
Women at the margins: The gendered suffering of widows and prostitutes in Jayant Mahapatra's 'Dawn at Puri' and 'A whorehouse in the Calcutta street'

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Abstract:

Jayant Mahapatra is a renowned Indian English poet for his significant contributions to Indian English Literature. He was the first to win Sahitya Akademi Award in 1981 for English poetry. Majority of his poetries address social issues like poverty, hunger, exploitation of women and children. His poems 'Dawn at Puri' and 'A whorehouse in a Calcutta street' gives a vivid picture of the suffering of women both in rural and urban landscapes. The paper examines how Jayant Mahapatra juxtaposes two contrasting spaces ; the sacred town Puri and the urban redlight area of Calcutta and how they reveal the marginalisation and suffering of women. In Dawn at Puri, the suffering of widows is framed within a religious context of purity and pollution, sacred or profane while in Calcutta Whorehouse the women are reduced to bodies of desire.

Keywords: Exploitation, Marginalisation, Suffering, Sacred , Profane

Introduction:

It is through the craftsmanship of pen, attention of the people can be drawn to various social issues that existed in the past and exists in the contemporary times. Jayant Mahapatra, through his poetic imagination gives a social commentary of various issues that persists in the society as truly as possible. He expresses what he sees, what he feels. The characters he chooses for expression of his poetries are not extra ordinary but he draws out the issues faced by the common peoples of society like beggars, women, prostitutes etc.

Because of his Odia background, his poetries are infused with Odia history, background, rituals, life. M.K. Naik remarks,"Mahapatra's poetry is redolent of Orissan scene and Jagannath temple at Puri figures quite often in it (p-20). His poems "Dawn at Puri" and "Calcutta Whorehouse" are very significant when it comes to gendered sufferings of women although a difference in landscape exists. Both the poems share similarity of female marginalisation across both rural and urban spaces. In the poem 'Dawn at Puri', the widow women eager to visit the Jagannath temple epitomises suffering imposed by Hindu patriarchal codes of living like deprivation of colour. By contrast , the prostitutes at 'Calcutta

Whorehouse', in a urban landscape, whose bodies are treated as objects of desire. Both ways, women get marginalised that try to reduce them to function of rituals or desire and deprive them of dignity.

Undoubtedly, poverty and hunger clings to Indian landscape throughout. In Jayant Mahapatra poems; Hunger is one of the central theme; be it hunger for food or sexual hunger. Keeping in view his Odia background, some of his poems have depictions of landscapes, socio-cultural scenario, culture of Odisha.

Puri is considered to one of the Char Dhams. It's a sacred Hindu pilgrimage site where people also desire to be cremated in order to attain salvation. The paper focuses to bring a contrast on the sacredness of the holy town of Puri with the portrayal of women sufferings particularly the sufferings of widows. By bringing images of the reality, Mahapatra creates, gives a picture how in the name of tradition, widows suffer.

Jayant Mahapatra begins the poem with
' Endless crow noises

A skull in the holy sands' which begins with a not so positive tone and setting. The ideal understanding of dawn- of a new beginning, new hope fails to find a space here. It is seen to reveal the desolation particularly in lives of women which gets unfurled in the name of tradition and sacred spiritual beliefs. According to the Hindu beliefs, the crow noises is uncanny and gives negative emotion. In the sacred town, the holy sands has a skull which makes the readers aware of the contradictions that exists in religion and realities.

The most striking lines of the poem which gives the illustrations of gendered suffering of women is "White clad widowed women
past the centers of their lives
are waiting to enter the Great Temple"

Throughout history, widows are socially outcasted. They are believed to be and behaved in a very alienating manner. They become the victims of the social system. In traditional Hindu Society, a widow women is often regarded as impure. They are expected to live a life with no Colours, no participation, no pleasure for self. The White Saree depicts the erasure of colours, choices. Their 'waiting' to 'enter the Great Temple' Symbolizes the Social exclusion where 'waiting' is also symbolic of their wait for a more accepting society without enforcement of rigid rules that deprive them. The Indian society denies women of their equal rights therefore in most cases, it's women are left at margins to suffer. They remain strangled between the salvation and deprivation. A widow is believed to be purified through rituals. The female pain is made invisible through construction of rituals; their sufferings naturalised and sanctioned and therefore there is a gendered suffering of women.

Their 'austere' eyes symbolises hope that they have in their eyes and it gives a hint as if the widows are caught in a net as trapped as they are expected to be within the boundaries set by patriarchal society.

"The fail early light catches
ruined, Leprous shells leaning against one another,
a mass of crouched faces without names"

The fail denotes the broken pieces of heart which draws a parallelism with the life of widows. The widows leaning against each other leaning draws parallelism with leprous shells leaning against one another. 'A mass' 'without names' suggests the erasure of identity of the masses of the widow women.

Towards the last stanza of the poem, the poet's mother's Last wish to be cremated in the holy land of Puri reflects how women are consciously or unconsciously affected by the patriarchal religious Sacred beliefs and rituals. Her wish, 'twisting uncertainly like light' denotes the fickleness in faith. Her sufferings becomes internalised and sanctioned. The poem brings together the public and personal spheres in the gendered sufferings of women in the widow's rituals as well as the poet's mother's last wish to be cremated in the holy land. In both cases, the sufferings of women is mis interpreted as religious devotion.

In another poem of Jayant Mahapatra 'The whorehouse in a Calcutta street', the major themes it deals with is prostitution and whorehouses i.e. the biological urge or hunger for sexual practices and the way it makes thw women suffer. In the poem, Mahapatra expresses the silenced pain of the prostitutes who're victimized by the male dominated world. The whorehouses symbolises not only physical space but also an idea of the socio-economic condition that forces women to step into these.

In the line, 'where the house smiles wryly into the lighted street' gives a contrasted image that although the brothel house smiles, but the smile is ironic which exposes the hypocritic world outside. The line 'where no pasts join, and where they part' (9) is indicative of the coming together of histories as well as a cyclic repetition. The lives of the prostitutes are 'hollow' with neither any respect nor any exoticism within it. In the second stanza, the of the 'secret moonlight' (15) of prostitute women reminds the readers about the loneliness, cravings for home, family as well as the non-acceptance of them in mainstream society. The longing / yearning which gets hidden beneath the 'false chatter' they are unwillingly bound to do. The lines 'perhaps their reminding themselves
of looked-after children & of home :the shooting stars in the eager darkness of return" (17-19) briefly summarises that the absence of home, motherhood which the society has snatched away from them. The intimacy, the joys of motherhood shows gendered suffering which exists in emotional form too.

The eager darkness of return reveals the deprivation of dreams in the lives of prostitute women. The 'dream children' points the lost motherhood. The women's children - unsure if it is lost or even unborn; just imaginative symbolises the stripping off womanhood

or motherhood that the patriarchal society reduces them to just objects of sexual pleasure. Motherhood, which is considered to be the greatest joy or identity is stripped off for them and they are not in a position to even have a sense of pride regarding the children. These women are deprived of the ornamentation or socio-cultural marks of womanhood and the patriarchal world uses them as objects of pleasure. The 'little turnings of blood' can even refer metaphorically as a representation of gendered suffering of women. The last stanza of the poem opens up masculine dominance. The woman performs adhering to male satisfaction. This exposes the gendered imbalance of experiences of both men and women.

The two poems of Jayant Mahapatra; 'Dawn at Puri' and 'The whorehouse in Calcutta street' gives different perspectives of suffering - both centered around gendered suffering within the Holy Land of Puri as well as the bustling city of Calcutta. The women's suffering and pain have been assumed to be sanctioned in the poem Dawn at Puri owing to religious frameworks. 'The whorehouse in Calcutta street' Exposes the pain of the prostitutes whose bodies have been used by the patriarchal society for man's sexual pleasure.

Whether the geographic space be sacred or profane, it traces a continuation of suffering of women perpetually, sometimes in name of religious sacraments. Mahapatra's portrayal of victimization and marginalisation of women is not only a representation and finding a space in the Literary arena or domain but provides a critique of society that oppresses women whose voices goes unheard and problems;unattended.

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