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## VOICING THE UNVOICED EMOTIONS OF WOMAN: A STUDY OF THE SELECTED POEMS OF JAYANT MAHAPATRA

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### Abstract

In the days of Adam and Eve inequality of sexes was not known, but down the ages woman has been relegated to an inferior position in the social setup. In the eyes of a chauvinistic man, she is no more than a sexual object; she is never taken into consideration. Whether as a mother, or as a wife, or as a daughter, the connotation of the relationship is nothing beyond the concept of a 'thing'. Jayant Mahapatra uses this staunch reality to shift the poetic quest inward. He tries to give voice to the deep, concealed emotions of a woman. His poetry is the poetry of exploration where the need for survival with dignity in the hostile condition seems to be the basic preoccupation. As a matter of fact he deals with the subtle intricacies of human relationships revolving around man-woman relationship. The present paper is an attempt to explore how Mahapatra voices the voiceless emotions of woman in some of his poems.

**Keywords:** Unuttered, exploitation, frustration, object, eloquence through silence, agony and pain

Male/female is a biological phenomenon. And gender is a social construct. It refers to "man" and "woman" into masculine and feminine. Patriarchy associates masculine with power, independence, self-assertion, domination and activity. Feminine is associated with tenderness, dependence and submissiveness. It goes without saying that in the days of Adam and Eve, inequality of sexes was not known, but down the ages woman has been relegated to an inferior position in the social set up. She is defined not only in relation to men but as dependent on men and subordinate to them. In the eyes of a chauvinistic man, she is no

more than a sexual object. Whether as a mother, or as a daughter, or as a wife, or as a sister the connotation of relationship is nothing beyond the concept of a 'thing'. Jayant Mahapatra uses this staunch reality to shift the poetic quest inward. He tries to give voice to the deep, concealed emotions of a woman. The present paper intends to study some poems by Jayant Mahapatra from a feminist point of view.

Jayant Mahapatra (1928 - ) needs no introduction. Perhaps any discussion on Indian English poetry is incomplete without the reference of his poetical works. A Professor of Physics by

vocation and a profound poet by choice, Mahapatra started writing at the age of 38, quite late from a normal standard. Today Mahapatra has become a prolific writer having more than a dozen anthologies in his name – *Close the Sky, Ten by Ten* (1971), *A Rain of Rites* (1976), *Relationship* (1980), *Life Signs* (1983), *A Whiteness of Bone* (1992), *Shadow Space* (1997), etc. His poems have been published in various reputed journals like *Critical Quarterly*, *The Kenyan Review*, *The Sewanee Review* etc. He enjoys the distinction of being the first Indian English poet to have received the Sahitya Akademy Award (1981) for his poem “Relationship” and he has been awarded Padam Shree in 2009. Belonging to a middle class family of Cuttak, Odisha, his poetry is imbued with the cultural sensibility of India in general and Odisha in particular. And Odisha is an entrapment of staunch patriarchy. The male-dominated world in Odisha believes the emancipation of a woman only within the parameters of patriarchy. The socio-psychological construction of the male never permits to consider woman as a human being. The construction of woman in the framework of patriarchal society implies certain constraints that a woman exists with. She has to go through various pangs of pain and agony because of the denial of recognition for a social, mental and emotional identity. And her pathos remains unvoiced and she remains as ‘a bruised presence’ (Prasad 367). These bruised, unuttered emotions serve as a trigger to the creative imagination of Jayant Mahapatra because he thinks that probably through literature these pains and agonies can be given deserved recognition. In his poems, he talks about the rape victims, the prostitutes, and the poverty stricken ostracised women as well as about the conditions of women at home who face emotional vacuity.

Nowadays, in our country we hear about so many cases of domestic violence, sexual assaults, other types of atrocities against women. And we are shocked and shaken with these contemptible acts. But the harsh reality is that Indian society treats a rape victim in a different way. The raped woman loses social security besides experiencing the pain of physical violence. Her credibility is time and again questioned and private life may be made public. But

in his *A Whiteness of Bone* Mahapatra tells how ‘the rape of a young girl’ took him aback. He not only creates sympathy in our minds, but also highlights the brutal act where a female is victimised and sexually assaulted:

Last year on the bend of the Debi river  
the rape of a young girl  
shocked us like ripe mangoes  
Dripping from bare trees in winter (A  
*Whiteness of Bone* 60)

Further he says:

Last year her murder and dismemberment  
made us understand somewhat  
the trembling in the eyes of cows we see  
being led meekly to the town’s  
slaughterhouse  
(A *Whiteness of Bone* 60)

Here, through the intelligent image of ‘slaughter house’ Mahapatra vivifies the situation. He questions the sensibility of people by the fear, anguish and utter helplessness of the victim through the use of highly suggestive expressions like the use of communicative words “trembling in the eyes” and “slaughterhouse”. Mahapatra ridicules the rigid system which marginalises woman but celebrates her as “goddess” and “mother”.

In the poem “The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street” Mahapatra gives voice to the unuttered pains and agonies which the prostitutes have to suffer in their day-to-day confrontation with so called “cultured society”. He presents the prostitutes as the victims of “a great conspiracy”. He gives them a transcended romantic identity. In the poem, the communicative value of silence is exploited to a great extent. Further, Mahapatra has successfully shown that in a brothel this woman’s inner being is not nurtured by fine feelings like love for children and home:

Dream children, dark superfluous;  
you miss them in the house’s dark spaces,  
how can’t you?  
Even the women don’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 thing:

the little turnings of blood  
at the far edge of the rainbow.  
("The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street")

In the poem, the protagonist is invited to enter the brothel. The protagonist is very much interested in knowing the inner feelings of the woman. But the woman here is disinterested in the entire affair. She takes part in the sexual encounter without any active participation. And when the act is over, she simply says "Hurry, will you?" The man, the protagonist becomes shocked and turns into a "statue" and his body behaves as a "disobeying toy". Mahapatra shows that the experience ends in disappointment for the man and in a note of heart-rending pathos in respect of the woman as it exposed to the woman the absence of a vital and meaningful existence. He suggests vividly that male-exploitation and poverty have driven the woman in trade flesh. Thus, the position of a woman in Mahapatra's poetic vision is far more elevated than it is in reality. In the poem "Hunger" Mahapatra shifts his focus from describing the life of a prostitute to the poverty of a common man and shows that the daughter of the fisherman has no voice of her own, like many girls in India. He achieves eloquence through silence. The travail of the exploited girl is embodied in expressions like "her ears were cold as rubber", "she opened her wormy legs wide". Mahapatra's poems are a measuring rod for the emotions of a woman who does not get what she longs for, but she accepts her lot with stoic resignation.

Mahapatra in one of his finest poems entitled "Lost" shows how a woman projects her inner emotions through her physical gestures. The man gets the response contrary to his expectations:

My hands move on.  
...  
And outside my hands, where  
your body keeps shrinking in space,  
the first faith ... goes wrong  
...  
Where was I when I lost it?  
("Lost")

Thus, the poems "Lost" and "The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street" are examples of an

effort by Mahapatra to explore the "mute inglorious" (Nare 190) emotional sufferings of woman through her physical gestures. In both the poems, the cold and passive response from woman comes as a blow to man.

Mahapatra uses a sad and serene tone to voice the pains and agonies of woman who goes through the emotional void in a relationship. In the poem "The Logic", Mahapatra voices the aloofness of a wife in the following words:

Reviewing your cosy composed gesture  
troglodytes had to find out,  
you will not sleep with centuries  
any more as with your women,  
no more than you would  
find me to be proof of you.  
("The Logic")

The woman despite the burdens of suffering and loneliness is willing to take part in the affairs of life, the affairs of the present. She says "Make me small and edible, love" ("The Logic"). But turning to the present her wound only deepens; her soul only garners afflictions beyond cure:

This scalp hurts not from the steep drag  
of your hands but from my own practised  
drivel ("The Logic")

When the dreams of a woman getting emotional and physical love from a relationship are shattered, when she has none to share her pains, emotions, sufferings; she turns to her inner self and falls in love with herself. The psychological imbalances that she undergoes either through self-involvement or the extreme self-love in the conditions of loneliness emerge from the banality of her desires and dreams. Decentralising her roles from one to another may prove woman's adaptive characteristics, but within this remain the invisible pains and agonies. And Mahapatra uses terse and penetrating words when he writes:

In the darkened room  
a woman  
cannot find her reflection in the mirror  
(A Missing Person)

It is not an exaggeration that his words can be taken as axiomatic hymns of the heart infinitely fissured, injured and contrite. Thus, Mahapatra's poems carry the problems of woman and her heart and also the diagnosis if not the remedies. In this sense we can say that he gives voice to the unvoiced emotions of woman in an "incurable concrete – not abstract" (Brooks 6) way.

In fact, Mahapatra's poems are a "think-tank" – to use a modern idiom. These poems are packed with thoughts propelling us to think in different ways. We cannot dismiss the agonised voices raised by Mahapatra as isolated, abstract voices. His words are live objects, they are not merely like a bundle of sticks faggoted together with a piece of thin rope. He is quite aware of the power structure, of the lack of social justice and the apathy of the strong to the poor and the subaltern. Atrocities against women haunt and wound the readers. Reading Mahapatra's poems has a long-term effect – if not direct and immediate. These poems raise fundamental questions regarding the existence and help us to be aware of our immediate reality. Jayant Mahapatra follows D. H. Lawrence's decisive statement that the objective of art is not to solve, but to declare; the reason being that life is not a mathematical problem which one can always find a well-knit or step-by-step solution. The complexity of the diverse nature of life is an unending challenge to the custodians of art. Yet the writers like Mahapatra give voice to the voiceless emotions related to unuttered pain and agony of woman's heart and focus on the need to sensitise the reader to the frustrating subtleties of life.

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