

# 06 Depiction of Poverty and the Plight of Women in Jayanta Mahapatra's Temple

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**Abstract:** It is a known fact that literature is the mirror to the society and the condition of women has been portrayed since ages. Literature of India as well as South Asia has witnessed the condition and plight of women. The sharing of common history and culture makes the literature of the region a distinct literature with some commonality. It presents a common basis for South Asians to understand their position in the contemporary world. Stories of injustice, discrimination, and gender biases have been regularly voiced by various South Asian writers.

Jayanta Mahapatra is a poet of such repute that many of his poems are regarded as Classics in modern or contemporary English literature. The poetry collection, *Temple*, penned down by Jayanta Mahapatra was published in the year 1989. It is a series of poems in four sections including a prologue followed by three poems. Framing the news reports from *The Times of India* (1980) of New Delhi and *The Telegraph* (1986) of Calcutta, the poet brings out the pain of loneliness, poverty, and death in the poems referring to the suicide of an octogenarian couple and also the suffering of a 12-year-old girl who was allegedly gang-raped and murdered. To all accounts, *Temple* represents a dream narrative; perhaps a character in someone else's dream – unaware of the 'self' that she is the main figure in this dream.

This paper will depict the destitution, enduring, and women's abuse or oppression with special reference to the verse collection *Temple*, composed by an eminent Indian English poet, Jayanta Mahapatra. It would attempt to link the Indian reality to the realities of South Asian societies through analyzing some South Asian poetry in general and the poems of *Temple* in particular.

**Keywords:** *South Asian literature, poverty, women-abuse, oppression, injustice, gender-bias*

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## Introduction:

Literature is the mirror to the society and the condition of women has been portrayed since ages. Indian as well as South Asian and world literature has witnessed the cruelty, injustice, discrimination, ill treatment, and plight of women. Various writers have presented the agony of women, compelling the readers to dwell on their sufferings. Although South Asia has made progress in human development in recent years, the region still faces poverty, gender disparity and women oppression. India, from a long period of time, has largely been a patriarchal society. On the one hand, a woman is epitomized as a goddess and on the other hand, she is considered weak, who is dependent upon man.

Jayanta Mahapatra, born in 1928 in Cuttack, India is one of the most revered Indian poets who has depicted both poverty and the plight of women in his poems. He has abiding belief in humanistic ideology. His poetry strolls round Odisha and social issues such as hunger, homelessness, prostitution and death linked to poverty in this world. In many of his autobiographical statements articulated in his short prose pieces and interviews, Mahapatra has repeatedly said that when he started writing poetry, his knowledge of poetry did not go beyond Wordsworth, Keats and Shelley prescribed in the school syllabus. In his poetry one can feel the presence of "the still, sad music of humanity" of Wordsworth, the sweeping lyrical grace of Shelley and the sensuousness of Keats. The element of subjectivity helped him to relate himself to his milieu and landscape in a delicate way never done before in Indian English poetry. The exploration of inner self is woven with his childhood experiences as much as with the Odiya fairy tales, myths and legends and the great Indian epics. He is a poet of such repute that many of his poems are regarded as classics in modern or contemporary English literature.

The poetry collection, *Temple*, penned down by Mahapatra was published in the year 1989. Like other poetry collections, this masterpiece collection by the poet also goes deep down into the mind of readers. It is a series of poems in four sections including a prologue followed by three poems. Framing the news reports from *The Times of India* (1980) of New Delhi and *The Telegraph* (1986) of Calcutta, the poet brings out the pain of loneliness, poverty, and death in the poems referring to the suicide of an octogenarian couple and also the suffering of a 12-year-old girl who was allegedly gang-raped and murdered. To all accounts, *Temple* represents a dream narrative; perhaps a character in someone else's dream—unaware of the 'self' that she is the main figure in this dream.

### **Temple: An Outline**

Jan Kemp in his review on the *Temple* in the journal *Kunapipi* writes that:

For me, *Temple* is a poem held together by an inconceivable silence. Perhaps one finally desires to return to an overwhelming silence. And the poem too, even if the poem is an invention... (58)

In this invention, Mahapatra moves the reader towards the harsh reality of life experienced by the central female voice Chelammal. The woman is presented as the oppressed and the oppressor, as the destroyer and creator, as the all-powerful and weak, as Sita and Putana. The poems portray the plight of the Indian woman, who cannot shut out "the bursts of pain that keep coming to sting her from the dust of lies and the scabs of myths".

As in *Relationship*, *Temple* also is a long poem of over nine hundred lines. It is a dream narrative with a prologue set in the set in the southern part of India. In spite of the strong mythical content, the poem has intense social context. The poems of Jayanta Mahapatra usually deal with poverty, hunger, loneliness, silence and death. The presence of these issues can be observed in *Temple* as well. It deals with both psychological and spiritual plight of Indian women caused by poverty and oppression.

Apart from the Prologue, *Temple* is divided into three parts – 'The Hall of Dancing', 'The Hall of Offerings' and 'Sanctum Sanctorum: The Shrine'. It initiates with a news item which speaks of an octogenarian childless couple Ramanujan and Chelammal committing suicide. The police in the statement feel that they committed suicide due to poverty and loneliness.

Chelammal is the protagonist of the poem and is projected as a poor, suffering and a lonely woman. Jayanta Mahapatra examines her circumstances by imagining her childhood, her period of maturity and her final years. These circumstances present the miserable life of Chelammal exploring a deep concern. Through the life of Chelammal, the poet presents human misery leading to suicidal death. 'The Prologue' introduces Chelammal and eventual culmination of her life in suicide.

## Representation of Poverty and the Plight of Women in *Temple*

The first part of *Temple* deals with a hopeful girl awakening into her sexual being. It depicts the fondness in Chelammal's early life, her growth in the lap of nature, her sexual awareness, premarital rituals and marriage. The poet also highlights her sense of helplessness as a poor woman in a male dominated society. She recollects her past happy life and wonders if at all she would have "the promise of paradise." She also becomes self-conscious and wants to free herself from the numbness of life. She questions: "had I no right to dream?"

The poet also reminds of the tragic death of a girl in wrinkled village on the bank of the Kaveri. Her suffering and that of women in general leads him to find:

I find a corner for myself where a dismal Asian silence looks up at me  
from newborn mimosas in the grass. (Mahapatra 329)

The second part 'The Hall of Offerings' refers to that part of the temple when Hindu devotees make offerings to the god. Corresponding to the spirit of 'The Hall of Offerings' Chelammal submits to her destined life as a married woman:

Her father, brothers all move with the sadness of men.

They belong, but not her.

What could they say

after she had been raped

and left to her fate? (Mahapatra 330)

It is clear that Chelammal was raped. However, it is clearly implied that by enforced marriage. After she is raped, the loneliness of her agonizing life becomes intense. The poet says that the world is full of Chelammals:

For like the fish spawned in rice fields,

was not she fated to be caught

when the terraces were finally drained?

There is no woman

who is not alone,

no woman who is sure

She has found her way

to her real purpose of life. (Mahapatra 331)

'Sanctum Santorum: The Shrine' is the third part of *Temple* that deals with Chelammal's ultimate strength, the dwelling place of her consciousness which corresponds to the image of the shrine. She discovers her inner self and strength to combat the calamities of her life. She wakes up to the call of her spirit. She does not want to follow the traditional submissive path of Indian women. She wants to take recourse to a violent path.

Chelammal at the end commits suicide and is released from the misery and agony of poverty and loneliness. Despite her action, woman's fate has not changed. The women are still suffering and the news-clipping from *The Telegraph* at the end of the poem bears testimony to it:

Khagaria, January 5, 1986:

A 12 year old-girl was alleged gang raped and murdered in Biribase Tola near here last Wednesday, according to the police. The police recovered her beheaded body. No one has been arrested so far. In the last two months, six rape cases and five murders of women has been reported from different places in Khagaria District. (Mahapatra 349)

### **The Putana Myth in the Temple**

1. Abrams in the book *A Glossary of Literary Terms* defines myth in these words:

If the protagonist is a man rather than a supernatural being, the story is usually not called myth but legend. If the story concerns supernatural beings but is not a part of a systematic mythology, it is usually classified as a folktale (102).

As cited in the book *The Myth Connection* authored by Chitra Shankaran, a well-known psychoanalytic Sigmund Freud points myth "to be the great primordial truth, the precipitate of the unconscious". Hence, myth is consciously used by writer and the writer's intellect is unconsciously influenced by ancient tales.

Myths are the potent symbol of the man's aspirations, which provide him with ideals and help him set goals in the hostile world that continuously threatens man's existence. Struggle for survival consume man's life energies and he needs fresh impetus to go on facing and tackling the new obstacles which keep propping up like the ending, rolling waves in the sea. Myths and legends provide mankind with the much required psychological support and help him discriminate between good and evil judiciously. However, mankind's history is codified in its myths and therefore myths symbolically represent what was stirred man's soul in his life journey from times immemorial to the present day.

Jayanta Mahapatra attempts to explore the dark corners of the human soul to elicit meaning and significance of life. Hindu mythology states that the ultimate consciousness and the divine force are one and die same. A woman is a representative of this divine force and the ultimate consciousness. Man is able to cast ahead with the help of this force, achieving whatever he sets out to achieve. Goddess worship has been prevalent in India from ancient times. The term Shakti, refers to a dynamic energy that is responsible for creation, maintenance and destruction of the universe. It is considered as a female energy as it is responsible for creation, as mothers are responsible for birth.

Kansa, afraid of the prophecy that the eighth child of his uncle's daughter would kill him, prisoned his cousin and her husband. He killed all their offspring as soon as they were born. But Krishna, the eighth child was taken off from the prison to live with his foster parents. Kansa ordered ogress Putana to kill all the boys born during that month as he was unaware of the whereabouts of Krishna. Transformed into a beautiful woman, Putana, with poison over her nipples arrived at the house where Krishna lived. Krishna not only drank the milk, but he also sucked her life away. Putana nevertheless attained moksha since she had acted as mother, even being an evil one, to the child.

The poet in concern offers a picture of an alternate world Chelammal could aspire for to liberate herself. She could have attained strong gender consciousness of woman drawing inspiration from the myth of Putana and not yielding to the burden of chastity of Sita. Mahapatra infuses into the spirit of Chelammal, the strong will of Putana who was prepared to die in the hands of Lord Krishna with the hope of deliverance from the cycle of birth and death.

### **Conclusion**

The poet Jayanta Mahapatra is shocked to see how a woman, the Shakti incarnate is treated in such an agonistic manner. The status of women in our society has gone down and it is continuously declining. The cases of rape, murder and mutilation keeps becoming the news. The issues do not persist only to the place from where the poet belongs but it is universal. The poem

*Temple*, sublimates death and elevates the spirit of life in its most miserable state. To celebrate life and death on equal footing, Mahapatra takes woman as the medium of endless human sufferings and possible redemption. The poet uses the concept of female principle, the source of all energy, the Shakti, in terms of Putana, a mythical demonic woman, as the central metaphor. *Temple*, is not written in the traditional narrative mode and the absence of a linear narrative makes it complex and subject to multiple interpretations. Jayanta Mahapatra poetically displays the pain and sufferings faced by women of India, South Asia and the world in general.

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