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Exploring the Themes and Morality in Jayanta Mahapatra's Poetry

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Abstract

Jayant Mahapatra's poetry is deeply intertwined with the rich tapestry of Indian culture. Within his verses, one can discern a genuine portrayal of the essence of Indian heritage. The core themes of Indianness and nationalism resonate throughout Mahapatra's poetic works. His use of symbols and imagery is evocative and thought-provoking. Mahapatra's poetry is imbued with sensitivity and emotion, capturing a wide spectrum of feelings such as pain, love, sorrow, death, and faith. Personal elements in his poems often reflect the profound sense of loss and detachment from his mother during his formative years. Mahapatra's poetry delves into a myriad of subjects including human relationships, social issues in India, love, sexuality, marriage, ethics, human behaviour, and patriotism. His verses serve as a satirical commentary on religion, culture, and societal norms in Odisha. At the heart of his poetry lies the essence of Oriya culture, as he seeks to unravel the intellectual and emotional depths of his cultural roots.

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Introduction

Themes based on Sex, Sexuality and Social Concern

In the earlier phase of his poetic career, Jayant Mahapatra explores the themes of Sex, Sexuality, and later on, he shifts his focus towards social concerns. M.K. Naik highlights this transition, stating that Mahapatra's earlier poetry reflects a quiet yet often ironic contemplation on love, sex, and sensuality, while his later poems delve into the social and political landscape. Naik praises Mahapatra's style for its colloquial ease, punctuated by impactful imagery such as "his lean-to opened like a wound" and "the one wide street lolls out like a giant tongue." However, Naik also acknowledges that Mahapatra's introspection occasionally leads to excessively cryptic statements or verbal redundancy, and in weaker moments, echoes of other poets, like the Eliotesque reference to "mornings like pale yellow hospital linen." Nevertheless, Naik believes that Mahapatra's better work showcases a poetic voice that promises to grow stronger in the future.

One of Mahapatra's most significant poems in this regard is "Hunger," which explores the themes of sexuality and poverty. In this poem, sexuality and poverty are intertwined. It tells the story of a hungry fisherman and his hungry daughter, who is forced into prostitution due to their poverty

and the need for money. A customer visits her, driven by his hunger for sexual gratification. The fisherman even lies, claiming that his daughter has just turned fifteen. The poem vividly describes the desperation and degradation, with lines like "The sky fell on me, and a father's exhausted wile" and "She opened her wormy legs wide. I felt the hunger there, the other one, the fish slithering, turning inside." The fisherman urges the customer to quickly engage in the act, as the bus will be leaving at nine. Once the fisherman departs, the girl opens her legs, and the customer experiences his own hunger.

Themes of Sexuality and Prostitution in the Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street

The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street intricately explores the themes of sexuality and prostitution. The customer is drawn to fulfil his desires after being enticed by the alluring images of beautiful girls on billboards and posters in public spaces. Seeking to satisfy his urges, he ventures into a Calcutta street whorehouse in hopes of encountering a bevy of stunning prostitutes resembling those he has seen in advertisements. Despite feeling a sense of guilt for visiting such a notorious establishment, he proceeds to indulge his sexual cravings and gain insights into women. The professional prostitute, in turn, strives to please her customer, even as she subtly reveals her

vulnerability by urging him to hurry. Through this poignant interaction, the poem realistically portrays the complex relationship between a customer and a prostitute, while also delving into psychological nuances. The familiar setting and environment serve as a backdrop for a captivating exploration of the theme, with social implications regarding the persistence of prostitution irrespective of economic conditions. Nonetheless, the poem hints at the possibility of a more hygienic and safer environment for such transactions, shedding light on health concerns associated with the profession.

Themes on Psychology and Philosophy

Jayant Mahapatra's mental capacity and poetic calibre are evident in his creation of numerous poems encompassing a variety of themes. Among his works are psychological, reflective, and philosophical poems such as *The Logic*, *Grass*, *The Exile*, and *The Abandoned British Cemetery at Balasore*, *Total Solar Eclipse*, and *The Moon Moments*. These poems stand out as some of his most impressive psychological pieces. In particular, *Total Solar Eclipse* skilfully portrays both scientific and superstitious perspectives. The scientific approach is illustrated through the moon's movement between the earth and sun, while the superstitious approach is subtly referenced through the fearsome Brahmin priest.

like the fearsome Brahmin priest in the temple....
using darkness to be a portent of the gods
who had just revealed a last occasion
to hide the disrobing of human values
by a rabid civilization. (*Total Solar Eclipse*, *Life Signs* 22).

The Brahmin priest, steeped in superstition, interprets the dark sun as a sign from the gods. He seeks to appease the deities who may be planning to unleash a calamity upon humanity as punishment for their transgressions. The poet also suggests that the solar eclipse symbolizes the stripping away of human values by an aggressive civilization. This poem delves into a range of psychological and philosophical themes. In addition to these profound concepts, the poem is rich in animal imagery, with the cobra, hyena, vultures, sparrows, and crocodile serving as symbols of the cycle of life and death.

Conclusion

His poetry embodies the humanistic, liberal, secular, social, cultural, historical, geographical, and spiritual concerns of Orissa. As a native of Orissa, his deep love for his homeland is evident in his early poems. These poems, initially perceived as love poems, garnered mixed opinions upon the publication of his first volume. His distinctive style is characterized by abundant imagery and the skillful use of vocabulary to explore humane themes. Additionally, he is a poet who writes in a language that has been marginalized in the contemporary literary scene. In his poems, Mahapatra mourns the plight of women in a patriarchal society, where even their deaths are controlled by male dominance. The poem "Dawn at Puri" serves as a poignant example of the forced suppression of female emotions and desires. It portrays women as widows whose lives are merely a means to fulfill the wishes of others. This satirical portrayal exposes the harsh reality of women's lives in the so-called "holy" land. Mahapatra criticizes the hypocritical practices of society and advocates for greater freedom and equality. He mocks those who claim to be torchbearers of holiness, shedding light on the plight of widowed women who have nothing to look forward to but the

inevitability of death. Mahapatra enables readers to ignite their thoughts even in the aftermath of the abolishment of the age-old tradition of Sati in India. The people of Orissa are still haunted by the atrocities of the past. Despite the lingering charm of youthful aspirations in their eyes, women are deprived of the opportunity to dream. The poet's voice resonates strongly through his poems, addressing various themes of social significance and leaving a legacy for future generations. His visions and ideas carry a distinct native flavor, shaped by his life experiences. He holds a hopeful outlook towards eradicating the insignificance of so-called pseudo morality, which persists even in the most fertile environments.

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