

**Transforming Objective Reality into Images and Symbols - One  
more look at Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry**

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**Abstract**

What is Reality? Reality is something that exists. There are two kinds of realities. One is subjective reality and the other is objective reality. Subjective reality is linked to our senses. It is the reality that we perceive through our mental filters and it is often conditioned by the past. Objective reality is different. It is how things really are. Objective reality demands perceiving things which exist independent of our mind and is in totality. This by implication means that we have to focus on its specific characteristics in order to perceive a thing objectively. (Facets of Unity p. 206 The Enneagram of Holy Ideas by A.H,Almaas) Objective reality is whatever remains true whether you believe in it or not. There is deep poverty, squalor, hunger, homelessness, and prostitution linked to poverty in this world. Giving expression to these realities without imposing one's own view is objective reality. Jayantha Mahapatra, who comes from Orissa, writes on varied subjects which exist in and around him. The focus of this paper is

to understand Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry in the perspective of transforming objective reality into images and symbols. How does Mahapatra see things which exist in and around him and describe them in beautiful images and symbols?

**Key Words: Transformation, Subjective, Objective, Reality, Images, Symbols.**

### **Introduction**

Not many of us view this world as it really is. As a matter of fact, we do not use our senses fully as Helen Adam Keller aptly puts it. Yet, we try to interpret this world with our senses and filter it through the existing patterns in our brains. That means, the world that exists outside is different from the one we have created on our own. How nice it would be if we are able to perceive this world as it really is. To understand the concept clearly, we can bank upon a simple example. Poverty, homelessness, hunger, illness, malnutrition, prostitution, prostitution linked to poverty and oppression of the poor are only some of the problems that we are a witness to. Portraying these social realities with our own understanding and interpretation is different from what they really are. Portraying them objectively needs experiencing and living them personally. For example, a product can be explained by a salesman with a lot of enthusiasm and exaggeration, but a customer's perspective is that he wants to know what the specific features or qualities of that product are for which he may like to consult or refer different sources such as a web site or a magazine. When we talk about "objective reality", we are talking about the world that's really there, unfiltered, outside your mind. Our beliefs do not change the world, except to the extent that they lead to actions that alter reality. From literature stand point, 'hunger' can be perceived in different perspectives. But when viewed objectively, its totality and its nakedness appears. One more example is poverty. When poverty is seen in all its trueness and nakedness, it is total perception and is objectively viewed. "Reality is a social construct, a common denominator of the subjective experiences and perceptions of society forms our reality. Subjective is a statement that has been colored by the character of the speaker or writer. It often has a basis in reality, but reflects the perspective through which the speaker views reality. It cannot be verified using concrete facts and figures." (1)

### Full Text

Jayantha Mahapatra is not a stranger to the lovers of poetry. He needs no introduction in the pantheon of Indian English writings. He is the first ever to receive the Sahitya Academy Award for his poetry in English. Perhaps any discussion on Indian English poetry becomes incomplete and meaningless without reference to his works. The thematic substance of his poetry centers round Orissa and social ailments such as poverty, deprivation, injustice, plight of the Indian woman, and prostitution linked to poverty and sexuality abound in his verse. His objective reality lies in the fact that he says “All these things happen around me” and he cannot write about the “better things of life” – about the lives of the upper classes. He is the author of such popular poems as Indian Summer and Hunger, which are regarded as classics in modern Indian English literature.

One of the predominant themes in Jayantha Mahapatra’s poetry is poverty and it is closely linked to sexuality. In the poem “Hunger”, it is poverty which drives the fisherman to send a customer to his daughter while it is sex which makes the customer to exploit the fisherman’s poverty. The images used in this poem to intensify the stark reality are astounding. The moment the fisherman leaves the stack, his daughter opens her “wormy legs” wide and signals the customer to quench his thirst and hunger there. The situation is so pathetic that it brings tears to the eyes of the reader.

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 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 (Hunger – A Rain of Rites)

The poet sincerely and objectively questions his own helplessness. Seeing poverty, squalor, violence everywhere, he questions his own self in “Waiting for the Summer of 1994 – Shadow Space):

Can I call myself an artist  
For want of a better name?  
Yet, it is just compulsion, I feel

That is implicit in the poems I write

Poetry, for Mahapatra, has become a metaphoric river without water. He writes:

Today  
I stand on the bank of the poem  
Even though each word has a price.  
Even though this poetry appears as a river  
A river without water  
We have to swim across  
Even if its words  
Do not welcome us to its secret country  
Where                    we                    live                    without                    knowing

Woman and the plight of woman is another theme in Mahapatra's poetry. Woman in the modern world is an object of pleasure. In the male-dominated chauvinistic society, more so in a region like Orissa, woman has always been a sexual object for a man. Love does not have any place in the present day world. Many claim love but only a few have it. The loveless, emotionless, fatigued, restless, mechanical life of a wife is realistically portrayed by Mahapatra in his poem.

The good wife  
lies in my bed  
through the long afternoon  
dreaming still, unexhausted  
by the deep roar of funeral pyres  
In the darkened room  
A woman can't find her  
Reflection in the mirror.                    (Indian Summer - A Rain of Rites)

Mahapatra sincerely describes the condition of women in a patriarchal society. A woman is alienated from the society and she suffers loneliness. Her position after marriage is like that of a

person who is in exile. A woman is likened to an old thing in the house. This is given expression to in the poem “On Most Nights”.

On most nights there's a woman  
who just lies in her bed, open  
like any old thing in the house she lives in.  
Like time, that pours over her.  
The walls keep their close watch  
over her loneliness; and not even that  
can go wrong here. ...”

(On Most Nights- A Rain of Rites)

Domestic violence is a common feature in India today. In “Still Life”, Mahapatra objectively alludes to the pathetic condition of a woman who takes a decision to burn herself instead of dying every day bearing the beatings and torture”, unable to bear the torture. In “June Rain:”, he gives expression to his voice of inadequacy:

In my country of unenforced laws  
I write my futile poem, eat the fish  
I buy from the local market, listen intelligently  
To discussions on parliament elections

(Shadow Space)

The problem of prostitution haunts the imagination of Mahapatra. He transcends all barriers of hypocrisy and deception and depicts the plight of prostitutes who are considered a blasphemy and an anathema to the and by the society. He blends his romantic imagination with ironic symbolism and delineates realism that is evident in the society. A prostitute is likened to a discarded thing in the society. [The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street - A Rain of Rites]

“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 things:  
the little turnings of blood

at the far edge of the rainbow.” (The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street – A  
Rain of Rites))

The poet is deeply touched by the poverty, squalor, deprivation and homelessness of many people living in India on one hand and the unchanged conditions of corruption and politics and politicians on the other. He gives expression to it objectively in his poem “The Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the Republic” of India.

Do we want to feel the ground  
give way beneath us?  
This is a barren world that has been  
Prowling round my room,  
Epidemics in the poisoned air,  
Dusty streets stretching away  
Like disgruntled socialists. (The Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the Republic)

The poem, “A Country” brings before us the sorrowful and unhappy state of affairs evidenced by him in India. Poverty, homelessness and deprivation continue even after many years of independence.

Sometimes at night when all voices die  
my mind sees earth, my country to  
accept sacrifice, the loss of friends,  
and sons who vanished suddenly in seventy two.  
However much I provoke and curse  
I am unable to force an answer out of you wherever I try to live,  
In pious penitence at Puri  
Or in the fiery violence of a revolutionary

My reason becomes a prejudiced sorrow like socialism. (The Country – Life Signs))

“Puri is a living character in his poems. The temple, the priest, the beggar, the crow, the crowd, all these rise before us in their objective reality and then transforms into images and symbols. The Various images and symbols of his poetry are the product of a trained mind.” analyses Dr. Manisha Rani in her research paper Imagery and symbolism in the poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra  
(3)

Rajiv S. Patke, writing on Mahapatra's poetry comments that his poetry retains "the lineaments of a lived reality as well as a felt historical and mythical past".(267) (4)

Pradeep Kumar Patra says that "reading Mahapatra is just as reading Wordsworth. Just as Wordsworth interprets his whole ideas into poetry, in relation to nature, Mahapatra also finds the events, situations and the lost glory of Orissa as the objective correlative for the expression of his ideas and thoughts" (5) The world in which we are living is filled with pain, guilt, remorse, hunger, poverty, deprivation and he recreates the same in his poetry with objective reality in the form of images and symbols. The lives of the people of Cuttack, the temples of Puri, the prayers of the priests, the intolerable pandas, the Hindu festivals, the ancient monuments come to life in his poetry. Puri - on the shores of the sea - with its temples, priests, beggars, lepers, prostitutes, and fishermen – is recreated in all its truthfulness and nakedness in his poetry.

At Puri the crows  
The one wide street  
Lolls out like a giant tongue  
Five faceless lepers move aside  
As a priest passes by  
And at the street's end  
The crowd thronging the temple door;  
A huge holy flower  
Swaying in the wind  
Of greater reasons.

(Taste for Tomorrow)

(The Best of Jayanta Mahapatra 36)

Mahapatra's thematic arena is very wide. Besides Orissa being the most important theme of his poetry, he deals with love, poverty, deprivation the sounds of the temple bells, prayers of priests and the funeral pyres in his poetry. When we read Mahapatra's poems, we become conscious of the day-to-day existence in life. All the realities naked in life come to the fore in his poetry. In his poem, "Dawn at Puri", he describes the temple town Puri in all its originality.

Endless crow noises  
A skull on the holy sands  
tilts its empty country towards hunger.

White – clad widowed women  
past the centres 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 (Dawn at Puri)  
(The Best of Jayanta Mahapatra 29).

In the poem, "The Lost Children of America" (Life Signs), he describes the city where he lives in (Cuttack) in all truthfulness and nakedness.

In the dusty malarial lanes  
Of Cuttack (...)  
In these lanes nicked by intrigue and rain  
And the unseen hands of gods (The Lost Children of America –  
Life Signs))

In the same breath, he writes another poem "A Summer Night" (Waiting).

This is the town where I was born; here with others  
Year after year I celebrate the joyous festivals  
In the whine of the cripple and the mangled leper (...)  
The open drains flouting the dread of disease  
The naked children crying of their swollen flesh  
It is hard here  
To keep the crows away from the spilt guts  
Of the decapitated

He fills the lines of his poems with images of human excreta, dung, fish scales, rotten tomato. The description is so truthful that it reflects the condition of India as a whole.

### **Summing up:**

It is said in the Mahabharata that the highest and the supreme dharma (way of life) for human beings is not subjecting others to the same pain that they themselves experience. Mahapatra is a poet who saw poverty, hunger, deprivation, homelessness, and prostitution linked to poverty and sexuality in close quarters in Orissa and elsewhere in India. The objectivity that we see in the realities depicted in his poems are the poetic transformations. These transformations are not

coloured and they are naked truths. What is significant in Mahapatra is that these realities are transformed into beautiful images and symbols which compel us to read his poetry again and again. That Jayantha Mahapatra has made a niche for himself in Indian English literature and in the hearts of lovers of poetry is undeniable.

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