



Decadence in 'A Rain of Rites' by Jayanta Mahapatra: A Bird's Eye View

Ms. Malabika Mishra

Research Scholar,

Kalinga University, New Raipur.

mito.4me@gmail.com

Dr. Papri Mukhopadhyay

Asst. Professor,

Dept of English,

Kalinga University, Naya Raipur.

<https://doi.org/10.66376/criterion.v17.n4.31>

Abstract:

Decadence, a major theme is visible clearly in the poems of Jayanta Mahapatra, specifically in the volume *A Rain of Rites*. In this volume, the poet has portrayed the wretched condition of life in Odisha, the native land of Mahapatra in post- colonial era. In this poem, the poet has explored the economic condition of his People, which has had an unexpected impact on their lives who have become not only economically but morally, ethically, and spiritually paralysed. This paper focuses on the poems like "*Hunger*", "*A Missing Person*", "*Dawn at Puri*", "*The tattooed Taste*", "*The Whore House in Calcutta Street*" and "*Dawn*". These poems narrate the picture of decadence in the form of fractured humanity, the greedy self, and unshattered carnal desires of a patriarchal society. This analysis shows the symbolic language of Mahapatra through which he has expressed the grief and guilt of both his people and his place.

Keywords: Decadence, Economic, Fractured, Paralysed, Patriarchal.

Introduction

Jayanta Mahapatra, the poet of Odisha, became a poet of the world whose journey from regional to international recognition is due to the contribution of the poem volume *A Rain of Rites*, published in 1976. It created a landmark in his poetic life and introduced him as a poet of the land and a poet of his people. He is one of the leading figures of contemporary Indian English poetry, who has earned a place in everyone's heart through his introspective, emotionally condensed voice. He explores the inherent emotional trauma and psychological conflict of modern man. He has given emphasis not only to the beautiful side of his native land but its ugly side as well, which dominates the beauty of his land and his people. "My poems are generally thought to be obscure" (Das 133), which he has confessed in an interview, saying, "The reader becomes impassioned to dig out meaning which most of the time remains hidden behind the veil of symbol, metaphors and images" (Das 130). His poetry searches both the visible and hidden domain of his place and his people. As G.N. Devi says, "With *A Rain of Rites*, Mahapatra starts speaking of his existence as a poet more emphatically, and his poetry becomes a metaphor for itself" (p 7).

The volume '*A Rain of Rites*' became a widely read collection, which gave him the fame of a poet of the world. In this volume, the poet has shown the various aspects of an inhuman, uncultured, and immoral view of society, where loss is omnipresent. Loss of human values and degradation of society are vividly painted in the poems like "*Hunger*", "*A Rain of Rites*", "*The Whorehouse in Calcutta Street*". "He reconnoitres", writes R Parthasarathy, "the intrication of human relationships, especially those of lovers, with a robust tenderness. About the poems themselves, there is an unexpected quietness" (59).

Objective

This study aims to analyse the theme of decadence in every aspect of life, such as social, economic, cultural, and spiritual, by presenting the theme of exploitation, poverty, and human

suffering in the selected poems of this volume. It seeks to explore the harsh realities of the world. Moreover, the study examines the use of symbolism and imagery to highlight decadence and resilience.

Literature Review

Jayanta Mahapatra's place in Indian English poetry is very significant for his exploration of human suffering, identity, history, and the cultural landscape of Odisha. His poetry collection *A Rain of Rites* (1976) has attracted scholarly attention for its symbolic imagery, existential concerns, and portrayal of moral and spiritual crises. While critics have examined themes such as mythology, nature, identity, alienation, and ritual, the theme of decadence has generally been discussed as part of broader concerns rather than as an independent subject of study.

Bijay Kant Dubey, in his study *A Rain of Rites by Jayanta Mahapatra* (2022), is of the opinion that this collection is one of Mahapatra's finest achievements. He has emphasised the poet's use of silence, solitude, landscape, and symbolism to reveal the painful life in Odisha. He argues that Mahapatra presents a world marked by loneliness, despair, and fragmented human relationships, where decadence is visible in every dimension of life.

Bruce King, in his book *Modern Indian Poetry in English* (Oxford UP, 2001), shows the condition and situation of the land of Mahapatra, which gives the idea of the circumstances where the silent suffering and moral decay of the society is clearly visible.

K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, in his book *Indian Writing in English*, Contemporary Indian Literature Series, (Bombay: P.E.N. Centre, 1957), shows the social reality, focuses on hunger, poverty, and disillusionment of post-colonial era.

Iyengar has noted that post-independence Indian poetry's reflection on social realities are central to Mahapatra's poetic vision.

M. K. Naik's book *A History of Indian English Literature* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1982). emphasises the role of poverty, which makes a man irrational and fails to be judicious and conscientious. Naik highlights the bleak realities of human existence, where hunger and deprivation become defining features of life.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "*Can the Subaltern Speak?*" (Columbia University Press, 1988) shows how the marginalised people in Mahapatra's poetry remain dumb and silent despite being exploited and dominated by the society

Aijaz Ahmad's *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literature* (London: Verso, 2000), provides a Marxist framework that allows hunger in the poems to be read as a product of economic struggle leading towards individual failure.

Jayanta Mahapatra in an interview said his poetry comes from the real picture of society, where human suffering and social decadence plays an important role to bring a complete destruction of ethics and morality.

Methodology

The study adopts the method of close reading and deep interpretation, which involves a detailed examination of the selected poems in *A Rain of Rites*. Attention is given to specific poetic devices like diction, imagery, symbolism, metaphors, tone, and poetic structure to identify different dimensions of decadence. The analysis is supported by interpretations from established literary critics and scholars.

Sources of Data

The research is based on both primary and secondary sources.

Primary Source

The primary text for the study is:

Mahapatra, Jayanta. *A Rain of Rites*. University of Georgia Press, 1976.

Secondary Sources

Secondary materials include scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and critical essays on Jayanta Mahapatra, Indian English poetry, postcolonial literature, symbolism, and ecocriticism.

The methodology is limited to the textual analysis of *A Rain of Rites*. Although, references to Mahapatra's other works may be made for contextual purposes, the detailed analysis is confined to this collection. The study focuses on literary interpretation and does not include empirical methods such as surveys or interviews. A qualitative approach was adopted to interpret the society and the people within. Through a close reading and critical interpretation, the research aims to offer a comprehensive understanding of Mahapatra's intention to show social, cultural, and spiritual decadence dominating the healthy environment of Odisha.

Textual Analysis

Jayanta Mahapatra, by being a witness of decadence visible all over his native Place, becomes conscious and mature, questions himself, though unanswered, proceeds to take the help of pen and paper to express himself, relate his feelings to the world to get the reason and to know the consequence of unpredictable behaviour of a self-ruled society. Most of the poems are representative of Mahapatra's style showing the picture of decadence across the place where the poet lives. Though the narration is on a particular Place, it serves as a microcosm of macrocosm that the readers across the world realise and honour Mahapatra as a poet of keen sightedness. Decadence is a consequence, a phenomenon resulting the plight of values, morality and ethics in the individual, in the society.

Mahapatra, through these Poems, focuses on the dominant agent of evil in the society

in the form of greed, lust, avarice and sensuality. It is the concern of the poet to make his people aware of that glorious heritage by comparing the past with the present, as present is on the blind journey towards peril. Here, Mahapatra has shown various dimensions of decadence and takes rain as a symbol of expression of self, as he is moved by the sight of rain which he has stated in an interview with Abraham, "I shall always be haunted by the rain, be moved by it because it represents a sense of the mysterious which I cannot understand" (153-154). Again, he elaborates, "Rain does something to me I cannot explain- I can hide my face in the rain, be washed by it perhaps. It takes on different meaning at different times. Deliberate or unconscious? I can't say". But rain represents "a correlation with my inner self I can recognise" (154).

Mahapatra, very subjectively presents the dimension of decadence in his surroundings as:

Social Decadence

Mahapatra's poems depict the miserable condition of people who struggle not to get a comfortable or luxurious life, but to get basic necessities of life like food and shelter. But the misery is not running after it, but being avoided, ignored, and exploited by their own people in their own place, which shows the horrible scenery of decadence. In the poem, "*Hunger*", the poet has painted the situation on his canvas very clearly by showing the cruel rule of poverty, hunger and helplessness.

The interpretation of oppressor and oppressed in the society is clearly narrated, where the most oppressed figure is the woman who silently sacrifices herself to fulfil the hunger of belly and the body. Starvation becomes a demon to suppress the morality of mankind. The poet has shown the cruelty of starvation and the helplessness of the victim as having no alternative but to surrender with silence and stillness.

The fisherman said: will you have her, carelessly....

I heard him say: my daughter she's just turned fifteen....

Feel her, I will be back soon, your bus leaves at nine....

She opened her wormy legs wide..... (Mahapatra 44)

These lines of Mahapatra represent decadence in society where a father offers his daughter, a girl of fifteen years who has just reached puberty, to a stranger to enjoy her body. The stranger is a traveller who recognizes the absolute compulsion of the father and daughter; who ignores the notions of female purity and chastity, of a choosing instead to utilize her body to survive, the stranger highlights how Mahapatra's portrayal of the father and daughter and their compulsion is not merely a depiction of individual misery, but a stark illustration of the moral degradation of society. At present situation, a woman's body is treated as a commodity to be exchanged for money to escape poverty, hunger, and starvation. The traveller lacks all empathy; instead, he is driven by an uncontrollable carnal desire that blinds him blind both inwardly and outwardly, leaving him unable to feel the compulsion of a budding daughter and a helpless father.

For hetaerism is as much a social institution as any other; it continues the old sexual freedom – to the advantage of the men. Actually, not merely tolerated, but gaily practised, by the ruling classes particularly, it is condemned in words.

But in reality, this condemnation never falls on the men concerned, but only on the women; they are despised and outcast, in order that the unconditional supremacy of men over the female sex may be once more proclaimed as a fundamental law of society (Engels 60).

Mahapatra, in the poem "*Hunger*", reflects upon a ruined society within the spheres of relationship, responsibility, and recreation. Here, the poet describes a father-daughter relationship confined not by emotion, but by economic profession. How a father can become so helpless as to offer his child to a traveller, and how that traveller, though could understand

the misery of both father and daughter becomes selfish and satisfies his carnal desires, remain central societal questions. The poet highlights the role of poverty and starvation which make the man witless, thoughtless, and cruel, ultimately destroy the values of the society. Similarly, the poem, "*The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street*" projects a stark image of social decadence through the life of a prostitute. Here, the poet presents an emotionless woman and a sensual man as representatives of a deeply degraded society as prostitution remains a permanent blemish on modern society. Mahapatra surreptitiously reveals this grim reality says:

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
comes back to you, a disobeying toy - (Mahapatra 28-34).

Woman plays a crucial role in shaping a society through her dedication, resilience, and selfless sacrifices. She, with her love, care, and emotion make the life heaven like. And the responsibility of the man is to respect, support, and understand her to keep an exact balance to hold the values and ethics of the society. In this poem, the poet portrays the woman as a prostitute who has no emotion or feelings while making love instead, welcomes as many customers as possible, giving minimum time to enjoy her and the man who considers himself strong and wise becomes a mere toy in her hands. Here, the poet not only depicts woman as an agent of forthcoming destruction through her involvement in prostitution, but he has also exposed the vulnerability of the male client who has been driven by his sensual desire, his lack of restraint pushes society towards destruction by discarding the core values of social life.

Mahapatra is moved by the condition of his people in the present, which is hard to accept as there is no joy in life or mirth in the air. He compares the present with the past and

writes in his poem '*Dawn*':

Is it the earth within?
Does it keep us waking, give
brief respite?
like a hard crossword puzzle
it sets riddles crowding against
one another (Mahapatra 1).

Here, the poet highlights the uncertain and unpredictable situation of the present. Man is becoming confused, imbalanced and shattered, unable to remain stable in the present. Everywhere, a sense of loss is felt; society has lost its values by being disconnected from its people and their attitude. Through the images of an Oldman, a boy, and children, the poet describes the mental conditions of the people. Childhood is marked by poverty, disease and negligence, and a similar condition is shared by the older people. As children are the future and old men are the foundation of a society; their present condition invites a dark future- the primary cause of social decadence. The poet writes in the poem "*A Twilight Poem*":

If now, an old man's face
appears on the darkened ledge,
the hewing of the wind
fills one with dense exile (Mahapatra 20).

By presenting a number of images of society, the poet makes the reader aware of the social decadence, which is the root cause of inhumane activities leading towards a dark future.

Cultural Decadence

The culture of a place is its identity, narrating the strength and weakness of a race. Reflected in its rites and rituals, Indian culture is an ideal to be followed by people not only of

its own land across the world itself. The belief and the faith of the people, along with their actions and dedication, make their nation the teacher of the world, or “Biswa Guru.” However, with the passing of time as the country develops, Society leaves behind its true culture, choosing instead to cling to dogmas and taboos. Mahapatra's poems show the fake rites and rituals, actions, and reflections in the name of culture.

The volume *A Rain of Rites* deals with the superstition prevailing in the society. The poet, Jayanta Mahapatra tries to surface the realities against a backdrop of the culture and tradition of India. He confronts the taboos and dogmas besetting the social life in the name of rites and rituals. Each poem in *A Rain of Rites* is about some aspects of Indian life, rituals, nature, or the moods that go into the making of poetry.

Mahapatra, like other poets of his time - Pritish Nandy, Keki N. Daruwalla, A.K. Mehrotra - explores the world of the irrational activities of the human being in the name of culture and tradition. John Oliver perry aptly observes:

As they strike our earth of awareness, some may too easily disappear in the dust and confusion. Alternative rivulets emerge and form a puddle here and there; we may vainly expect and seek a coalescing, or dominating image, a concrete show stopper. But all the while patter continues and tolerates our ignorance, defies our determinations and tests them by the pressure of its seriousness not to be overtaken by its own needs, its own limited ways of seeing and speaking. So, we are presented with a repeated pattern, and endless process that cannot be harnessed as energy (Prasad 62).

The man of this modern era is becoming self-centric, having forgotten the glorious past and its high culture, where there was a strong relationship among the people who valued the importance of relationship, love, and attachment. But now, in this present situation, culture has met its destruction, becoming narrower in its concept and meaning, and losing its importance.

In the land of the poet, he confronts the loss of culture at the hands of its own people, who do not have any feelings or respect for those who are poor and marginalised. Woman, who plays an important role in building a society and is respected as a mother, life partner, daughter, and sister becomes an object to be enjoyed. Her purity and chastity are on the verge of destruction. She is a dumb victim of society who accepts everything without any complaint or argument. The poet writes in the poem “*Dawn*”:

“An Indian woman, piled up to her
silences, waiting for what the
world will only let her do” (Mahapatra 1). ”.

The poem “*Village*” of this volume shows the superstitious people and their superstition, which has a devastating impact on a woman's life. The patriarchal society's attitude towards a woman and the suffering of woman in that situation are vividly described by the poet through the character of Radha. Radha is barren, and worshipping a vermilion-smeared stone god to have a child is her last hope. Her faith is ultimately shattered, leaving her mentally harassed, and surrenders herself to the situation.

Besides the low mud walls of a hut
Radha in the hurt-filled light of an
early November sunset in the
sterile sameness of the grass-lined
call of the children (Mahapatra 8).

This incident is evidence of cultural degradation and decadence where woman is identified only as a daughter, a wife and a mother. She does not have her own identity. A woman has no existence if she cannot be a mother in society. Society tortures her in such a way that she becomes insane, confining herself within the four walls of a room.

Though the nation has developed in many aspects, it is still caught in the clutch of blind belief and superstition. In the name of culture, people are being exploited. Culture is not meant to limit the freedom but to be an emancipation of the human mind and the exercise of reason. Mahapatra could see and feel the decadence of culture all around. The poem “*Myth*” presents the picture of decadence in culture by projecting the taboos of the creed and caste-ridden society, where the poet himself becomes the victim. As a Christian, he is restricted from entering into a Hindu Temple. He stands outside the “dark dank sanctorum” in fear of being driven out. When the saffron-robed priest of the temple questions his identity, he is surprised and becomes still, watching the prevalence of casteism and creed. This is not the culture to be identified by the man-made religion but by humanity, values and morality. Man, having the weapon of reason, becomes the slave of uncultured system of society. He writes:

Vague grieving years pit
 against the distant peaks like
 a dying butterfly
 as a bearded saffron-robed man asks
 me firmly: Are you a Hindu? (Myth p 82).

India, a country of gods and saints, is becoming a land of evil and inhumanity. Superstition and blind belief have dominated the minds of the people, who are running after false prosperity and fake development, leaving behind a strong culture. Children, women, and elderly are suffering a lot while being ignored and neglected. Those who need the most support are harshly driven out, whereas anyone with money, power and strength becomes the ruler treating others like animals. But the poet remains hopeful, holding onto the belief of reclaiming

the culture of his land. As an optimist, the poet waits for a new order and new era in society. He dreams of a beautiful time full of mirth, where everyone fulfils their wishes and desires. His poem "*The Tattooed Taste*" says:

And sees in the moonlight
pulling on their old ropes of silver.
the dark shapes of changing seas
like so many desperate struggles
of the dying, then asks himself
over and over again is he one of
them, the dying, dreaming of
how the world should be? (Mahapatra 57).

Mahapatra's obsession with the degrading culture is reflected in his lines, and his hope is to make the readers feel the importance of it, which is the mission of the poet, as culture is the strength and base of a developed society.

Spiritual Decadence

India is widely known for its inclination towards spirituality that makes a person move towards achieving a goal or destination successfully. As a human being, the supreme creation of the creator is assigned the duty to make the earth heaven, Such as by using his reason and conscience. Spirituality, in a broader meaning, is the devotion and dedication towards duty with a heart of empathy, Compassion, and generosity.

Mahapatra has written mainly on his native land to represent the whole world. His native place, Odisha, is famous for its morality and spirituality, which is seen in the religious activities of its people. Odisha is a land of temples and festivals where Lord Jagannath is the deity of the land, and for Him, each month has its own significance to celebrate. Puri is known as Shreekshestra which is a holy place to attain salvation. Many monuments and sculptures of this land symbolize its spirituality. People gather together to celebrate each day, relating it to any religious rites and rituals. But the spirituality which once held a deep meaning in the lives of the people has lost its value. In the name of spirituality, exploitation is occurring everywhere.

The spiritual decadence is visible across the entire land, leading towards ruined hope and faith. Though temples-the symbols of spirituality-stand tall, there are helpless beggars, naked children, and lepers who wait for the kindness and mercy of the rich, yet no kind eyes ever fall upon them. The physical and mental conditions of these lepers and the beggars reflect the deep spiritual emptiness in the human soul. In the poem, "*Main Temple Street, Puri*", the poet writes:

Children, brown as earth
continue to laugh of cripples and
mating mongrels.
Nobody ever bothers about them.
The temple points to unending rhythm.
On the dusty streets, the colour of shorn
scalp there are things moving all the
time and yet nothing seems to go away
from sight. Injuries drowsy with the
heat (Mahapatra 16).

Here, the poet strongly blames religion, rites, and rituals which do not solve or uplift

the condition of those people who are down-trodden. Not only the beggars, lepers, and children, but the image of the “whore” reflects a deep spiritual barrenness that comes frequently in the poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra. Man has lost his values and culture of the land. Woman, the incarnation of “Shakti”, becomes an object of enjoyment and a means of satisfying lust. This treatment towards women is a clear symbol of spiritual decadence. Woman has lost her purity and chastity; She has allowed herself to be easily accessed for money, but it is out of compulsion rather than choice. It is a desperate struggle to overcome the demon-like hunger. While offering herself to others, she becomes professional, lacking love and emotion. In the poem “*The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street*”, the poet writes:

When like a door, her words close
 behind:" Hurry will you " "let me go",
 and her lonely breath
 thrashed against your kind (Mahapatra 18).

“*Dawn at Puri*” begins with an ominous symbol of crows and their noise hovering around a skull lying on the holy sands of the beach of Puri. "The skull" points out the condition of the people in contrast to the rites and rituals of the temple of Lord Jagannath. Puri is famous for being a symbol of spirituality; However, the picture of skull is the symbol of hunger and starvation. Here, the poet indicates the contrast situation of the same holy place, which speaks to a misinterpretation of spirituality. To worship God by offering costly jewellery, clothing, fruits, sweets, or food is not true spirituality; offering these only creates a barrier between the rich and poor, or the priest and the people. Instead, spirituality means helping the needy, showing empathy, being compassionate is spirituality. The present scenario that shows the meaning of spirituality in a narrower sense is not spirituality, but a decadence of spirituality.

“Endless crow noises

A skull in the holy sand

stilts its empty country towards hunger” (Mahapatra 1-3).

However, the poems of this volume are like a mirror to show the spiritual decadence through symbols and imagery. Here, the poet has interpreted the core of humanity with its contemporary treatment, symbolizing the attempt of the poet to make the readers feel and see the present scenario to rectify the present to build a fully developed nation, aligning with values and morality, leading towards an ultimate, high order of spirituality.

Conclusion

Jayanta Mahapatra's maturity as a poet came to the light with the publication of the volume *A Rain of Rites*, where he shows the glorious past and a devastated present very artistically by using various figures of speech. Most of the poems in this volume describes the present scenario of social, cultural, and spiritual degradation. Woman has been described as an object of enjoyment or a thing to be handled easily at the whims and wishes of men. Children, the future of the nation, are deprived of proper care and adequate nutrition. Hunger is narrated as a demon to play with the emotions of people and force them to go against values and morality. Mahapatra says:

"Around me was sickness and hunger, the suffering of people from malnutrition and disease- terrible form of disorder of the universe that made me question myself on the goodness God we had been taught to believe in, and so I left unable to reconcile these two affirmations- that God is the sum of all perfection, and that the world of ours with all its imperfections was created by him" (Mahapatra, *“Through the Looking Glass”*).

Mahapatra, as a son of soil has felt the illusion of life in the present era, as having a deep faith on God, the creator and saviour of the world but the surrounding is inflicted with inhumane activities put the poet in dilemma to believe in the relationship between the creator and creation.

The poem “*A Rain of Rites*” is one of the finest literary pieces, showing the mirror to the society to be conscious of the ruined present. Through this poem, Jayanta Mahapatra has addressed his people to rectify the present, revise the past and reshape the future.

Works Cited:

Devy, G.N. *Rites and Signs: A Note on Jayanta Mahapatra's Poetic Sensibility*, Living Indian English Poets, ed. Madhusudan Prasad, New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd, 1989. P.7.

Engels, Friedrich. *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. Translated by Ernest Uttermann, Penguin Classics, 2010.

Mahapatra, Jayanta. *Selected Poems*. Oxford University Press 1987.

Mahapatra, Jayanta. *Through the Looking Glass*, Times of India, 28 mar 1992:2

Mahapatra Jayanta, *A Rain of Rites*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1976.

Parthasarathy, R. *Jayanta Mahapatra and the Quest for Identity*. Journal of South Asian Literature, vol.19, no.2, 1984.

Prasad, M.Ed. *The Poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra*. New Delhi: Sterling, 1986.Print Publishers.