

# The Interplay Of Imagery And Symbolism In The Select Poems Of Jayanta Mahapatra

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## Abstract

Jayanta Mahapatra is the most significant representative of Indian English poetry and his work is very profound and philosophical, revealing the aspects of life, culture and spirituality. In this paper, the author learns about the collaboration of imagery and symbolism in his few poems such as “Hunger” “Whorehouse in Calcutta Street” “Dawn at Puri”, “A Rain of Rites”, “Grandfather” and other poems to share his thoughts and feelings. Images that Mahapatra employs in his poetry to depict the underlying meaning of love, faith, suffering, and identity include the images of everyday life in Odisha: its rivers, temples, rituals, and nature. His symbols, e.g. light and darkness, rain and river, tend to relate the personal world of the poet with the rest of humanity in general. He transforms the mundane into a glimpse on life and faith with the help of simple but impressive images. The paper will seek to demonstrate why the imagery and symbolism employed by Mahapatra to provide meaning in her work bring about a sense of beauty and pain of human existence to the readers. Through this interaction, the paper reveals how his poems merge the local experience with the universal truth and why he is an amazing and an unforgettable poet in the Indian English literature.

**Keywords:** Jayanta Mahapatra, Imagery, Symbolism, Odisha, Universal Truth

Jayanta Mahapatra is a distinguished and special among the English-speaking poets of the present Indian generation. His later literary career started relatively late in his life, he made his first serious attempts as a writer at the age of about forty after teaching Physics, and the path of his work is distinctly characterized by enormous productivity, to which was added the accolade of being made the first Indian poet to be awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award on English poetry. This was done to his collection Relationship (1980). Others that became seminal collections are A Rain of Rites (1976) and Life Signs (1983).

His work is deeply affected by geography of Orissa (today Odisha). His themes are well involved in the local content and the place Cuttack and the holy city of Puri which gives his poems a very Indian sensibility which responds to the modern social realities. The individual identity of the poet is also developed in a complicated socio-cultural crucible because she was born in the high-profile Odia Christian family under the governance of the British colonial regime. This history created an identity and alienation, as he viewed his world through the prism of two cultures, native cultural heritage and western-informed English education. His work, therefore, is a strong epitome of the cultural, social, and political landscape of the contemporary India.

He has used a unique combination of poetic devices to explore such intricate human nature as love, death, and social injustices against women. His poem tends to be in soothing, contemplative rhythms, in which quietness itself is language. In the same way that T. S. Eliot measured life by ‘coffee spoons’, Mahapatra measures human emotion by using repetitive symbols, such as rain, sleep and stone, which symbolize an aspect of stasis, decay or persistence. These symbols give his poems a very reflective nature and assist him to study the nuances of the human relations and in particular human relations between men and women.

He creates remarkably abstract and cold images of women in his representation of them. The women of his poetic universe tend to be voiceless, nameless, and soulless; they become depicted as inert presence fashioned by the situation and not individualized. Such conscious lack of the personal identity shows the commentary of the poet on the state of women in the patriarchal society when their silence turns into the symbol of oppression and a symbol of survival.

Mahapatra often employs the narrative style to narrate events, memories, or meditations using the first-person point of view. The narrator is a kind of a silent observer that documents the quiet agony and despair of women, but the women themselves are left without words. Silence, one of the most important signs that Mahapatra uses, means both repression and the unspoken depth of emotional pain. On the same note, the stone is also symbolic and serves to represent the concept of passivity and immobility by giving special attention to the emotional numbness that women have been forced to experience.

'I' is a central element in the poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra that is complex in nature. It is not just a grammatical suggestion but the embodiment of a male consciousness in which experience is filtered and interpreted. The 'I' is a narrator and a spectator at the same time, which is also a struggle on the part of the poet to understand human relations, especially the problematic relations between man and woman. In the majority of his poems, the male is the one who defines the world and knows it, whereas the woman is a silent character who is observed but not heard. By leaving the first-person narrative, Mahapatra takes the role of an external observer, who has been patiently documenting human ills, lust and corruption without speaking, on the sidelines.

The conflict of speech and silence is dramatized very forcefully in the poem "Hunger" by Mahapatra. In this case, the poet-protagonist uses first person narration as he is torn between the desire and guilt that comes with it. The fisherman-father spews out some words in transactional despair, but the daughter, whose body is the object of his negotiation, does not voice her opinion. She is portrayed as a passive helpless character a victim of economic poverty and male lust. Her silence also becomes symbolic of thousands of women turned into survival tools in a patriarchal and stratification society. Mahapatra brings about haunting eloquence by this very silence; by refusing women to talk, he renders the extent of their invisibility.

I heard him say: My daughter, she's just turned fifteen...  
 Feel her. I'll be back soon, your bus leaves at nine.  
 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. (Mahapatra 15-20)

The same description is made in the "Whorehouse in Calcutta Street". The woman in this poem is also deprived of individuality and she becomes a machine of the means of sustenance. She is not engaged in passion, she is an uninvolved witness to her own debasement. She is described by the male speaker (or in some cases, by the poet-narrator) with a tone of pity and even self-consciousness. She is not a sinner on the contrary, she has been reduced to prostitution by poverty and exploitation. Her stoic attitude towards her condition presents the moral and economic tragedy of women who have to take the impact of a man-made moral and economic system. The repetition of such images by Mahapatra helps to emphasize the fact that female silence is the place where pain, oppression, and resignation are united.

Walk right in. It is yours.  
 Where the house smiles wryly into the lighted street.  
 Think of the women  
 you wished to know and haven't. (Mahapatra 1-4)

The speaker however indicates the secret moonlight of the women and how they are actually discussing false chatter with their clients that they are actually thinking of their children, their homes and their own lives instead of the sexual pleasure they will bring to the men who make their payments. The ladies are pretending to be enjoying the show, yet there are other more prosaic matters they are concerned with. These men are missing them in the dark corners of the house and cannot perceive these women as people, as dignified and hopeful. This is possibly represented with the far end of the rainbow that they experience in the core of their beings faintly.

Mahapatra has defied this mainstream thought in society of looking at prostitutes as lesser human beings in *The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street*. Mahapatra makes us understand that the women depicted in the poem can be the outcasts of the society, but they are also human beings, and just like any other person, they have their hopes, dreams, fears, and emotions.

The existing dualistic system allows males to pay money to prostitutes to have sexual gratification but curses prostitutes who offer them the gratification. These men who enter the bordello are merely thinking of themselves and their desires; they do not even pause to realize that most of the prostitutes they see are mothers, who would rather get home and be with their kids. In fact, the women at the brothel can only offer pleasure to the men simply because they have left their families at home to go to work.

The emotional realism in the themes of Mahapatra is only enhanced by his stylistic approach. Similar to several other contemporary Indian poets who write in English, he favors free verse, discarding traditional rhyme and meter in order to collect the spontaneous rhythmic and mental speech. His patterns of stanzas are irregular and his tone is usually conversational or meditative contributing immediacy to his images. The poet is quite direct, colloquial in the “*Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street*”, and he asks a man to enter the realm of fantasy and desire, only to show that it is morally empty. The ordinary colloquialism is in stark contrast to the gravitas of existential despair that fills the poem.

Finally, the ‘I’ in “*Girl Child*” verse of Mahapatra also acts as a witness and conscience. It is an internal look of the poet, who is tormented by the feeling of guilt, compassion, and powerlessness in the face of human suffering. By using this male lens Mahapatra does not only challenge the power and desire structures which affirm the silence of women but also offers his moral panic akin to the place he occupies in the silence. In this way, his poetry turns into the realm where the personal and social commentary can be combined with each other and the individual I will become a group voice of consciousness and moral consideration.

The poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra has a strong connection with the physical and cultural scenery of Orissa which is the setting and the emotional heart of most of his poems. Some of his work like “*Dawn at Puri*”, “*Taste for Tomorrow*”, “*Slum, Evening Landscape by the River*”, and *Events* portray the beauty of Orissa and its holy places, poverty, rituals, and people vividly. One of the most vivid and realistic descriptions of the area is represented by the work of “*Dawn at Puri*”. The poem is presented as a sequence of bleak haunting images: the skin-scraping cry of crows, a skull upon the sacred sand of the sea-beach, groups of white-clad widows waiting without any murmur outside of the temple. Both sacred and morbid, these pictures are an expression of co-existence of the life and death, faith and decay, which is the spiritual air of Puri.

Endless crow noises

A skull in the holy sands

tilts its empty country towards hunger.

White-clad widowed Women

past the centers of their lives

are waiting to enter the Great Temple. (Mahapatra 95)

Likewise, in "Taste for Tomorrow" we get one more visit to Puri city with its representatives of the crows, broad temple street, and lepers in the crowd of pilgrims. Mahapatra describes the awkward blend of both piety and destitution through these kinds of details. The poem is not a praise of religion but it reveals the contradiction of holiness and human sufferings that define the Indian holy towns. The imagery of crows is also repetitive in both poems as the crow is a symbol of continuity and decay, which interrelates the two poems, as all life is perpetuated even in the event of ruin and desolation.

In the case of Mahapatra, Puri is not merely a geographical place, but it is also a metaphor of spiritual depletion and moral disillusionment of India. Some of the ancient temples at Puri and Konarak, populations soaring high and others in rubble, create a sense of historical grandeur and the imminent passing of time. The poet is able to reflect on culture and its persistence and the frailty of human beings through them. His descriptions are not topographical in a narrow sense, but psychological and philosophical, and turn the landscape of the Orissan into a contemplation on life, religion, and death.

The poem of the Orissa of Mahapatra is not a nostalgic utopia of the nature before being but a breathing reality of the present full of contradictions- holiness and degradation, sanctity and corruption. His phrasing is minimalistic, his descriptions are tangible, and every picture has spiritual connotations. The repetition of the image of sea, temple, and the crowd brings the idea of continuity and endlessness but at the same time alludes to meaninglessness of human endeavor. The depiction is such that the reader is affected to feel deeply attached to the location; one who has never been to Orissa may experience the verbal, sound, and religious atmosphere through the lines of his poetry in respect to walking in its temple streets and seashores.

Essentially, Jayanta Mahapatra turns the Orissan landscape into a poetic place where the geography and the emotion become one. His Puri and Konarak are not confined to any particular region, but it is the conflict of faith and despair, life and death that is universal. His well-developed images and meditative tone make the common landscape of his motherland mean something that cannot be easily transformed into the symbol of the eternal conflict between the sacred and the profane which characterizes the human condition.

Besides Orissan landscape, Mahapatra keeps on examining existential and psychological dualities, which are revealed in the form of dilemma between hope and despair, knowledge and ignorance, and the tension between the traditional Indian life and the here and now, the urban contemporary experience.

Light and Darkness is a common symbolism that is often incumbent to investigate the issues of knowledge and ignorance, malice, helplessness, and dual nature of human existence. Flashes of light or beauty tend to be portrayed as brief, with a contrast of overall darkness of memory or affliction. As an example, in A Rain of Rites, the light and darkness create the juxtaposition of the moments of innocence or knowledge amid the daunting darkness.

Moreover, the Human Body in the work of Mahapatra is more a biological matter, which becomes an extensive cultural icon. It represents the social conventions, customs and struggles in expressing heartrending accounts of destitution, devotion and marginalization. It is an important practice that establishes abstract social critique on a foundation of corporeal, material suffering.

The rain which does not achieve its goal, is a representation of unfulfilled potential, moments of intellectual or spiritual fulfillment which are not lasting, and wasted time. This image plays an important

part in the poet discussing inner pain and passing of time. The rain in the work of Mahapatra serves only as a medium to memory and reminds the poet of his past and all the misery he has experienced. It ties man to the universe and at the same time envelops both the past and present forming an effect of paradoxical exposition.

The word 'Rites' in the poem "A Rain of Rites" suggests some kind of cleansing, systematic, and regular ceremony, a ritual that was used to make someone feel spiritual renewal. However, the imagery that goes along with it is of chaotic, wasted, or destructive nature (rain that fails to fall, rain thrown like kelp). Such juxtaposition denotes that the poet sees traditional structures (rites) as not always effective, they cannot lead to the desired psychological or spiritual renewal. Compassing the idea of old social order with the chaos of the nature, Mahapatra forms the symbolic criticism of the desolated tradition and he finds the solution of his difficulty not ritual but existential one.

In conclusion, the poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra can be considered a great testimony to the imagery and symbolism combination that expresses the ambiguities of Indian life, in this case, basing on Odishi spiritual and cultural environment. By his suggestive visual and sensory imagery, Mahapatra turns even simple things like hunger or faith and desire and death into the symbolic representation of more profound psychological and existential realities. His repetitions of light, darkness, sea, and temple, body, and soil, show a constant conflict between the sacred and the profane, the personal and the collective. Interwoven with all these things, Mahapatra does not only describe the physical reality of his environment; he also reveals the emotional and moral realities behind human-to-human reality. His vision of poetry, then, has no regard to local boundaries, and the local becomes the universal. The play of imagery and symbolism in his poetry is not only the art, but the method of philosophy- the method that will challenge the reader to face the multifaceted significance of faith, identity and human sufferings within the Indian context.

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