



THE PRESENTATION OF WEARINESS IN THE SELECT POEMS OF JAYANTA MAHAPATRA

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Abstract

The poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra is an expression of certain kinds of crises that have been witnessed by their generations. He is profoundly and explicitly preoccupied by the predicament of his generation, and his poems have become objects of the expression of that predicament and weariness. His poems are profoundly marked by contemporary crises and disillusionment, which are prevailed in his respective social panorama. His poems are the dark glasses through which life is seen with strange clarity. Life seen through those dark glasses is grey, monotonous, desolate, empty, grotesque, paralyzed and hopeless with full of weariness and fatigue. Mahapatra is deeply and philosophy concerned with the predicament of his generations, which have been, the victims of squalor, decadence, malaise, morbidity, profligacy, dissipation, depravity and agony of spiritual lapse due to the disillusionment prevailed in his age. The poems are the expression of a devastating analysis of the society of his time which suffers from the psychic blow. The researcher has tried to discuss some of his poems which reveal such images.

Keywords: *decadence, disillusionment, sexual perversion, sado-masochism, hysteria*



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The history is a record of many crises in the human relation to ultimate reality. The zeitgeist is captured in the works of art. Usually these crises shape the art and literature of an age and, in turn, literature becomes an expression of the time spirit of that age. The poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra is an expression of certain kinds of crises that have been witnessed by their generations. He is profoundly and explicitly preoccupied by the predicament of his generation, and his poems have become objects of the expression of that predicament. His poems are profoundly marked by contemporary crises and weariness, which are prevailed in his respective social panorama. Life seen through those dark glasses is grey, monotonous, desolate, empty, grotesque, paralyzed and hopeless.

Jayanta Mahapatra is a poet of remarkable power and vision. He has made his mark on the scene of Indian English poetry during 1970s and 80s decades. During this time, Indian society was enveloped by unsolved anxiety, horror and uncertainties and his poetry is inevitably influenced and conditioned by this traumatic situations. Mahapatra is intensely aware of the alienation and isolation. He is conscious of the searing pain, gloom and the

consequent existential anguish. He is not the poets like Naidu, Tagore, Derozio who will sing the sing of Nature and find peace in it. But being a modern poet, he gets caught in the currents of time and the main current manifestation was: disillusionment, agony, squalor, mental dirt and anxiety.

Mahapatra's poems are inevitably influenced and conditioned by the mental and moral state of disillusioned and hollow social panorama in which he is entangled. Mahapatra shows a thoughtful perception of the sordidness and malaise of his social world in his poems. His poems are filled with the gloom, horror and trauma that he has witnessed in the realm of his country. He is preoccupied by the sense of weariness and decadence.

His poetry is about a relationship of man to his self i.e. soul, man to man, man to time, and man to land. In his poems, one finds the quest of identity. The protagonist or the mask persona of the poem seems to be doubtful to his or her own identity. He or she is in a search of the self, but he or she is sceptic and decadent. In fact, the decadence, an outcome of disillusionment an anxiety has caused various types of mental diseases which make him or her totally lost. The image of being lost is quite clear in the poem entitled *A Missing Person* where the mask persona's inner self is lost. It means to say that she is unable to find her image in the mirror even though she holds an oil lamp. Here, Mahapatra conveys the meaning that ultra - modern and mechanic generation has lost its identity. The lady in this poem is the mouthpiece of modern youth who is disillusioned in such a way that she is unable to hear the voice of her conscience. Her visibility has become problematic. So one may assume that the lady in the poem has become the victim of psychological disease namely Bipolar disorder. Bipolar disorder is such a depressed phase in which a person tends to appear lethargic and withdrawn, and also expresses feeling of worthlessness, guilt, intense feeling of loss, sadness hopelessness, failure and rejection. The lady in the poem is such lethargic and depressed that she finds herself lost and withdrawn. That is why, she lacks visibility and concentration to perceive the outer world. For this reason, she is totally unable to find her own self in the mirror. The following lines of this poem show the invisibility and lack of clarity with which modern disillusioned youth is living,

“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.” (Mahapatra, 89)

Here, the phrase ‘the darkened room’ signifies the gloom that has enveloped the visibility of that mask persona. There is not the darkness in the outer world, but the main problem lies in the psyche of that lady. There is a schism between the inner and outer selves which doesn’t allow her to see the image in the. To quote the words of one researcher in this respect, “She is tired and bored-waiting as usual at the edge of sleep-and contemplating her figure in the mirror. She holds in her hands an oil lamp shedding a dim yellow light which enables her to see her body reflected in the mirror, but no light is shed on her inner self, her lonely psyche or soul. Her inner sufferings and frustrations are never externalized and never understood. The woman does not speak, but her inner self has been dramatically presented through a few deft touches.” (Nayak, 15)

This means to say that there a light, but that light does not shed on her inner self. She seems afraid, timid and skeptical in her self-interpretation as there is a gap between her actual self i.e. the external agency and her inner self. Her inner self is fragmented as she is unsure of his selfhood. She is unable to perceive the reality as she feels tormented. The lady in the poem is neurotic who is suffering from the psychic conflicts. Hers is the buried self which is paralyzed with the social self. Hers is the split personality as there is a gap between the actual self i.e. reality and buried self. Her illusion of seeing her image in the mirror is shattered by her own invisibility. She is physically present into the external arena, but absent within. The grief of the poem is seen when she is not able to come out from within to without as she is disillusioned. She can’t journey from inner to outer, from within to without and from mind to material. And for that reason there is an utter silence in the poem, as one can’t find the movement in the whole poem. She feels sad as she is isolated and lonely and this is one of the chief traits of Mahapatra to portray the hollowness and the psychic trauma of the female characters in his poetry.

In his poetry, Mahapatra explicitly deploys the images of women who are living their decayed life forgetting their great cultural heritage and the moral values. India’s past boasts the exploits of warrior-queens, but its presence reveals cultural atrophy. Today we live in a state of cultural topsy-turvydom caused by the crisscrossing of western and Indian values, making the women-force feel restless. Indian history has lost its significance; it lies only in

books. Today, instead of warrior-queens, Mahapatra notices educated urbanized women who flaunt western values. He satirizes this cultural volte-face through the representative image of a city woman under the sway of western culture in the poem entitled *The Twentyfifth Anniversary of a Republic: 1975*.

“What is wrong with my country?

The jungles have become gentle, the women restless.

And history reposes between the college girl’s breasts:

The exploits of warrior queens, the pride pieced together

From a god’s tainted amours...

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.”

(Mahapatra, 1-7)

Mahapatra portrays sexual degeneration and perversion in his poems inevitably which ultimately leads the whole generation to be weariness and boredom. As a matter of fact, sex-act is the source of life and vitality, but if it is exercised for the sake of procreation and if it is an expression of love. When it is exercised for the sake of momentary pleasure or momentary benefit, it becomes the source of disappointment and disillusionment. It represents the priority of the flesh over the spirit and thus results in decay. From the beginning of his poetic career, Mahapatra is obsessed with the whore-image. He is chiefly concerned with the portraits of prostitutes who do the business of flesh, not of love, sympathy or divinity. He is deeply conscious of the facts that the whores are concerned with money who will please their customers by sharing physical pleasures only, not by building emotional relationships with them. They believe in physical involvement, not in emotional involvement. They will throw all the norms and traditions of society to the wind, because they believe they believe that theirs is a trade and profession and they must do it, and there is nothing wrong in it. Their relations with the customers will last only for the period of their sexual-intercourse. Their relations will be momentary, not life-long or everlasting. Lust, not love, will have the place in their life which ultimately results frustration and malaise. Relation without love will invite boredom and futility to them. Such is the scene portrayed in Mahapatra’s magnum opus poem title *The Whorehouse in Calcutta Street*. The poem begins with the instruction of the protagonist who does not know how to find a whorehouse in the streets Calcutta city and

ends with the woman asking him to leave when she is in a hurry to receive new customer. For example,

“You fall back against her in the dumb light,
While she does what she thinks proper to please you,
The sweet, the little things, the imagined;
Until the statute of the man within
You’ve believed in throughout the years
Comes back to you, a disobeying toy...
her words dose behind: “Hurry, will you? Let me go.”
“Hurry, will you? Let me go.”

(Mahapatra 1976)

Here, the customer visits the whore with a keen desire for communication, as he wants ‘to learn something more about women’ but his desire is frustrated. Because she is selling pleasure, not love and that pleasure is momentary, it will last only for a few moments. If she sells love, then she would pass hours after hours with her companion and her partner would have been satisfied. Here, in the poem the case is reverse. Before he attended that whore, he had an illusion that he would have a fruitful talk with her and thus he hoped for the emotional attachment, but his illusion is shattered against the vast force of reality. His was the expectation to be loved by that lady, but his hope was disillusioned.

The sexual perversion, resulted from the decadent and distorted mindset of the young generation, is prevailed to such an extent that they have become the victims of Sado-masochism. Sado-masochism is a sexual aberration in which a demented person seeks sexual gratification out of emotional abuse or physical violence inflicted to one’s sexual partner. Mahapatra’s poem entitled *Lost* is one of the best examples, which shows this type of sexual perverted young lover. In this poem, the lover enjoys a vicarious pleasure from his lover with the help of his fingertips. As the lover says,

“I’ve wanted to know what lulling silence
Can bloom in my hands,
What pain and pleasure your mind can wear
Through the intrigues at my fingertips.
I watch your body ease off the seasons
Stretched out on the stone of my breath,

Going nowhere.”

(Mahapatra 1976)

These lines show the combination of sadism and masochism. Sadism means sexual pleasure obtained by inflicting harm on others. Masochism means sexual pleasure obtained from receiving harm. Here, the male partner is trying to arouse sexual desire in the female partner with bodily movements. The proximity of the two individuals is described. Here, the lover wants to know the impact of his touching her body with his palm and in that way he wants her to let her body succumb to his desire. So here, the male member becomes sadist and the female member becomes masochist. So here is sexual perverted mentality of modern young generation which ultimately becomes the main source of futility and decadence. Here, it is found that the male part always relates the female entity as an object through which they can fulfill their sexual urge. Mahapatra effectively underscores the pathetic and gloomy condition of women who have become victims of male exploitation and hunger.

A keen observer of contemporary social reality, Mahapatra does not fail to portray the destitute poverty and hunger which is also the source of disillusionment and despair. A vision of frustrated state of the downtrodden young mass is inevitable in some of his poems. The most powerful realist image of a victim-woman is noticeable in his famous poem *Hunger* dealing with forced-prostitution. In this poem, the fisherman-father, a victim of penury, unscrupulously allows her fifteen-year old daughter to resort to prostitution. For example,

“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.”

(*Hunger*, 46)

In the lines mentioned above, the poet has expressed many things: the father’s exhausted wife as a plea to live against poverty, the daughter’s youth, and the easy commerce that disintegrates the pure veil of relationship. The speaker, who has a fair amount of flesh and blood in him, is in search for sexual gratification, represents the hunger for sex. He can’t identify the expression on the face of the fisherman, as he is blind with his lust. He is too hollow to understand the helplessness of the father. He does not feel ashamed of his purpose. In the case of the father of that daughter, one can say that he also merciless who cannot offer food to his daughter out of his hard work, but feeds himself out of the income earned by his daughter. So being careless, he ignores to see the real fact and tries to escape from the

situation saying: 'I'll be back soon, your bus leaves at nine'. Attacks one critic on the character of the father of that daughter vehemently:

“A father of a daughter who has to provide her food, dress, and shelter, feeds himself with the money earned by her! Besides, he has to inculcate the moral values of social life. What does he do in this poem? Because of poverty, he leads her in the wrong path. No culture of any society can approve of this. The society stands strong by the chords of family life where there are pure ties of relationship between father and mother, mother and son, father and daughter. 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)

Here, one can observe that money is termed as god by a human being for which the father allows his daughter to lose the chastity as they are suffering from the hunger for food. So is the case with that man who approaches the fisherman-father. He feels ashamed of his own thinking at the end of the sexual-intercourse. When he perceived that girl, who was just fifteen years old, he felt that her age does not make her look like a young girl. He realized that the girl was not a living entity, but a thing made of rubber sitting in the corner of the hut and waiting for the food as she is hungry. The boy who came for fulfilling his lust is taken aback and feels blameworthy when the girl invited him to feel her. He says:

“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; I felt the hunger there,

The other one, the fish slithering, turning inside.”

(Mahapatra, 46)

He feels that his was the hunger for sex, but the place the people whom he approached were hungry for food. This pathetic scene made him forget his carnal desire. The poverty of that downtrodden class has changed the course of their life. It has degenerated their codes of life. So they plunged into the business of prostitution. Moreover, here one can observe sex-ridden young male section of the society who are blinded by the physical urge i.e. lust but their lust is not properly fulfilled. Particularly, in this poem, the protagonist had expectation to get a response from the other party during their intercourse. When he entered into the chamber

where that girl was waiting for him, he felt 'her years were cold as rubber'. So their expectation of getting fulfilled shattered and thus leading him to be disillusioned.

Thus, Mahapatra's world is filled with pain, guilt, remorse, desire and hunger of both types: hunger for food and hunger for sex. Being aware of changing contours of contemporary life and caught in the currents of his time, he is deeply and affectionately moved by the dirty and dingy social panorama. He observed his surroundings and records reality. He is not a romantic to let himself engulfed in the beauty of nature and its surroundings. He is a realist who deals with the present sorry status of men of his landscape in particular and his nation in general. Sense of helplessness and loss prevails in his poems. To quote the words of one critic in this respect:

"There is a remarkable poise about the way he organizes things: the dominant concern is the vision of grief, loss, dejection, rejection. The tragic consciousness does not seem to operate in the work of any other Indian poet in English as Indian poet in English as disturbingly as in that of Jayanta Mahapatra."

(Panikar, 116)

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