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Experience, Expectation and Tradition: Gender Portrayal in Jayanta Mahapatra's Poetic Landscape

Farida Parvin
State-Aided College Teacher, Department of English, Gazole Mahavidyalaya
Malda, West Bengal, India, Email: farida@gmg.ac.in
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Abstract:

Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry reimagines female figures through an intricate interplay of personal experience, expectation, and cultural heritage or tradition. Against the background of Odia life and history, his women are neither one-dimensional symbols nor mere victims; rather, they carry the weight of collective memory and individual suffering. Mahapatra depicts widows, mothers, prostitutes, and daughters in profoundly evocative imagery – the "white-clad widowed women" waiting at the temple or "dream children, dark, superfluous" left behind in brothels. Critics note that he refuses to sentimentalize their plight. He unflinchingly shows poverty, hunger, and gendered injustice as in the poem "Hunger" where a fisherman's daughter is sold to survive, yet he imbues each scene with the deep traditions of Odia culture and ritual. This paper argues that Mahapatra's portrayal of women is shaped by "authenticated experiences" and the "rich past heritage" of his homeland. Women in his poems embody both personal longing and social critique: they are carriers of memory and conscience, trapped by patriarchal expectations even as they connect the present to India's ancestral continuity. By weaving feminist insight with regional identity, Mahapatra expands the "tonal chord" of his poetic world to include the silences and sufferings of women, without resorting to pity.

Keywords:

Jayanta Mahapatra; collective memory; gender portrayal; cultural heritage; Indian English poetry

Introduction

Jayanta Mahapatra (1928-2023) is widely regarded as a central voice in contemporary Indian English poetry. A professor in physics by profession, but a poet by heart took up writing poetry relatively late but quickly established an unmistakable personal style rooted in the sights and rituals of his native land Odisha (Tiwari 2019). Over the decades Mahapatra has published acclaimed poetry anthologies such as *A Rain of Rites (*1976), *The Lie of Dawns: Poems 1974-2008* (2009), and *Bare Face* (2000) winning the Sahitya Akademi Prize in 1981 for his anthology *Relationship* 1980). His verse is characterized by a lyrical voice that blends objective realism with mythic symbolism. Among his recurrent themes are memory, history, and especially the interplay between the personal and the political. In this tapestry of images, women often appear as central figures: as widows at temples, street-cobblers, prostitutes in colonial lanes, and daughters constrained by custom.

Critics observe that Mahapatra's poetic world is doubtless scattered singularly with various images of wives, beloveds, whores, seductresses, village women, city women and adolescent girls, making the female figure "a tonal chord central to the mood of his poems" (Bhardwaj and Kumar 2020, 161). This paper examines how such portraits are generated by the intersection of three dimensions: (1) the experiences Mahapatra

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narrates (often of poverty, desire, and loss); (2) the expectations imposed by a patriarchal social order; and (3) the heritage of Odia culture and history that enwraps each scene. This essay argues that Mahapatra neither romanticizes nor distances his female characters. Instead, his poems render them as carriers of suffering and memory, fully embedded in their cultural milieu. Far from passive objects, these women articulate, through silence and imagery, the collective woes of their society.

By analyzing select poems (like "Hunger", "Dawn at Puri", "The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street", "Indian Summer") and engaging feminist and postcolonial critiques, this paper explores how Mahapatra redefines the portrayal of women in Indian poetry. It brings in scholarship on Indian English poetry and gender, noting debates about whether Mahapatra's stance is feminist or merely observational (Tiwari 2019; Bhardwaj and Kumar 2020). In so doing, this article aims for a balanced view: recognizing both the compassion in Mahapatra's vision and the structural pressures that frame his poetic imagery. The ultimate goal is to show that Mahapatra's women live at the crossroads of the personal (experience), the prescriptive (expectation), and the ancestral (heritage), and through this complex vantage point the poet gives them profound resonance.

Cultural and Gendered Context

Mahapatra's own words and background are instructive. Born into a middle-class family in Cuttack, Odisha, he lived amidst the cycles of village life and Hindu ritual. He famously taught physics and only began writing poetry in his late thirties, yet his work is steeped in the landscape of Odisha – the Jagannath temples of Puri, the mouths of rivers, and the rustic quarters of towns (Tiwari 2019; Swain 2010). Crucially, Odia society (like much of South Asia) has historically been patriarchal. Traditional norms confine women to certain roles: daughters are eventually sent to live with husbands, wives are expected to dutifully serve households, and widows are often cast out from sacred places. As Sharma *et al.* observe, in Mahapatra's writings the male-dominated world has set the limits of existence for the women where wives become bereft of past freedoms, in other way wives and daughters live neglected and marginalized both culturally and biologically (Sharma *et al* 2013).

This social matrix shapes expectation: women must navigate household duties and patriarchal strictures, often at the expense of their own aspirations or identities. In Odisha's caste-inflected rural society, a woman's "home will never be hers" in her own right; she simply moves from her father's house to her husband's, remaining "enslaved by men," as one critic notes (Alorcious and Balachandran 2023). These lived realities – child marriage, widowhood, economic deprivation – are a backdrop to Mahapatra's poetry. His sensibility is therefore that of an insider who knows the "hell" of women's daily struggles. He delineates women in all shapes and figures, insisting upon "the realities of women's life" (Prasad 2000). Yet, he does so without didacticism.

On the other hand, the heritage of Odisha also offers a different lens. The state's mythic past – the Sun Temple at Konark, the Jagannath cult, ancient epics – remains vivid. Mahapatra often anchors scenes in these cultural touchstones. For example, "Dawn at Puri" opens with crows and skulls on the temple sands, immediately juxtaposing the sacred with decay. Widows in white procession, "waiting to enter the Great Temple," highlight how faith is complicated by hardship. Such images evoke the idea that women, even at society's margins, are entwined with Odia spiritual tradition: they embody rites (the funeral pyres, temple pilgrimages) that are as much theirs as men's. A critical approach must note this duality: women are subjected to oppressive customs, yet they also are keepers of ritual "strands of faith" (Dubey 2022). This interplay – of patriarchal constraint and living tradition – recurs in Mahapatra's verse.

Women's Lived Experience in Mahapatra's Verse

Mahapatra's poetry often takes up stark scenes of poverty and exploitation, viewed through the eyes of everyday witnesses. He seems particularly drawn to the darkest corners: prostitutes' quarters, hungry villages, and impoverished streets. For instance, the poem "Hunger" describes a fisherman forcing his own daughter into prostitution for subsistence. Mahapatra's narrator watches helplessly as "the sky fell" on him, overwhelmed by a "father's exhausted wile". The imagery is visceral:

> The sky fell on me, and a father's exhausted wile.
> 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 1976, 44)

Here hunger operates on two levels: literal starvation and sexual appetite. The girl's body is depicted in animalistic terms ("fish slithering"), underscoring how dire circumstances have driven all human feeling to a raw, consumptive state. Reading this, one is struck by how Mahapatra experiences the world of poverty – it is not abstract, but present through flesh-and-blood necessity. Critics note that Mahapatra's realism "presents everything in a heart-touching way" (Varghese 2020, 229) and indeed the sparse, cold diction here forces us to confront the horror rather than gloss over it.

Women in these scenes often appear anonymous and voiceless, yet charged with symbolic weight. In "Hunger" the daughter is never named; she is simply a commodity within the fisherman's transaction. Similarly, "The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street" begins with an enigmatic invitation—"Walk right in. It is yours." and describes how brothel doors "smile wryly into the lighted street" (Mahapatra 1976, 17). The prostitutes there are portrayed almost like demons or spectral hosts; Mahapatra captures them chiefly through action and environment. One famous stanza goes:

> "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…" (Mahapatra 1976, 17)

These lines from "The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street" suggest that the prostitutes' children – born out of compulsion – are unwanted "dreams," unwanted by both customers and mothers alike. The women themselves bear only the pain, not joy even the women don't wear them- "dream children" like precious stones. In condemning this world, Mahapatra refrains from moralizing; instead he simply reports the scene. His detached, imagistic style forces us to supply our own judgment.

Beyond brothels, many poems locate suffering in domestic spaces. In "Indian Summer," for example, we glimpse a wife dreaming amid "the deep roar of funeral pyres" (Mahapatra 1976, 35). The juxtaposition is powerful: inside a bed, a woman sleeps "unexhausted" by the funeral fires just outside. The hearth and death are literally in view, yet the poem never names her or gives her voice. As Sharma *et al.* (2013) observe, Mahapatra often presents the depressing state of a woman in this manner. The pattern is that experience – hunger, poverty, death – is conveyed through objects and fragments (flesh, flames, temples) rather than explicit commentary.

This emphasis on sensory detail rather than rhetoric is notable. It aligns with the poet's statement that he prefers to harp on the "feel" of experiences, rather than on their "thought". It also ties him to a realistic, even scientific mode of observation. As a Tiwari (2019) notes, Mahapatra's lyricism is combined with authentic Indian themes. In practice, this means that women in his poems often carry the weight of their environment. The small gestures – a widow's austere gaze, a silence in a brothel corridor – become charged with collective meaning.

Notably, Mahapatra himself acknowledges that his poetic eye is that of a scientist: objective yet probing (Tiwari 2019). He is "absolutely free from imitation" and his canvas is broad, embracing both Odia village and universal human struggles. In this context, the female figures he paints are neither idealized nor vilified by an outsider; they emerge organically from the scenes he has seen. A study remarks that "the portrait of woman reoccurs" in Mahapatra's poetry, and the poet is "one of the widely read Indian poets who got recognition worldwide" for this unflinching realism (Sharma *et al* 2013).

Societal Expectations and Gender Roles

While experience conveys what is, expectation speaks to what should be – the roles and limits placed on women by patriarchal norms. Mahapatra's poems often make these expectations palpable through the contrasts he draws. For example, in "Dawn", a domestic image is transfigured into a metaphor of female inertia. The poem ends with:

> "There is a dawn which travels alone,
> without the effort of creation, without puzzle.
> It stands simply, framed in the door, white in the air:
> an Indian woman, piled up to her silences,
> waiting for what the world will only let her do." (Mahapatra 1976, 1)

Here the dawn (a daily miracle) is equated with an Indian woman bound by silence. She is "white" (suggesting widowhood or purity) and motionless in the doorway, her only action being to wait for permission from the world. The poem's second half (quoted above) strips away the first half's mysteries, reducing dawn to a social metaphor. The effect is chilling: this woman is the very image of constrained potential. By linking her to dawn without "the effort of creation," Mahapatra implies she is deprived of creativity or agency. This emblematic portrait forces the reader to consider how Indian society "only let(s) her do" certain things.

Another illustrative passage is from "Dawn at Puri", which we saw begins among temple sands. The second stanza vividly captures widows (often ostracized in India) waiting outside the temple:

> "White-clad widowed Women
> past the centers of their lives
> are waiting to enter the Great Temple;
> Their austere eyes stare like those caught in a net
> hanging by the dawn's shining strands of faith." (Mahapatra 1976, 28)

The capitals emphasize the women's identity as *Widows*, and even the poet's word "Centers" is capitalized, highlighting how far past their youth they stand. These women have "reached the center of their lives" – that is, beyond the age of marriage – and now conform to the role society allows: penitent old widows seeking temple blessings. Yet Mahapatra notes the tension: their eyes are "austere" and entangled in a net of faith. On one hand, they still approach the sacred; on the other, their futures are essentially predetermined. Critic Bijay Kant Dubey comments on this vision, contrasting the "faith which is so sacred" with the "hardship and misery" that the widows endure (Dubey 2022).

These and similar images dramatize the expectations placed on women. In Mahapatra's world, a woman's life path is largely scripted by men: "a woman with one male partner is married and… the one who has lost her partner is a widow," and in each case she must adhere to strict norms (Bhardwaj and Kumar 2020). Mahapatra is attentive to these unwritten rules: for instance, "Dawn" highlights how widowhood is marked by white clothing and passive waiting (Dubey 2022). "Dawn at Puri" underscores that widows must still serve the temple despite their personal (Dubey 2022). In "The Return", he notes hibiscus flowers blooming on the workmen-women who "tar the wide hot streets" – another subtle commentary. Lines like "hibiscuses in the blisters of women coolies" underline that society expects even its poorest women to perform hard labor without complaint (Swain 2010).

In sum, Mahapatra's poetry refracts social expectations onto his female characters. Women in his poems often appear trapped lonely both socially and emotionally as they navigate life bound by custom. He frequently shows them in moments of waiting or watching – as if life happens around them while they stand still – indicating the limits of their freedom (Dubey 2022). Yet he avoids direct polemic. Critics note that he "resonates" with the plight of these women without celebrating or lamenting it overtly (Tiwari 2019; Bhardwaj and Kumar 2020). In this way, the poems suggest expectation by the very inaction and restraint of the female figures: a silent protest in itself.

Heritage and Cultural Memory

The third pillar of this study is the cultural heritage that frames Mahapatra's world. Although his poems are grounded in immediate experience, they are shot through with allusions to Odia tradition and Hindu mythology. This heritage colors the portrayal of women as living links between past and present. For example, Mahapatra often invokes local temples, gods, and rituals – contexts in which women's roles are complex. The widows in "Dawn at Puri", for instance, engage in the ultimate Hindu rite of passage (cremation at the sacred seashore) (Dubey 2022). Their presence in this scene suggests that even those marginalized by society are part of the eternal cycle of birth and death. Similarly, in *"Dawn,"* the very metaphor of dawn connects a daily cosmic cycle to a woman's fate.

The poem "The Return" contains a telling image of Odia heritage intermingled with women's lives: the poem's speaker sees his political hopes fade ("the sky grown murky with promises of the leaders unfulfilled") and at the same time observes "hibiscuses in the blisters of women coolies" in a procession (Swain 2010). Here, a ritual flower (hibiscus) appears on the hands of laboring women, symbolizing both devotion and the nation's contradictions. The coral-red hibiscus (often offered to deities) blooming in misery suggests that heritage

endures even among the humble. The women thus embody the continuity of faith and struggle: they wear the traditional offering even as they toil under "promises… unfulfilled" (Swain 2010). As Swain's review notes, these juxtaposed images of natural beauty and human suffering give Mahapatra's late poetry "brief, astounding revelations" (Swain 2010). The women's presence at once affirms cultural rootedness and mourns unkept national ideals.

By melding the "rich past heritage" into his vision as Tiwari (2019) remarks, Mahapatra ensures that women in his poetry cannot be understood apart from their cultural context. They **embody** heritage even in suffering. A widow approaching the temple is participating in millennia-old rites, just as a prostitute in Calcutta confronts the colonial city that once oppressed Odisha. Their very gestures—folded hands, silent waiting, or enduring gaze—resonate with ancient motifs of devotion and endurance. This layering of personal and historical time means that Mahapatra's women are always on the cusp of the eternal. They feel the past "shinning strands of faith" (Dubey 2022) even as they face the present "darkness" of their lot.

Discussion: Negotiating Nuance

Scholars differ on how to interpret Mahapatra's stance. Some praise his compassionate realism. As Harsheetaa Bhardwaj and Pramod Kumar note, Mahapatra "exposes the tyrannical treatment to which women in Odisha are subjected" and "critiques the oppressive forces which dehumanize women and relegate them to the status of objects" Bhardwaj and Kumar 2020). Indeed, his recurring images of *"wives, beloveds, whores… have deeply significant metaphoric evocations"* that underscore a shared human tragedy. In this view, Mahapatra's portrayal is sympathetic: the women's lack of agency is presented as unjust, making the poems implicitly feminist in concern. His own admission, quoted in an interview, admits he feels pain at women's suffering ("their voice seems to say: we are the beast of burden, like cattle. It is about this pain I would like to write".

Others caution that Mahapatra is not an explicitly political or activist poet. He never offers concrete solutions or directs anger at male oppressors; instead he remains a detached observer. One study observes that while Mahapatra "brings forth the minimal spatial freedom that women have been begrudged by men," he does so without "pitying or sympathizing" Bhardwaj and Kumar 2020). This restraint can be read two ways: as dignity (he respects his subjects by not patronizing them) or as aloofness (he does not intervene in their fate). Nonetheless, the consistency of his focus on female figures ensures that "the portrait of woman reoccurs" as a central feature of his poetry.

The present analysis finds room for both interpretations. On one hand, Mahapatra's poems are undeniably empathetic portraits: he aligns himself with women's suffering and makes it legible. At times he even channels their interiority – for example, describing the widow's lonely waiting or the prostitute's world-weary routine. On the other hand, he filters these experiences through symbols (webs, dawns, temples) rather than giving women a speaking voice. The effect is powerful but ambiguous: we feel the oppression but also sense our own gaze implicated. This ambiguity may be intentional: by not overtly championing the women, he invites readers to reflect on why they do not rise from their silence.

In terms of conceptual limitations, one might argue that Mahapatra's caste/class lens still centers male experiences (as the fishermen and temple goers are often men). Women appear mainly in relation to men (daughter, widow, wife). It is true that his viewpoint is an observer's. Yet the richness of his imagery complicates a one-sided reading. He does not idealize patriarchal frameworks; for example, he shows the Jagannath temple not only as a shrine but as a space marked by hunger and death (Dubey 2022). Similarly, although women in his poems often fulfill prescribed roles, those roles are shown to be empty or strained, as when Mahapatra notes that a woman "longs for an approval from her male counterpart knowing that it will end up in fiasco" Alorcious and Balachandran. 2023). In effect, he subverts expectation from within the tradition.

Conclusion

Across decades, Jayanta Mahapatra has consistently brought women to the fore of his poetic vision – but not as archetypes or exotic symbols. Instead, they arise organically from lived experience, at the nexus of personal and public narratives. His poems suggest that women in India bear "layers of interpretations" (Pujahari and Meenu 2023) but Mahapatra chooses metaphor and scene over polemic. By doing so, he redefines their portrayal: they become figures of conscience and heritage. The women "piled up to her silences," waiting for

the world's permission, is at once deeply individual and unbearably symbolic. Through such imagery, Mahapatra challenges readers to hear those silences.

In sum, Mahapatra's women are not peripheral. They are central chords in the tapestry of his poetry. Their experiences of hunger, loss, and labor are portrayed with unflinching realism; the expectations placed on them (by family, religion, patriarchy) are subtly critiqued; their roles as bearers of tradition and memory are celebrated. This tripartite perspective – experience, expectation, heritage – yields portraits that are at once sensitive and critical. Future scholarship might further explore how this fusion of the feminist with the regional shapes Mahapatra's legacy. In a nutshell, this study underlines that by locating women at the crossroads of the personal, social, and historical, Mahapatra offers a richly textured vision: one that honors their suffering and strength without reducing them to any single dimension.

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Note on contributor(s)

Farida Parvin is a State-Aided College Teacher in English at Gazole Mahavidyalaya, Malda, West Bengal, India. Her specialised area is South Asian literatures and postcolonial theory, with research interests in subaltern epistemologies and gender performativity within marginalized communities. She has contributed to several edited volumes and reputed journals.