

Woman: Quest For Identity in Jayanta Mahapatra's Poetry

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Abstract

Poetry is a craft that needs to be chiseled both in theme and technique. Jayanta Mahapatra as a post- colonial poet writes to establish a native tradition by resisting the former colonizer and asserting national identity and nationhood. Poet covers multiple levels of personal and social experiences and also mirrors forth the dilapidated picture of woman's excruciatingly painful life through his poems. My paper is an attempt to explore the vision and voice of Mahapatra's discriminated woman and to transform an experience of woman's pain into a narrative of resistance. As a subject of the long silenced and long denied sufferings, Mahapatra writes that the similes, metaphors are not the only things important for the woman, she also has a Yeatsian zest for life and longing for love by her husband/consort.

Keywords:

Woman, Dilapidated, Discriminated, Victim hood.

In the Indian context woman's identity is defined in terms of her relationship with men at various roles of daughter, wife, fiancée, aunt, and so on for she does not have an identity of her own. She is like a *Barbie Doll*, played with at will, and placed again in a glass box. The low status of woman in India dates back to the days of Manu, the ancient lawgiver, who placed woman at the lower stratum than man.

“Pīta Rākṣatī śaiṣavē, Bhārtā Rākṣatī Yæuvanē,

Shthavirē Rākshantī pūtrā, shtriyā swātantra na marhatī”

(Father protects at childhood, husband protects at youth,

Protected by sons at old age, women are never independent)

Jayanta Mahapatra(1928-) offers a structure as well as a texture that integrate both persuasive and expressive modes of poetry. Having hinted at socio-cultural conflicts he decks his poems with transparent words by structural association. Mahapatra has depicted women in the very first collection of his poems:

Even

When she is

Even

When she is not

(Close the Sky: Ten by Ten)

In her presence and absence woman is pervading the consciousness of man. She is mythically an abstraction. She is more spoken to and about

than she speaks. She is silent, distant, oppressed, tortured physically-mentally and emotionally, enigmatic and deceptive. Some of Mahapatra's important poems based on female are *Another Evening*, *Women in Love*, *The Whore House in Calcutta Street*, *Hunger*, *Of Armour*, *Love Fragment*, *Of that Love*, *Woman*, *Lost inter alia*.

Mahapatra's poem *Woman (Close the Sky: Ten by Ten)* reveals two worlds embedded in herself. These two worlds show -- the body and the mind. These two worlds in a woman become an inner mystery ever struggling to settle their apartness by a different way. Men's cruelty to women has, over years, become the order of the day. This has been lively drawn in the poem *Dawn*:

Things are only going their way
The dawn appears headless again
The child has already come to know
That peace has gone never to return.

(A Rain of Rites)

Mahapatra's *Women in Love* expresses the poet's passion for woman. Even after the physical consummation of love, the poet demands a lasting union with her. He remarks:

Women, what things
You would make me remember,
What would you make me do?

And the poet declares conclusively in the same poem:

And if on the endless blue waves of your body
Someone leaves a boat, a touch
It would only drift about, like a child asleep.

(The False Start:24)

In this poem woman's body has been symbolized as sea-blue waves -- constant, undulating, somewhat wild, deep but innocuous and also the means to reach the goal. The lover is symbolized as a boat that drifts apart on azure waves. The woman's soul is too innocent to get at the boat, which is continuously getting on with the waves. This imagery of waves and boats suggests that woman is vastly expansive like the blue waves. The lover (a boat is a symbol of winning) is unable to gauge her depth. In fact, a woman has so many submerged qualities in her, which she herself knows not, but man gets a so-called victory over her even by a slap or a shove, let alone, other cruel physical means.

Mahapatra's surrealistic backdrop often trailing a woman makes one aware about the condition of woman. The pathetic condition of a woman is portrayed in his poem *A Missing Person* where he has depicted such woman protagonist who has really lost her own identity as a woman. She emerges in the darkened room as a ghostly figure, a moving, living but insane heap of guilt. The woman of this poem is full of desires, burning in search for her identity, standing in front the mirror with an oil lamp in

hand but her inner passion consumes her in the absence of any outlet or sharing. Mahapatra writes:

In the darkened room
A woman
Cannot find her reflection in the mirror
Waiting as usual
At the edge of sleep
In her hands she holds
The oil lamp
Whose drunken yellow flames
Know where her lonely body hides.

The word '*darkened room*' is symbolic of a tragic gloom that envelops the Indian psyche as regards the women folk -- sans recognition, sans freedom from the shackles of socio-economic injustice and ignominy. The protagonist of the poem is one such helpless woman who is examining and analyzing her figure in the looking glass, the oil lamp in her hand shedding a dim yellow light which enables her to see the silhouette of her body. But no light illumines the inner "*she*" or her lonely invisible self and soul.

Mahapatra has written about those scapegrace women who suffer in the society. His works show his concern for the social and cultural construction of gender, raising his protest against marginalization and also the hydra-headed exploitation of women. Somewhere in the poems of Mahapatra it is impossible for a woman to rebel against the masculine yoke -- against a male's sense of smug superiority. Romance is soon replaced by the harsh reality; the woman no longer remains a '*fairy*' but becomes a creature only of flesh and blood, irrespective of her own whims, desires and aspirations. The lover's fall from the romantic Paradise may be likened to the original fall of the first man and woman and their consequent loss of Paradise.

Hunger (A Rain of Rites) shows how a poor father sells his daughter just for money. In this poem, we see a poor fisherman, who is a luckless father inviting a stranger to enjoy his fifteen year old daughter to satisfy his carnal hunger. The word '*hunger*' is both literal and symbolic. The stranger's lust for a woman's body -- even of a child for that matter -- is the "*hunger*" that degenerates his being civilized or sophisticated in the social services, and brings into the open the primitive beast in him. The poet says:

It was hard to believe the flesh was heavy on my back.
The fisherman said: Will you have her, carelessly...
I heard him say: my daughter, she just turned fifteen...
Feel her. I will be back soon; your bus leaves at nine
The sky fell on me, and a father's exhausted wile.
Long and lean, her year were cold as rubber,
She opened her wormy legs wide. I felt the hunger there,

the other one, the fish slithering, turning inside. (P 19)

Mahapatra's girl here reveals more of her poverty under the force of circumstances, but the question remains: can the flame of desire for physical love in a woman keeps still burning even when the body emaciates and decays? The poem has an autobiographical touch. The poet's imagery hints at some dichotomy in lover's psyche. The expression: "*the fish slithering, turning inside*" - may as well allude to a strange blending of two images that slowly dissipates one overruling the other. The main point to be noted is that the stranger in the poem is a failure, and even the dear fishermen father too is a failure to understand or feel the emotions of the wretched girl. The father's and the customer's sense of guilt is associated with the poverty as well as with the helplessness of a young girl. Women's self esteem is eroded. Since women are forced to live a life -- cabined, cribbed and confined in too saucy doubts, fears -- not to speak of ignominy- what happens is that often women lose an ardent zest for life getting aloof from living a full and meaningful existence.

In the poem *The Indian Way* the woman has been idealized in a very typical context. Here we find Indian male mentality responsible for taking his wife under his absolute authority. He lauds her value and pretends to attach importance to marriage. The lover, in this very poem, buys a lotus, symbol of purity, for his beloved and says that he would never touch her before their marriage is solemnized, yet it doesn't deter him either to mind or bother ploughing a whore every night. This man is deceitfully showing his honesty and regards to his beloved to whom he is not yet married, but his true character is identified when we find him frequently visiting the whore house. Offering of the lotus to hoodwink the beloved and maintaining the double standard by the Indian male are revealed by the fact that the lover would not otherwise hesitate to "*touch*" the other woman, but he would never touch his "*lotus*" woman before the wedding night. The lover in this poem counsels prudence over physical union to have her very close to him when the marriage is awaited. Thus the poet describes:

We would return again and again
To the movement
That is neither forward nor backward,
Making us
Stop moving, without regret

You know
I will not touch you,
Like that,
Until our wedding night.

The picture of an ideal wife has been portrayed by Mahapatra's poem

Indian Summer Poem:

The good wife
 lies in my bed
 through the long afternoon
 dreaming still, unexhausted
 by the deep roar of funeral pyres.

(A Rain of Rites. P. 8):

Women as a separate class are subjected to greater criminal victimization both inside and outside their homes. It has been aptly observed about the women folk: *"She tries to return to her culturally defined self and discards realizing that it is not meant for her, that she cannot live her life in accordance with the cultural prescription"*

Mahapatra talks about a male dominated society in some of his poems where we see women dwarfed. The most significant aspect about Jayanta Mahapatra's poem *Lost* is the peculiar way in which he deals with sexual love. The poem seems to explore the positive results of the physical union of the lovers. Yet the interpretation of the lyric as glorification of sensual love amounts to a contradiction of the implication of the title. The woman is described as doing two things simultaneously; she is spread eagled under the hot breath of her lascivious lover. At the same time she is also in motion. The poet says:

And outside my hands, where
 your body keeps shrinking in space,
 the first faith of some child goes wrong
 like some defect in a mechanical toy;
 yet what does it lead to?
 to what fateful encounter?
 Like a misplaced watch, this half-light.
 Where was I when I lost?

Once again these lines quite significantly mirror forth the essential pull of the paradoxical under-current in Mahapatra's poetic treatment. What happens here is that the girl is forced to be in motion only as a passive woman devoid of any willingness or direction. The lover crosses the border of the mundane and the ephemeral to enter the realm of the infinite and the eternal. The poem reads like an elegy bewailing the protagonist's physical inadequacy, his introversion and his failure to reach towards the other. The image, then, justifies our reading of the poem as a lament over the loss of sexual desire. Woman desires a companion in the true sense. Survival for her in a male-dominated world is difficult and a woman has to struggle against heavy odds and only then can she have a room for her own.

In another long poem *Bewildered Wheat Fields* the poet talks about the killing spree in Punjab where, as we find in the poem, anarchy pervades the entire cross-section of the state. Even helpless women were not spared. The poet writes:

Now a man
 knows only two ways
 for dealing with a stray woman
 he rapes her
 and he kills her.

Humanity has lost its way into oblivion for hate to reign supreme. Man has degraded himself to the level of brutes and the jungle law prevails. In these circumstances it is difficult to find a way out as things drift apart with the passing of each day. In another poem *Events Burden & Waves and Fruit*, Poet writes:

A rape penetrates the
 Periphery of the jungle
 And thought looks up
 Dumbly at the toes of words.

K.Ayyappa Panikar strongly corroborates and comments that “Mahapatra explores *the range of male sensuality*”.

Mahapatra's presentation of love without a moral presence in a sex-haunted world avoids the usual sentimental blabber to give his poetry a unique touch. This vacuum within her takes a woman to loneliness, disillusionment and a sense of frustration. Images drawn from human body are corrupt agents as well as destroyers of female chastity and individuality. In other words, it may be said that this is one and only aim of her life, but when this emotional involvement is denied to her, then her body which once gleamed like burnished brass, starts growing old, ugly and decrepit.

In the other poem *The Whore House in a Calcutta Street* the experience of the protagonist has been narrated in the first person by the poet himself. The protagonist is invited to enter the brothel and is tempted that there he could run into all the women he always wished to meet. Therefore, he is told not to feel ashamed or guilty of his being present there. Here the woman has been depicted the other way, meaning that she is a victim, a mere tool and a mere money-earning machine. In fact hunger, poverty, social insecurity and male exploitation have driven her into the flesh trade which she is forced to accept with stoic resignation. Here we find that the protagonist wanted to know more about the coquettish woman. But his inner vision of himself cherished so long within him appears as a “statue”, acting as a poetic symbol virtue to restrain his fall into the abyss of carnal vice and the body of the protagonist disobeyed him. His desire is:

You fall back against her in the dumb light,
 Trying to learn something more about women-
 While she does what she thinks proper to please you.

The sweet, the little things, the imagined;
 Until the statue of the man within

You've believed in throughout the years
 And the walls you wanted to pull down
 Mirror only of things mortal, and passing by;
 Like a girl holding on to your wide wilderness
 As though it was real, as though the renewing voice
 Tore the membrane of your half-woken mind

When, like a door, her words close behind;

'Hurry, will you?
 let me go,'
 and her lonely breath thrashed against your kind.

Thus this poem begins with instruction to the protagonist and ends with the woman asking him to leave when she is in a hurry to receive new customers. The expression like- "*tore the membrane of your half-woken mind*" and also "*and her lonely breath thrashed against your kind*" are highly suggestive and evocative of the sexual act one is supposed to perform in a whore house.

Love as a theme dwindles at the hands of Mahapatra. He examines it from various angles yet it remains largely unfulfilled, unrequited and therefore he suggests the need for consummation of love. In the poem *Of Armour*, the secret physical union is shown in a more controlled way without stating things in an overt manner. As the poet puts it:

She is where you have followed her
 And where her fleeting panting space
 Covers up your declivitous time

You could if you would not
 Press your own skilled ghost
 Against her tumbled heart

If she only let you be
 Yourself naked and gaping
 Hanging on the doorstep without a name.

These three short tersest show that the texture of the poem is woven by straight as well as cross stitches of powerful poetic images -- contained in such expression like "*declivitous time*", "*skilled ghost*", "*tumbled heart*" -- incorporating the dichotomized self -- at the same time Mahapatra's poetry here records richness and sophistication of language and the delicacy of words chosen. The poet describes fornication between two physical entities. But again the protagonist fails to have his mental thirst fully quenched. The poetic expression like "*skilled ghost*" and "*without a name*" mirrors that the female is half satisfied and wants her consort to be natural and humble to her. She would expect her man "*Hanging on the doorstep without a name*"- thus brining in an element of subtle dithering as an Everyman, sans any clear identification.

The word “*naked*” signifies that the lady wants the male to be truly natural and in his “own” when he comes close to her. Symbols of poetic images such as “*fleeting panting space*”, “*declivitous time*” or “*skilled ghost*” as used by the poet are sudden and stunning in their telling impact. The woman is being “followed” by the lusty desire of man who ‘takes’ the woman physically when time slips into a negation. The expression could have been otherwise if the “*skilled ghost*”, in other words, a *suppressed conscience* would not intervene in order to incapacitate the woman’s “*heart*”.

Mahapatra is known as a poet having tendencies of a Modernist, Post Modernist, Post Colonial and also an Expressionist writer. He comes close to Modernism in his adopting of complex images, and also in the poetic diction. Again, some elements of Post Modernism may as well be noticed in Mahapatra’s use of fragmentary sensation, disposable simulacra and in arresting of a mood by disorienting technique. Besides, Mahapatra’s poetic output often presents a world order which is distorted under the pressure of intense personal temperament, mood, emotions and ideas. It may be said that the lines we read in relation to their image and language, express feeling and imagination rather than photographic representation of the eternal reality. Expressionist attitude to a course is a revolt against a mechanized modern life.

Another poem based on the same idea is *Another evening* where the overwhelmed protagonist is longing for his beloved whom he has lost. He laments:

Your absence
is part of growing older,
and this October
a time for measuring
an indefatigable memory.

Many Indian writers now present a picture of woman, which is in sharp contrast with the images of the past given by the other earlier Indo-Anglian poets. Change in the economic conditions has brought a remarkable transformation in our attitude towards gender and consequently woman has substantially consolidated her position by shedding off her servile attitude to her husband/consort.

Mahapatra, on the other hand, explores the range of male sensuality in his poem *Man in his Nights*, which bears strong similarity to the themes, we have discussed here. The poet writes:

He rubs his eyes with a corner of his handkerchief
that is smeared with the dark of impossible nights,
hoping his sight would clear.
The wet road on his mind is blotched
with the blood of neon.
The plump whore he’s just left

has brazenly gone to work on a new customer.
 Brother,
 late at night, as you come home,
 there will be goats' heads staring at you glaucous eyes
 from the wooden blocks of butcher's shop,
 every woman's useful youth another smear,
 another tired bloody streak
 over the votive shrine of a body ancient as stone.

The woman, as seen, is not an active sharer in the “*guilt*” rather she plays a passive role here. She takes to it mechanically, tired and bored, without even professional grace. She is a marked insensitivity, as a passionless tool. The expression like “*goats' heads*” and “*votive shrine of a body*” are used as acute symbols brought into these paradoxical lines. A noticeable fact about the more recent poems of Mahapatra is that they seek to reveal an increasing concern on the part of the poet with contemporary realities.

To sum up this short article on Mahapatra we found that he can certainly be called a powerful representative of the second generation modern poets seated under the canopy of Indian Writing in English. He himself asserted that the land of his birth place is replete with rituals, rites, myths, religion, and history *inter alia* and that he can not escape from all these things, which, as he said forms the “*theme song of my life*”.

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