Indian society treats a rape victim differently. Maria Cohen and Sherrie H. Mekenna rightly say in the *Rape*, “The woman’s credibility may be questioned and her sexual activity and private life may be made public.”<sup>4</sup>

The raped women lose social security besides experiencing the pain of physical violence. Usually, power operates on the weaker sections of any country, and here also, the female body is tortured as in Margaret Atwood’s poem *Torture*. In this poem, she pictures how a female body is tortured and reduced to a ‘mute’ symbol. Mahapatra, while dealing with the rape of the young girl, reminds us of the slaughter house. He says:

*Last year her murder and dismemberment  
Made us understand somewhat  
The trembling in the eyes of cows we see  
Being led meekly to the town’s slaughter house.* (A Whiteness of Bone, pp. 60)

L. Bhatt rightly remarks:

“The fear, anguish, the helplessness, the shame, the agony and the pain of the rape victim are powerfully communicated in the analogy; the trembling in eyes of cows, we see being led meekly to the towns slaughter house.”<sup>5</sup>

We have another example of fourteen-year fisher girl, raped by the debauched son of a careless priest. What is more shameful on part of the police and adds much woes to the ordeal of the raped girl is that instead of punishing the rapists, the girl herself is repeatedly raped by four policemen in the police station. On the one hand Mahapatra interrogates the feasibility and sanctity of the temple and on the other denounces the unethical and immoral attitude of the police administration. In the poem “The Lost Children of America” he exposes:

*In the Hanuman Temple last night  
the priest’s pomaded jean-clad son  
raped 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.*

In the above-mentioned poem, the functioning of the government machinery and police administration is under the scanner. The only source of income and livelihood for prostitutes are their flesh and skin, and with the passage of time, they lose their charms. So, to hide their growing age and fading looks they use cosmetics which find expression in his poem “The Twenty-fifth Anniversary of a Republic”.

*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.*

Thus, Jayanta Mahapatra, as a poet, brings in notice to all and attempts to break the shackles that have been tied around the women restricting her movements by the orthodox patriarchal society.

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