

HUNGER VERSUS SEXUAL HUNGER: A STUDY OF JAYANTA MAHAPATRA'S "THE WHOREHOUSE IN A CALCUTTA STREET" AND "HUNGER"

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Abstract:

During the ancient period women enjoyed high status and played a significant role in society. But the status and role of women is discriminated in the later periods and they were considered to be the weaker sex and food giver. Her status and dignity as women is not accepted in society as well as at home. Though women have always been considered to be "part and parcel of life", history is full of instances where she is meted out injustice, deprived of her basic needs and even fundamental rights. Women have endured untold sufferings because of colonization and also due to Indian patriarchy. Her position is degraded to a prostitute who sells her body for money due to miserable living conditions, poverty and starvation. Most of the Indian English writers have portrayed the marginalization of Indian women in their writings. Jayanta Mahapatra, an Indian English poet tries to capture the gruesome realities regarding the condition of women in India. Mahapatra seems to be deeply aware of the situation and he tries to expose an Indian society laden with the predicament of these subjugated women. In India, women are considered as a property to be handled by man. She is not entitled to have her own opinions. In this paper, an attempt is made to show how women are regarded as a commodity in Indian society by analysing Jayanta Mahapatra's two well acclaimed poems "The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street" and "Hunger". The poems throw light on the emerging profession of prostitution for survival and child prostitution in India due to poverty and hunger and also the status of women in Orissa. Mahapatra expresses the plight of those helpless and unvoiced beings in his poems.

Keywords: Female predicament, Subjugation of Women, Patriarchal Society, Child Prostitution, Poverty, Prostitute.

Introduction:

Jayanta Mahapatra is a poet of human relationship raising his situations from the microcosm of Orissa, India. The human relationship in his poetry centers round man-woman relationship. Mahapatra hails from Orissa and his poetry is filled with a remarkable presence

of

this landscape. The pathetic conditions of women form a part and parcel of his poetry. The portrait of women reoccurs in his poetry and he presents them as the sufferer. He is a man who casts light on the status of women in Orissa and expresses the predicament of those women in his poems. Mahapatra made an attempt to empower the women folk of Orissa through his poems.

Mahapatra's poetry gives a picture of the gruesome realities of our country and the plight of Indian women folk for survival in a patriarchy ruled nation. He brings forth various poignant realities and presents the subjugation of women by male dominated Indian society. Mahapatra seems to understand the marginalization of women folk in our country and he took efforts to give voice to these voiceless through his poetry. Mahapatra voices the staunch reality to us through his poems that women are not toys for playing but persons with human feelings and emotions who should be dealt with humanitarian concern. He becomes a spokesman to the deep concealed emotions of the women because he feels that through literature the agonies, pain and frustration be given recognition it deserves.

Mahapatra portrays sexual degeneration and perversion in his poems. As a matter of fact, copulation is the source of life if it is exercised for the sake of procreation and if it is an expression of love. However, if it is exercised for the sake of momentary pleasure or momentary benefit, it becomes the source of disappointment and disillusionment. It represents the precedence of flesh over the spirit.

Mahapatra deals with the whore-image in many of his poems. He is more concerned with the portraits of the prostitutes who do the flesh trade, not out of love, sympathy or any kind of feelings and emotions. He is deeply conscious of the fact that the whores are concerned with money who will please their customers by sharing physical pleasures only, not by building any emotional relationships with them. They believe in physical involvement and not in emotional involvement. They will throw all the norms and traditions of society into the air because of their belief that it is a trade and profession and they must do it to earn something for their financial support. Their relations with the customers last only for the period of their sexual intercourse and it is momentary, not lifelong. Lust, not love, will have the place in their life which ultimately results in frustration and malaise. This kind of relation which overshadows love will invite weariness and futility to them.

Mahapatra deals with the profession of prostitution in his poems "The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street" and "Hunger". Prostitution as a commercialized device and as a profession has existed in the world from times immemorial. As the world's oldest profession prostitution has undoubtedly existed in some form or other as long as society has attempted to regulate and control sex relationships through the institutions of marriage and family. This institution has existed in all the civilized societies from the earliest times. In India too, prostitution has a long and an ancient history. In Ramayana, Mahabharata and in the Puranas, we find references to courtesan women like Rambha, Menaka, Urvashi, Tilothama who used

to exhibit their skills and artistic excellence in dance, music, etc. in order to please Gods and the king of Gods, Indra.

The profession of prostitution was so widespread in the ancient period that the Hindu Sashtarakas like Manu and Brihaspati recommended for suppression of prostitution. During Mohammadan period also, it was much in vogue and many Mohammadan kings had their Harem. However, the rapid urbanization and industrialization during the British period increased this evil to a great extent. The problem of prostitution is becoming more and more acute in the country as the country is getting more and more industrialized. The problem of prostitution as we understand it today, is mostly urban and more particularly metropolitan. Unsatisfactory housing conditions and imperfect family patterns have led to an increase of prostitution. Mav G. in "Encyclopaedia of social Sciences" vol.12 defines prostitution as "an act of social intercourse characterised by barter, promiscuity and emotional indifference" (Rao 734).

Prostitution as a grave social evil has been haunting many of the civilized countries of the world including India. The problem is becoming more and more rampant in India especially in the urban area. There are many factors and forces which causes this problem for it is not an isolated unit. It is indeed, a product of economic, social, psychological and other factors. There is no doubt that poverty or economic necessity is the most important factor behind prostitution. M. Londres is of the opinion that "the foundation of prostitution is hunger" (Rao 736). Studies made by the League of Nations in different countries have revealed that "poverty, overcrowding and low wages are clearly contributory causes of prostitution" (Rao 736). It is observed that many women having no other visible means of support in order to make out a livelihood often resort to prostitution. Most of the prostitutes come from under privileged economic groups. Surveys conducted about this social evil revealed that poverty and lack of employment opportunities are the biggest factors causing prostitution.

Desperation and hopelessness seem to characterize the lives of India's poor. This desperate poverty is often cited as the root cause of India's growing prostitution problem. However, it is argued that in many countries with prosperous economy, high standard of living, universal education, the problem of prostitution remains unsolved. This indicates that trade in flesh goes on unabated not simply because of ignorance, illiteracy, poverty etc. but also because human beings consciously choose this occupation and are willing to be manipulated by others. However, this paper mainly focuses on the economic cause of prostitution, poverty.

One of India's most striking characteristics is its material poverty to which most of the people cannot meet basic survival needs like food, clothing and shelter. Poverty does not create imbalances in gender and sex. It only aggravates the existing imbalances in power and therefore increases the vulnerability of those who are at the receiving end of gender prejudice. In a patriarchal society, the section in families in societies that is affected is women and girl children. Caste wars, political strife, domestic conflicts through their manifestations

and repercussions reflect strong gender prejudice against women. Violence against women, assault and rape on women are not individual sexual or physical crimes. It has become a tool of gender persecution which amply reflects on the degree of human degradation and commoditization of women in the eyes of the state, community and society. Indeed, such poverty belongs to an almost unusual world in which only the wealthy are certain to meet the basic needs.

Mahapatra's poem "Hunger" depicts two kinds of hunger. One is the hunger for food and another is the hunger for sexual gratification. The poem explores the informal child sex trade lurking in the social fabric of India. It presents a sentimental touching story of a fifteen-year-old girl who is enslaved in the social fabric of prostitution in order to keep starvation at bay with the consent of her own father, a poor fisherman. Her father himself acts as a pimp here because hunger reigns over all other relationships. Dhanisha K.S. says, "The poet throws light towards the society like a hungry wolf swallows the pathetic condition of a young girl in one gulp" (222). In a country like India, renowned for hospitality, it is our moral responsibility to give a secure environment for our children to live peacefully. Instead, the society utilizes the deprived state of a young girl and compels her to indulge in prostitution in order to satisfy the sexual urge of so called upright and moral society.

It is usually seen that men who are not satisfied with their married life or are not married or divorced, go to brothels and give money for their own pleasure. It has become a business. India, now is not just poor by money but also poor by morals. The basic moral of a human being to realize that women are responsible for the creation of a new generation is wiped off from our minds. It is a shame for us to forget that women are not toys meant for sexual gratification or satisfaction of man, they are the creator of the entire human race. Now, only women are meant to go through rapes, prostitution, household tortures, etc. In Mahapatra's world, women live in penury, hunger and starvation. In his works, Mahapatra shows the meaninglessness and futile of women who struggle for their own identity and survive amidst sorrows and hardships.

Jayanta Mahapatra portrays the landscape of Orissa in his poem "Hunger". Orissa is endowed with a treasure of tourist's attraction which is varied catering to every facet of tourism, be it religious, cultural, heritage or eco-tourism. Gopalpur, a town and a Notified Area Council on the Bay of Bengal Coast in Ganjam district in the southern part of Odisha is chosen by Mahapatra as the setting of the poem. It is a small town thronged by tourists for its sunny beaches, shallow sea and quiet nights. The story of the poem takes place in the hut of a poor fisherman near the seashore. The roof of his hut was thatched with palm leaves. There was dark inside except a lamp with a flickering flame and the walls are covered with soot, collected for a long time.

The story of the poem revolves around a tourist, a fisherman and his daughter. The tourist who is the protagonist of the poem came to the tourist spot to enjoy the beautiful sight of Gopalpur seashore. The poem begins with the sudden spurt of lust for the protagonist. The

speaker encounters a poor fisherman. The fisherman-father, a victim of penury unscrupulously allows his fifteen-year-old daughter to resort to prostitution. It is seen in the lines: “The fisherman said: will you have her,” (Mahanta et al. 172).

The sexual passion makes the protagonist follow the fisherman to his daughter. The sexual hunger of the man and the hunger for food of the fisherman and his daughter meet in a mutually satisfying union. Starvation overpowers the inhibitions of a father pimping for his own daughter. The poverty-stricken girl had no other way but to subjugate to her fate. She lies silently in the dark room without any complaints to her father. The dark room symbolizes the life of the girl. According to Dhanisha K.S., “Survival sex is when the prostitute is driven to prostitution by a need for basic necessities such as food or shelter (223). The fisherman who pimps his daughter is careless of his offer of the girl as though his words sanctified the purpose with which he faced himself. The poet craftily pushes us to question the very idea of sanctity here. The utter hopelessness in the life of the fisherman and his daughter is too much that they could only see it as a means of livelihood.

Mahapatra describes the undernourished state of the fisherman and his daughter. The girl lies silently in the shack and indulges in the sexual act without any passion. In case of this young girl, it is not a spiritual bond but a business for transaction of sexual pleasures. It is perceived only as a means to keep poverty at bay. The fate of a child to become a whore is much worse than that of death.

The poem displays the emerging child prostitution in India. “Child prostitution is prostitution involving a child, and it is a form of commercial sexual exploitation of children” (K.S. 223). Children are often forced by social structures and individual agents into situations in which adults take advantage of their vulnerability and sexually exploit and abuse them by selling their bodies. The poet wants to highlight that the so-called civilized society has abundance of such incidents where innocent and adolescent girls are forced into this trade. In the 21st 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. (Mahanta et al. 173)

Mahapatra powerfully portrayed the destitute poverty and hunger of Indian life in “Hunger”. Situations force people to do such things. The bonding or binding among the members of families seems to have lost. Anu Filda Varghese says that the poet explains the hunger as double meaning in the poem. The long lean wormy legs of the young girl shows the hunger due to poverty. “I felt the hunger there” (Mahanta et al. 173) shows the hunger for sexual gratification of the speaker (230). But the pathetic condition of the girl made him forget his carnal desires. The speaker is tormented with an urgent desire for sex but later he feels guilty. When the girl opened her lean wormy legs apart, he realizes that it is abject poverty that has driven the father and his daughter to this pathetic condition. Mahapatra who is a keen observer of contemporary social reality does not fail to portray destitute poverty

and hunger which is also the source of disillusionment and despair through the deplorable condition of women.

A vision of the frustrated state of the downtrodden young mass is seen in the poem "Hunger". One of the most powerful realistic image of a victim-woman is noticeable in the poem which deals with forced prostitution. According to Vijay D. Mangukiya, "Mahapatra expressed many things in the poem: the father's exhausted wife as a plea to live against poverty, the daughter's youth, and the easy commerce that disintegrates the pure wit of relationship (5908). 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 cannot 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. On the other hand, the father seems to be merciless who cannot offer food to his daughter out of his hard work but feeds himself out of the income earned by his young daughter through prostitution. K. Balachandran attacks on the character of this father vehemently as:

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 (Mangukiya 5909).

Money is termed as God by human beings 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 speaker who approaches the father. He feels ashamed of his own thinking. The speaker who came for fulfilling his lust is taken aback and he feels blameworthy when the young girl invited him to feel her.

The sky fell on me, and a father's exhausted wife.

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. (Mahanta et al. 173)

Swathi Krishna says that the behavior of the girl makes the speaker to understand how poverty drives people to commit such actions mechanically and how well it deprives them of their pride and dignity (747). Here, the fisherman considers his daughter like a commodity which he can trade to any man. He behaves like a merchant who sells commodities to the society and is selling his only daughter whom he should have protected. "Instead of protecting her from the eagle eyes of other men, the protector itself turns into a broker of her body" (Krishna 747).

In the words of Jayaramaiah N. and S.A.R. Abidi, “Silence is the most important concern in Mahapatra’s “Hunger” poem” (719). Hunger conquers all other senses. The fisherman’s offer “Will you have her?” forces the protagonist to silently follow the father. Silence is concretized as someone gripping the protagonist and leading him on: “Silence gripped my sleeves;” (Mahanta et al. 173). The speaker feels that his hunger was the hunger for sex, but the people whom he approached were hungry for food. This pathetic scene made him forget his desires. The poverty of that downtrodden class has changed the course of their life forcing them to indulge in prostitution.

Mahapatra depicts how the ill-fated circumstances of people convert the womenfolk into mere tools for satisfying lust. Neha Sharma comments on the book *Indian English Poetry & Fiction* about the three distinct hungers in this poem and they are “the actual hunger of the poor father and daughter, the sensual hunger of the speaker, and the hunger of male community to materialize a girl’s body for the fulfillment of male desire and demand (Krishna 747).

Mahapatra’s another poem “The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street” seemed to deal with the pains and agonies that the prostitutes suffer in their everyday life. The poem is written in a conversational tone between three persons and it explores the uncertainties and unopened terrains of secluded realms of human life.

The poem demonstrates the attitude of Indian men to their women. Swathi Krishna says that for Indian men a woman is just a body filled with sexual pleasure that desperately awaits exploration and pleasure from men (745). In the poem, a customer enters the premises of a whorehouse with the hope of visiting prostitutes. The narrator of the poem suggests to the customer to think of all those women whom he wanted to have but whom he could never be able to have. The shameless speaker requests him to imagine all those women whose faces he has seen in the advertisements, faces which were pictured on the posters in the most enchanting way. Krishna further says that the poet points out the objectification of female body and its projection as a sexual object in the so-called entertainment industry to attract men and also to arouse sexual feelings in them.

However, the customer is here with the aim of understanding and learning about the mentality of a prostitute, apart from satisfying his sexual desire by merely consuming her body. But he is surprised to see that the whore indulges in doing the sexual activities mechanically rather than caring about the intention of the customer. For her she has to do this profession to satisfy her hunger for food. She does not expect the man before her to be concerned about her personal and mental affairs. While the customer hopes to have some personal conversations with the whore, she gets busy by doing fondling and embraces his body as a matter of her regular routine. Her next behaviour further shocks the customer when she asks him to hurry up so that she can go and satisfy the lust of her next customer. Love does not have any existence in her life. She becomes the victim of the commercial, passionate instinct of exploitation.

Since times immemorial, the Indian society has been giving a cold shoulder to the prostitutes and prohibited them from being a part of decent and cultural society. This misery experienced by them in daily life gets reflected in his poem. 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 women have 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." (Sharma et al. 395). In this poem, the women are pictured as a tool. The job that they do is mechanical. They are treated as a mechanical tool by the society. The poem mirrors the hunger and poverty of the Indian people clearly. The lady does not need any love and sympathy from anyone. Her business is for monetary benefit. She is regarded as a commodity and looked as flesh only. Mahapatra deals with the agonies and pains that these prostitutes suffer.

In "The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street", the woman is painted as fed up with monotonous and wearisome sex nearly a mechanical tool of man to whom she requests: "Hurry, will you? Let me go, (The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street 142). According to Swathi Krishna, selling her body is not a purpose for sexual gratification (746). She has to engage in this profession without her wish in order to make a living and she must also be the only hope for a living for her family, most probably her children. Her children must be awaiting and expecting her arrival soon, so that they can fill their bellies. The main reason behind her engagement in this profession of whoredom is only to gain some money which will help her family to gratify their hunger for food. She has no time to become a prey to the customer's curiosity about her background and other affairs of her life.

The uniqueness of the poem consists in the fact that the protagonist trying to learn something more about women gets deprived of his normal sexual response perhaps owing to the brazenness of the whore. He becomes a "disobeying toy" in front of the whore (Prasad 190).

So, it can be concluded that through these poems Mahapatra illustrates the brutality of our society towards poor people. The poem "Hunger" brings out the role of poverty in brutalizing the sexual relationship. The paper discusses how food insecurity has led to an increase in commercial sex work, especially for young women. It also reveals the emergence of child prostitution in India due to poverty. In these poems, Mahapatra shows how the females, the most marginalized section of our country due to poverty and other issues are forced to sell their bodies to please the sexual gratification of men. Mahapatra gives an insight to the tormented and dreadful lives of prostitutes who are being socially excluded from the society for being engaged in a profession which frankly violates the ideals of socio-cultural norms of male dominated Indian society. We can see the unheard pathos and sorrows of women who silently obey the rules of patriarchal society without questioning them and sells their own body. The poems throw light on the double standard of the male supremacist Indian society which on one side compels women to sell their body to men. On the other hand, this same society considers these women as malignant and corrupting the integrity of

the society because of their engagement in sexual activities. Mahapatra genuinely portrays the living condition of the social outcasts like sex workers who are supposed to satisfy their physical hunger by gratifying the sexual hunger of men in their society.

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