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SOCIAL CONCERN IN JAYANTA MAHAPATRA'S POETRY 'HUNGER'

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ABSTRACT

The title of the paper presents a sentimental touching story of the daughter of a poor fisherman who allows his daughter to become a whore to keep starvation at bay. Mahapatra's describes the absence of moral anguish which is quite a contrast to the calculated cynicism of Ezekiel, the flaunting sick melody of Kamala das or the sly indulgence of Shiva. K. Kumar. Towards the middle of his Career, Mahapatra wanted to project the real life of situations in his poems. The commercialization of sex attracted the attention of the poet. Incidentally, this paper portrays the dual existence of the ideal as well as the deplorable state of women in a male – dominated society.

In this paper Mahapatra symbolizes with such a victims of society. He claims that the paper is based on a true incident and asserts that it could easily have happened to him or anybody for that matter on the poverty – ridden sands of Gopalapur – on – sea. Mahapatra proudly proclaims that the landscape of Gopalapur chose him in his poem. The poem begins with the protagonist's realization that it was hard to believe the flesh was heavy on [his] back.

**Keywords:** Silence, sexuality, protagonist, patriarchal society, starvation, poverty, Innocence.

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INTRODUCTION

Jayanta Mahapatra was born in the year 1928 in Cuttack (Orissa). He lives in Orissa and most of his poem reflects his experiences there. He has published ten volumes of verse in English and two volumes of international journals and magazines. His ten volumes of Poetry are – *Close the sky, Ten by Ten (1971), Svayamavara and other Poems (1971), A Father's Hours (1976), A Rain of Rites (1976), Waiting (1979). The False Start (1980), Relationship (1982), Life Signs (1983), Dispossessed Nests (1986) and Burden of Waves and Fruit (1986).*

The earlier volumes concentrate on private relationships while the later ones deal with contemporary life with their political undertones. Mahapatra, being a very subjective poet, draws his images from his

experiences in life. This has made the interpretation of his poetry difficult; yet a few attempts have been made in recent past, in unlocking Mahapatra's poems.

Jayanta Mahapatra has played a vital and creative role in popularizing post-independence Indian English poetry by giving preference to experimental works by young and unpublished writers. Having chosen English as his medium of writing. Mahapatra admits frankly that he feels at home only his native country. English is only a medium through which he wants to present the voices of the Indians. He says, "I hadn't read any poetry until I started writing myself. No, not even poets like Eliot or Whitman or Tagore. I was trained to be a physicist. But I have veered from physics in a way".

#### **Mahapatra's Concepts in 'Hunger' poem**

'Silence' is the most important concept in Mahapatra's 'Hunger' poem. Of this, he himself observes, "Silence is a sort of idea in my work, which may come as revelation and perhaps, it will come as a result of living simply – not aggressively, and the mind begins to flow like water, or perhaps, silence is an opposite pole to this; I mean there is always something eluding in life and that something, I have never been able to find, even in whatever I can call my own – like a wife or son .... Let me call that my silence.

The 'angry young men' of the England of 1960's in their search for identification, took refuge in Sex, for "there are no more brave new causes" (*John Osborne's Look Back in Anger*). They drowned their uncertainties of live by engaging acceptance of the world as it is. Mahapatra goes a further. He finds in sex an uncertainty, which produces a void and not contentment. The author finds no unalloyed happiness during sex experience. There is an unbridgeable gap between the two who are participants in it.

Mahapatra says, "Let those of us writing in English forget that we are writing in it. Let us speak of who we are, of the place in which we live, of our occupations." His explorations of the problems in human relationships make his 'Hunger' poem especially significant. He says, "what appears to disturb me is the triumph of silence in the mind" and this is the theme that recurs in his poem 'Hunger' volumes of verses.

#### **Social Concern in Jayanta Mahapatra's Poem 'Hunger'**

Towards the middle of his career, Mahapatra wanted to project the real life situations in his poem. The commercialization of Sex attracted the attention of the poet. Incidentally, these poems portrays the dual existence of; the ideal as well as the deplorable of women in male dominated society, Male sensuality being dominant in society, Mahapatra describes the absence of moral anguish which is quite contrast to be calculated cynicism of Ezekiel, the flaunting sick melody of Kamala Das or the sly indulgence of Shiva. K. Kumar.

'Hunger' brings out the role of poverty in brutalizing the sexual relationship. The complex theme of hunger at **three levels** is treated in a simple way. As **Ayyappa Paniker** observes, the simplicity and strength of this poem has made it one of the great peaks of Indian poetry in English. This poem is touching story of the daughter of a poor fisherman who allows his daughter to become a whore to keep starvation at bay. Mahapatra's symbolizes with such a victims of society. He claims that the poem is based on a true incident and asserts that it could easily have happened to him or anybody for that matter on the poverty – ridden sands of Gopalapur – on – sea. Mahapatra proudly proclaims that the landscape of Gopalpur chose him in his poem. . The poem carefully preserves the state of mind of the fisherman and the protagonist.

The poem begins with the protagonists' realization that it was hard to believe the flesh was heavy on {his} back. A sudden spurt of lust overwhelms him. The tumescent protagonist encounters a poor fisherman who offers him his daughter. The fisherman said: will you have her carelessly.

Starvation overpowers the inhibitions of a father pimping for his own daughter. It becomes a convenient pretext for the fisherman to fish customers for his daughter. The fisherman is nervous. He has to compel himself to make the proposition.

Trailing his nets and his nerves' as though his words  
Sanctified the purpose with which he faced himself.

The poet describes the undernourished state of the fisherman and his daughter. The fisherman's white bones and his daughter's long and lean and wormy legs are testimonials to their penury.

In this poem, the youth and the girl being silent, the fisherman speaks in a matter – of – fact tone, which embodies the quality of **silence**. ‘Silence’ plays important role in the poems of Mahapatra and the success of the poem lies in its effective use of silence. Silence, incidentally, is word that gets endlessly repeated one might say consecrated in Mahapatra’s poems.

In a similar situation in “*The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street*”, the mind domineers and the body disobeys like a toy. Here, Mahapatra projects the complete domination of body over mind by the image of the mind yielding to the desire of sexual pleasure. The sexual passion makes the protagonist makes the protagonist follow the fisherman.

*I followed him across the sprawling sands,  
My mind thumping in the flesh’s sailing.*

*Hunger* conquers all other senses. The fisherman’s offer, “will you have her?” forces the youth to silently follow the tired father. Silence is concretized as someone gripping the protagonist and leading him on.

*Silence gripped my sleeves; his body clawed  
At the both his old nets had dragged up from the seas.*

They reach the hut: ‘In the flickering dark his lean – to open like a wound’. Just as the wind enters freely, clients enter the lean – to as they done in the past. The protagonist is the latest to visits the girl. Also it might mean that to the girl within it is just another client entering like the wind as others have entered in the past.

*The wind was I, and the days and nights before,  
Palm fronds scratched my skin .....*

An oil lamp indicated the poverty – stricken condition of the fisherman and his daughter, depositing sticky soot on the walls.

*..... Inside the shack  
An oil lamp splayed the hours bunched those walls.  
Over and over the sticky soot crossed the space of my mind.*

The fisherman under the guise of instructions to the youth tempts him with the hint of the tender age of his daughter. It might also be a plea to the youth to handle her gently, instead of the brutal acts of sex that prostitutes experience at the hands of savage clients. The father’s words are ambiguous. They suggest paternal solicitude as well as a pimp’s advertisement about the youthful charm of his ward.

*I heard him say: my daughter, she’s just turned fifteen .....*  
*Feel her. I’ll be back soon; your bus leaves at nine.*

The poet – persona is shocked at the base pimping by the father. It is as if ‘the sky fell on’ him, when he realized the ‘fathers\’s exhausted wile’. The fall is physical, literal and metaphorical. The ‘exhausted’ fisherman has succeeded at last in landing a client for his daughter.

The girl is puny, ‘long and lean’ for her age. The act of prostitution, to which her father forces, is not compatible with her page. It is akin to child labour, doing it for the sake of food. Not being an active participant in the sexual act, she has developed indifference.

The mechanical way in which ‘*she opened her wormy legs wide*’ for the sexual act and the words ‘*her years were cold as rubber*’ suggest the indifference that she has developed to the sexual act. The youth feels the ‘*hunger there, the other one*’ meaning the hunger for the food. ‘*Wormy legs*’ is ambiguous. It may describe her lean legs or the legs that are infected because of the unhygienic living condition. As they copulate, the poet evokes a frenetic phallic image, ‘*the fish slithering, and turning inside.*’ It unifies in a stunningly imaginative vision all the brands implicit in the poem. The sexual hunger of the young man and the physical hunger of the fisherman and his daughter meet in a mutually satisfying union. The girls’ mechanical indulgence in sex is a demining indictment of the poverty that commercialization as an act of love into a service to be sold to all and sundry.

More than the external acts, which contribute to the growth of the theme, it is the internal perfection of the self of the protagonist that gives a form and theme to his poem. The protagonist sees the twin aspects of hunger’ in the girl’s open thighs. Here is an introvert character that can neither resist participating in the

poverty – impelled sale of fresh, nor go to the whole erotic way of indulging in it. The whole poem is tinged with verbal irony and it is doubtful whether any one rightly understands the meaning of the fisherman's hunger. The poem carefully preserves the state of mind of the fisherman and the protagonist.

Mahapatra's poems project the tension between private fantasies and the actual world, which is the source of his poetic imagery. Such local images weigh on his selfhood. The external images – *'an oil lamp splayed the hours'* *'years cold as rubber'* and *'fish slithering, turning inside* – contrast the inner reflection if the protagonist projected in the images of the self – *'trailing his nets and his nerves'* *'minding thumping in the flesh's sling'* and *'silence gripped my sleeves'*. These two groups of images coalesce in the dominant image, *'mind thumping in the flesh's sling'* which pictures the domination of the self over lust. All the images are used for affirming and controlling the sexual drive of the protagonist. The images contribute to the synthesis of a new meaning form the juxtaposed hungers placed side by side.

The special feature of the poem is not only the juxtaposition but also the interaction of the two hungers, which assumes universal dimensions. On the level of the art, the local and the universal must meet.

#### Conclusion

To conclude that Jayant Mahapatra's poem especially characterization of the poem is not only the juxtaposition but also the interaction of the two hungers, which assumes universal dimensions. On the level of the art, the local and the universal meet. Mahapatra's poems project the tension between private fantasies and the actual world, which is the source of his poetic imagery. . The poem carefully preserves the state of mind of the fisherman and the protagonist.

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