

The Plight of Women: A Study of Jayanta Mahapatra's Selected Poems

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Abstract–

Although our constitution gives several rights to women to elevate them socially and politically yet they are sufferers. What's the reason behind their sufferings is the main concern of Jayanta Mahapatra. The main reason is their ignorance towards their existence and prejudiced patriarchal society that's why women are unable to use these rights practically. Mahapatra portrays predicaments of these women in his poetry. Although many writers have portrayed the plight of women in their works but uniqueness of Mahapatra lies in the fact that while portraying women he thinks with a female point of view even after being a male poet. He feels their loneliness, silence, anger, helplessness and their crippledness. He shows the several aspects of woman's plight. He finds housewife, widow, prostitute, helpless girl child and a pathetic mother a victim of social evils. The purpose of my present paper is to explore Jayanta Mahapatra in the light of offeministic traits. Through his poems he portrays their sufferings and tries to aware them so that they could fight with these social evils.

Key Words- Sufferings, Loneliness, Exploitation, Poverty, Alienation, Predicaments

Introduction-

Mahapatra has tried every possible effort to justify his role as a poet towards women. He has portrayed the sufferings, poverty, loneliness, alienation of women successfully in his poetry. He has a sympathetic heart which feels the predicament of women and tries to speak on behalf of women through his poems. In his poetry Mahapatra tries to give voice to voiceless women. He portrays how poverty forces a woman to become a prostitute, how a housewife is exploited physically and mentally, how girls are raped brutally by beasts shaped as men. Let's explore further through the deep readings of his poems.

According to Syamla Kallury and Anjana– **“It is the women and children who receive the lion' share of Mahapatra's sympathy and concern and the poems proliferate with images of abused, oppressed and battered victims at the hands of poverty and patriarchy.”**(P.49, **“The Indian Imagination of Jayanta Mahapatra”**). In his poems he reveals how women are exploited physically and mentally. In his poem **“Village Mythology”** he says-

“Firewood on their heads, a file of women

stagger along the last rain-wet road.

Suna, the faithful village wife, crawls through the darkness

as she moves beyond birth and death

from one night of rape to another.”

(P.17, Land)

He shows violence against women and girls in present society. How they rape brutally every day. For example in **“The Lost Children of America”** Mahapatra portrays-

**“In the Hanuman Temple last night
the priest’s pomaded jean-clad son
raped the squint-eyed fourteen year fisher girl
on the cracked stone platform behind the shrine
and this morning
her father found her at the police station
assaulted over and over again by four policemen
dripping of darkness and of scarlet death.”**
(P.33, The Lie of Dawns)

In this poem he shows how a fourteen years old girl becomes the sexual victim of a priest’s son. Even the policemen also assaulted her instead of taking action against priest’s son. We find the another example of a raped girl in his poem **“Her Hand”** –

**“The little girl's hand is made of darkness
How will I hold it?
This little girl has just her raped body
for me to reach her
The weight of my guilt is unable
to overcome my resistance to hug her.”**

<http://www.littlemag.com/body politic/jayantaMahapatra.html>).

Even in present time, the shadow of dowry darkens the lives of women. In his poem **“The Uncertainty of Color”** Mahapatra portrays-

**“The silent sob from the dying girl
set on fire simply for the color television
she did not bring as part of her dowry”.**

(P.23,Random Descent)

He also depicted the antinational activities in Punjab of 1980s in his poem named **“Dispossessed Nests”**. Women had to suffer a lot in such chaotic circumstances. They became soft target of lusty and insane men. The senseless violence has robbed of man of his conscience and he degraded himself to the level of animals-

“Now a man knows only two ways

For dealing with a stray woman:

He rapes her

And he kills her”.

(“Dispossessed Nests”)

In Mahapatra’s Poems we not only find the glimpses of ostracized women but he also portrays the women who suffer and exiled in their own homes. In **“These Women”** he says-

**“Where are things called homes
sticky with toil; need after need
tempts the fates to touch them,
trap the homely, embarrassed hurt.**

**Year after year
like onions and herbs hung out to dry
their hearts heavy
the quiet too long.**

What do they live for(.....)

They seed, though.”

(P.6, A Rain of Rites)

He also focused on patriarchal system of our society. This system is mainly responsible for the depravity of rights and freedom of women. Our society is male dominated society. After marriage women are twice removed from freedom. Most of the women have to lead a life which is full of loneliness and alienation. They try to search their identity but they cannot find their reflection even in the mirrors. Mahapatra portrays such woman in his poem **“A Missing Person”**-

“In the darkened room

a woman

cannot find her reflection in the mirror(...)

In her hands she holds

the oil lamp

whose drunken yellow flames

know where her lonely body hides.”

(P.89, The Lie of Dawns)

In “Indian Imagination of Jayanta Mahapatra”, Himadri Roy says-It is seen that both the ways a woman suffers. If she is concerned only to the four walls of kitchen, the power of domesticity seems to be a mockery with her existence. In a patriarchal society, the women can never truly have the liberty and freedom, especially when she becomes a wife. Her movements are restricted, as if her existential space is being dictated by the patriarchal authority. Mahapatra portrays such loneliness of women as-

“And the woman of sleepless nights hears

the footsteps of her loneliness slip out of her back door

through the trees to a garden she has never been.”

(“On Most Nights”, Rain of Rites)

The word woman is considered as a metaphor of sacrifice and sufferings. Their desire and fate is destined by men. They have several don'ts and dos in their lives. In the poem “The Woman Who Wanted to be Loved” Mahapatra portrays-

“Her dark days cannot be braided into a poem.

But her body wants to escape from greater things.(...)

Seasons pass, and she becomes stone.”

(P.11, The Lie of Dawns)

Women are sufferers of gender biasness. Most of the men consider women are born only to bear children and to quench the carnal thirst of men. They are neglected and marginalized at both cultural and biological levels. In contemporary society they are helpless or speechless. In his poem “Dawn” poet says-

“An Indian woman, piled up to her silence

Waiting for what the world will only let her do.”

(<http://www.poetryfoundation.org>)

The Indian culture and tradition is based on the supremacy of men over women. In “Deaths in Orissa” poet portrays the sorrows of women in such words –

**“In the corners of women's eyes
the rainbow breaks against the sunrise(....)
nothing but the cries of shriveled women
cracking against the bloodied altar of Man,
nothing but the moment of fear
when they need a god who can do them some good.”**

(P.138, The Lie of Dawns)

Mahapatra also depicts the pathetic conditions of widow in his poems, how a widow is treated in our society. Such type of life she leads which is hundred times worse than hell. It is injustice against women that a widower can remarry but a widow can't. He can wear all kinds of clothes but a widow can dressed in white only. In short a widower can fulfill his all desires but a widow can't. Mahapatra's sympathy for a widow can be seen in a poem **“Widow”**-

**“Her skin breaks into fickle shadows
That trial her to the corner of little room
Where a stone icon stands, weary with vermilion
In an exotic drapery of hopes.” (“Widow”)**

The poet further portrays-

**“ Like jackals, malicious women around her
Sniffing the smell of the left over death,
Feed on her scandalous intestines**

Through rain and summer, the spectacle or order” (“widow”)

Even the lusty men of our society add a woe to the worries of a widow. Even in our patriarchal society widow are considered as ill omen.

One of the major factors of women's sufferings is poverty. It is like a leprosy and twice dangerous for women rather than men. Mahapatra depicts in his poetry how this poverty increases the sufferings of women in contemporary society. In **“Village Evening”** Mahapatra portrays the picture of poverty of a widow named Ahalya with her seven years old son.

**“In the dark air of her hut,
Ahalya, the widow, caresses the rupee
her seven years old son
has brought home from his day long labors”.**

(P.22, The Lie of Dawns)

She is guilt ridden at the time of night because she has worries regarding to fulfill her promise to feed her son next day.

**“as Ahalya goes back to bed,
a guilty look on her face,
her promise to feed her son
morning milk-curds another faraway dream.”**

(P.22, The Lie of Dawns)

The poem **“Hunger”** is best example of poverty. In this poem poverty compels a father to sell the flesh of his fourteen years old daughter to a stranger. Even the stranger surprises so much and says-**“The sky fell on me, and a father’s exhausted wile”**.The poor penniless fisherman does not hesitate to bargain the flesh of his innocent daughter. He has to do such things only to keep his body and soul together. In such circumstances he makes his daughter the medium of his livelihood. He says-

“I heard him say; my daughter, she’s just turned fifteen....

Feel her.(.....)

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.”

(P.46, The Lie of Dawns)

This poem portrays the stark reality of our contemporary society where innocent and adolescent girls are dumped into this trade. Poverty compels the women to adopt the profession of prostitution. In his poem **“Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street”** Mahapatra portrays the condition of prostitutes. They have to sell their bodies to make their livelihood. They have no familial ties. They are socially outcast creatures and hanging in identity less alienation.

“Dream children, dark, superfluous;

you miss them in the house's dark spaces, how can't you?

Even the women didn't wear them-
 like jewels or precious stones at the throat;
 the faint feeling deep at a woman's centre
 that brings back the discarded things:
 the little turnings of blood

sat the far edge of rainbow.”(<http://www.poetryfoundation.org>.)

To conclude, I want to say that Mahapatra is a voice for voice less people. He portrays the dark reality of lives of women thoroughly and realistically, whether they are domestic wives, working women, widow, and prostitutes. **“The words are only metaphors of wound, as if they were knives, which, when removed from wounds, don't stop the flow of blood”.** (P.21, **“The Indian Imagination of Jayanta Mahapatra”**)

Mahapatra highly regards women as a mother of mankind and like goddess but he feels sorry for present degraded position of women in our patriarchal society.

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