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## Picturization of Women: With Reference to the Select Poems of Jayanta Mahapatra

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### Abstract

The present research aims to explore the representation and portrayal of women in the selected poems of Jayanta Mahapatra, one of India's most profound and prolific contemporary English poets. His compelling depictions of women often encompass and transcend the boundaries of traditional Indian cultural norms and societal structures, thus requiring a detailed, nuanced

investigation. His poems deal with the alienation of women from themselves and from the society. The atrocities that are exerted on women is explicitly exposed by the poet. They were not only termed as weaker sex by the patriarchal society but also made them as such. The poet stands by the deprived section of the society and acts as a voice of them, as the silent screaming is not heard by the world. His works serve as a bridge between the world of man and the world of woman. The pivotal focus of this study is an examination of Mahapatra's depiction of women, ranging from symbolizing pure innocence and tradition to epitomizing complex modern experiences and gendered identity. The research critically investigates how the poet's use of imagery, metaphors, and symbolic language paints a vivid picture of women across his poems, thereby adding another dimension to the thematic concerns of his poetic oeuvre. Moreover, the paper scrutinizes the elements of socio-cultural context, gender constructs, and feminist perspectives within Mahapatra's poetic descriptions. Through this examination, it seeks to analyze the intertwining of the personal, social, and cultural experiences of women in the poet's picturization. The study further delves into Mahapatra's poetry's use of nature and its metaphorical connections to femininity, while considering Indian societal realities and dynamics. Mahapatra's depiction of women in his poetry transcends from being merely characters to profound representations of societal paradigms and discourses, reflecting the inherent challenges and conflicts that women face in a patriarchal society.

**Keywords:** Deprivation, Marginalization, Exploitation, Annihilation, Alienation, Feminine Imagery, Women Representation, Cultural Perspectives, Gender Roles, Cultural Identity, Modernization, Cultural Symbolism, Cross-Cultural Studies

There are thousands of worlds in Jayanta Mahapatra, and all the worlds of him are filled by women. The women in Mahapatra walk in their own pace silently within the restricted domain. The world is sometimes gorgeous but mostly terrible, horrible and wild. To get to know the women of the poet one has to deeply understand the unique universe of this man, Jayanta Mahapatra. Though the scriptures portray women as Goddess, in reality they are considered very low in status. Mahapatra explicitly talks about this truth in all of his poems.

Jayanta Mahapatra is a well renowned poet of this era. He handles the genre (poetic) very effectively to expose the flaws of society and especially the atrocities that is exercised on women. His words send a spark to the readers and forces them to ponder the poor souls of his work, the females. He travels into the dark recess of men and throws light, so that the world will have a better vision on the life lead by women in society. He knows the knack of writing in a subtle way that churns the readers' heart. Though many things happening around the society, he chose to stand with the deprived.

Poetry makes me write poems with a bad heart. I don't know what that exactly means, but it is the heart that makes one furry secretly into someone...pushing to choose values, attitudes and to do the not-so-obvious; this heart, as it keeps on trying to hide the

wounded walls of its house, and at the same time asking for a meaning to our lives. (*Many Indians, Many Literatures: New Critical Essays*, p.15)

Very little space men allot to women. The space of women allotted to them by men is very little. They are confined to loiter under the supervision of men. The door of the women is slightly ajar to survive, to breathe a little and not to live or enjoy her freedom. The male in the society is exposed to the world by the treatment he gives to his female counterparts. She serves as the medium for men to realize and to have a self analysis of himself. Priyanka Sharma writes, “Somewhere in the poems of Mahapatra it is impossible for a woman to rebel against the masculine yoke- against a male’s sense of superiority. Romance is soon replaced by the harsh reality: the woman no longer remains a fairy but becomes a creature only of flesh and blood, irrespective of her own whims, desires and aspirations” (*Labyrinth*, p.105).

Jayanta Mahapatra speaks more of women than the women speak in his works. Their actions are keenly observed and interpreted by the poet. The body of his women moves very slowly, but the mind travels fast. They are always in deep pensive mood, reflecting her place in her house, family and society. In “A Missing Person” the poet shows a woman filled with desires searching her image in the mirror but could not find her real self in the reflection instead she sees only her fake image. The search of identity is clearly depicted by the poet. He paints the scene the artistically:

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”, *The Lie of Dawns*, p.89.)

The poet clearly depicts that a woman’s space is dark. She resides in darkness without any hope, longing for an emancipation. Her outer self is vague and her inner self is totally lost. Even the oil lamp fails to direct to find her true self.

The women in his works are the silent screamers, lone sufferers, deserted figures, exploited and deprived ones. He vividly puts forth these figures in his poem “The Whore House in a Calcutta Street”:

Walk right in. It is yours.  
Where the house smiles wryly into the lighted street.  
Think of the women  
you wished to know and haven’t.

(“The Whore House in a Calcutta Street”, *A Rain of Rites*, p.17)

The prostitutes in the whore house are not concerned of the persons who visit them, the visitors only seek physical gratification from them. Not only the space of these women is

confined to this small room but their children are also destined to live the same filthy life in their confined world. The poet refers them as 'dark children' and the women don't have time to adore them in their busy world and there is no space for their kids:

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 Whore House in a Calcutta Street”, *ROR*, p.17)

Mahapatra explores into the human psyche and simply presents the problems and the thoughts of women. But he couldn't provide any solutions to them. He feels a pain as he is incapable of rescuing the poor souls from this brutal yoke. He's searching for an answer for all his questions but in vain. But as a human his heart still leaps out to them. He feels content just being with them during the crisis:

Numbly I climb to the mountain-tops of ours  
 Where my own soul quivers on the edge of answers.  
 Which still, stale air sits on angel's wings?  
 What holds my rain so it's hard to overcome?

(“A Rain of Rites”, *ROR*, p.10)

He adds that he could only act as a participant and be a mere observer of the happenings. He accepts this in one of his writings:

As a poet, I think both an observer and a participant in life. Many apparently unnoticed events too, make fleeting contacts with the mind, and the impression left behind provided substance and device for what I want to write...My purpose in writing has to share the reader their hearts, soul and daily lives of my people including myself. ]

(*Contemporary Author, and Autobiography Series*, p.113)

Women in “Man of His Nights”, “The Whore House in a Calcutta Street” and in “Hunger” are noy passionate about their profession as prostitutes. They are presented as mechanical, bored and insensitive. Whore is mere a tool in the hands of passionate men. Women in other walks of life struggles to hold a place in her home and society and fails in all their attempts:

White clad widowed women  
 past the centres of their lives  
 are waiting to enter the Great Temple.

Their austere eyes  
 stare like those caught in a net  
 hanging by the dawn's shining strands of faith.

(“Dawn at Puri”, *The Lie of Dawns*, p.21)

In all her life woman is longing for an approval from her male counterpart knowing that it will end up in fiasco. Her cries are not heard and her longing eyes are not seen. Women are enslaved by men and are treated as heretic if they go beyond the line that is drawn by men.

They are the scapegoats of men's beliefs. Even religion gives no consolation for the deserted woman. When a man is tired, he vents all his stress and anxiety on woman not comprehending her physical and mental conditions. As Sutapa Chaudhuri rightly puts in:

Definitively excluded from male reality, objectified by the male gaze, women are regarded as a sexual commodity, a reproducer and erotic object – never as an equal but always the other through whom he seeks himself. Completely subjected to man's will, a victim of the appropriating male gaze women become a myth as it were in the male vision – treated as a 'thing' or property, to be owned and exploited, circumscribed in the confining limits of their own bodies. (*ACJELL*, p.21)

Mahapatra feels that whatever happens in his land befalls on his head too as he is part of this place. He has a strong belief that when women are treated properly, the land flourishes and the land's prosperity is solely responsible on women. He presents the life of contemporary men as a measurement to gauge his manliness and his behaviours towards women. He thinks that the land will be fully independent only if the condition of women improves. He witnesses the pain and anguish that women undergo to find their space in this patriarchal society. He can't act blind leaving all these atrocities and write something better to please others. he chose to stand by the deprived and hence often talks about this theme. He's all ears to his surroundings. Thus, he asserts:

If I am growing like earth or stone  
I will not hear the sad weeping words.  
("A Rain", *ROR*, p.11)

Jayanta explores and exposes the land and the women through his poems. He feels sorry for the dilapidated conditions of women and the land. He loves and treats the land and women as same. Srikanth Ganduri shares the opinion that,

There is a soreness and suffering that springs from the poet's belief of society that makes the poems weak causing bleakness and dampness which ends up in helplessness and misery. It appears that world can't be redeemed or saved from its present decadence. (<https://www.literaryjournal.in/index.php/clri/article/view/225/336>)

The poet is confused about the future of this land, Orissa and the women of the beloved land. He expresses this in the poem 'A Requiem':

India was a little girl  
who came in and stood  
at the threshold of his door.  
("A Requiem", *LOD*. p.165)

An uncertainty of his land and woman is expressed from the poet. The land, nature and everything remind him of women. In the poem 'Silence' he feels the touch of a woman when it rains:

Rain, all night.  
Capacious, like the body of a woman.  
("Silence", *LOD*, p.183)

Most of his poems reflect how women have suffered, tormented, tortured and enslaved through the centuries. Women were never allowed to move freely without the consent of men folk. Their life is in darkness, still searching for a ray of hope.

Mahapatra shows too much concern towards whores. All through his poems he projects the exploitation on women in various forms. They are like sex commodities waiting for the patriarchal community to purchase them in markets. As per Kanwar Dinesh Singh, “Man-woman relationship, totally devoid of love and only resting on physical need and encounter, figures in several poems of Jayanta Mahapatra. Mahapatra seems to be obsessed with whores whose Images are too frequent in many of his poems” (*Contemporary Indian English Poetry: Comparing Male and Female Voices*, p.23).

Jayanta Mahapatra’s world is filled with girls, wives, prostitutes, widows and women of all walks of life. They loiter as fragments and remnants of their partners. They all stand as representatives of women of the present world. The poems reflect remorse, rejection, annihilation and deprivation. The dark side of his land showcased through his women. The authors Dr. K. Muthuraman and others observe it in the same way:

Mahapatra’s humanistic voices becomes sad and sober when he deals mostly with women’s issues. He feels deeply for the plight of an Indian woman who bears the burden of the womanhood in the utter loneliness, helplessness, humiliation, deprivation and often deplorable degradation.

(<https://archives.palarch.nl/index.php/jae/article/download/4814/4746/9259>).

Despite this, Jayanta Mahapatra constantly poses questions in a hope that somewhere he might find answers for some of his queries. He never stops his advocacies towards his womenfolk and his untiring projection of cruelty will someday seek the attention of the world.

In essence, this research elucidates the depth and breadth of Jayanta Mahapatra’s picturization of women in his poetry, unraveling layers of meaning and interpretation that shed light on the intricate interplay of socio-cultural norms, gender relations, and individual identity. Through this in-depth analysis, the study endeavors to facilitate a better understanding of Mahapatra’s poetic artistry, offering fresh insights into his unique portrayal of women and its significant implications for literary and gender studies. It ultimately aims to contribute to the ongoing discussions on the representation of women in literature, particularly within the realms of poetry and Indian English literature.

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