

Structural Violence and Poverty in the Select Poems of Jayanta Mahapatra**Dr. Rituraj Trivedi¹ & Mr. Bhagwant Rao Nandeshwar¹**¹Assistant Professor Department of English & Foreign Languages, IGNTU, Amarkantak, M.P.²Research Scholar Department of English & Foreign Languages, IGNTU, Amarkantak, M.P.

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Abstract

The present study focuses on poverty and inequality in four poems of Jayanta Mahapatra, namely, “Main Temple Street, Puri,” “The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street,” “Hunger,” and “The Tattooed Taste.” Poverty in these poems is not incidental. Here, poverty is a structural issue. It is produced and sustained by religious, economic and social institutions. There are previous studies of Mahapatra that use post-colonial or regional approaches. This study takes a different approach. It brings together Marxist literary theory and Johan Galtung's theory of structural violence. Marxist criticism offers explanations of poverty based on the economic base, commodification and alienation. Structural violence theory is a theory that helps to understand that harm is done by structure, as that is the way that it is structured, not by any one villain. These frameworks help to focus Mahapatra's social vision in the reading. This study employs a close reading of texts that map poverty in four locations. These are the temple street, the brothel, the fishing hut and the beggar's corner of the city. Each is a case of poverty being perpetuated without direct coercion of the institutions. Charity, ritual and family only absorb suffering; they do not resolve it. The analysis also focuses on Mahapatra's poetic style. This structural argument is also decoded by imagery, irony, direct address and landscape. They observe suffering, but they never intervene. In addition, the ethical boundaries of Mahapatra's approach are considered. He prefers criticising the situation rather than resolving it in his poetry. It employs visibility as an ethical address. This method remains applicable in today's India, as there is still significant inequality and normalised poverty.

Keywords: Structural violence, Poverty, Marxist criticism, Commodification, Alienation, Reification, Social inequality, and Institutional harm.

Introduction

Jayanta Mahapatra was born in Cuttack, Odisha, in 1928. He lived in this area for the majority of his life. He bears this geography in his poetry. The temple economy is a recurring theme in Puri's writing. So are the villages that do fishing along the Bay of Bengal. Mahapatra was a physics lecturer before he turned to poetry (Bhuyan). This late arrival influenced his verse. Themes of suffering, like in his images, are often treated with a patient, almost clinical interest.

Mahapatra's works date to the post-Independence era. At this time, economic change was expected. The development was not the same for all. Rural poverty and uneven development persisted well after independence, even as the national economy grew (Sen and Drèze). Dependencies still existed, such as in Odisha. Fishermen, labourers and beggars remained on the periphery. Political freedom did not bring them material freedom either. This gap forms the backdrop of Mahapatra's poetry. His images respond to the economic base.

Two frameworks guide this paper. The first framework is Marxist criticism. This approach enables this study to read literature through economic relations. It queries the influence of the material world over a society's cultural life. Marx says this connection explicitly. He writes that: “The mode of production of material life

conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.” (*A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* 20-21) Eagleton subsequently reiterates this notion for literary study. He notes that a text’s form follows its material content, since “‘Content’ is in this sense before ‘form’” (Eagleton 21). Marxist criticism also explores the phenomena of class antagonism, commodity fetishism, and alienation. The following are ideas about how poverty makes human connections into transactions.

The second framework is the theory of structural violence. This concept was put forward in 1969 by Johan Galtung. He drew a wide definition of ‘violence’. For Galtung: “Violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual semantic and mental realisations are below their potential realisations” (“Violence, Peace, and Peace Research” 168). There is no visible aggressor for this harm. It can live inside institutions. It can be hidden in the folds of religion, economy and society.

In the existing scholarship on Mahapatra, he is read mostly from the post-colonial and regional perspectives (Das, Mitra). This paper asserts a path different from the above. This study instead dissects his poetry through the lens of economic structures and systemic harm.

The four poems in the collection *A Rain of Rites* capture poverty at four locations. It depicts beggars and disabled men/girls ignored by the side of the temple on “Main Temple Street, Puri”. The sky itself hangs “on to its crutches of silence” (Mahapatra 16). “The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street” kicks off with a hard-hitting statement: “Walk right in. It is yours” (17). This poem exposes the commodification of women’s bodies. In “Hunger”, a fisherman gives his daughter to a stranger. It ends on a disturbing image of desire: “the fish slithering, turning inside” (44). “The Tattooed Taste” is about a man with a disability who is a beggar and his son, who is paralysed. Their poverty is next to hollow religious charity. It ends with forces that are “purposeful daggers that decide, / but will not kill for mercy” (57).

This paper argues that poverty is not merely a decorative backdrop in these 4 poems. It is a structural condition. Religious, economic and social institutions reproduce it. The following sections read each poem closely. This study combines Marxist criticism and the theory of structural violence. A Marxist interpretation helps us understand why this poverty exists. It exists without an identified wrongdoer, as explained by structural violence theory.

Representation of Poverty as a Structural Condition

Poverty is a natural fact in Mahapatra’s perspective. It is not incidental. It is repeated in each of the four poems. In each poem, poverty becomes a part of an institution. The institution perpetuates poverty. This section reads this piece very carefully.

“Hunger” offers the starkest example. The speaker is taken to his hut by a fisherman. He offers his own daughter for money. He does this “will you have her, carelessly” as if it did not need thought (Mahapatra 44). This is what Marxist theory refers to as ‘commodification’. Relations with humans turn into exchange relations in a society of scarcity. Fatherhood itself turn into a transaction. Marx and Engels refer directly to such a transformation into the commodity form. They write that market logic: “resolved personal worth into exchange value” (Marx and Engels 2). It is the same for the fisherman’s paternal bond. It is forced to grow beyond its natural form or shape by poverty. The daughter turns into an object between men. In the poem, she does not use her own words. The stillness suggests her absence from the exchange that she is stuck in.

In “Main Temple Street, Puri”, a more subdued version of the same issue is demonstrated. In the vicinity of the temple, there are children and people with disabilities. The speaker clearly states: “nobody ever thinks about them” (Mahapatra 16). The whole thrust of structural violence is in this line. No one is going to beat these guys. No one calls them ‘the enemy’. The only thing they are left with is that. This reading can be sustained with a reading of Paul Farmer’s account of structural violence. He insists that affliction must be understood through “large-scale social and economic structures” (Farmer 305). The rhythm of the temple goes on unabated next to their suffering. The economy of pilgrimages works whether or not people are included in or excluded from it. This is the harm of no one. It is an injury resulting from a regular occurrence.

In “The Tattooed Taste,” this trend is carried a step further. Here, poverty and disability intersect. A father pleads with the man to take his “paralysed boy” (Mahapatra 55) to the doctor. Son is unable to walk. He cannot earn. It has been twice that he has been excluded because he is poor, and again because of his body. Even the “sacred ash” of religious life fails to reach him (55). The poem compares him to men devoted to ritual. They do not change anything physically about their devotion. This gap matches Galtung’s own definition of violence: “Violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual semantic and mental realisations are below their potential realisations” (“Violence, Peace, and Peace Research” 168). No one is to blame; it is just that the son’s potential is not being fulfilled, it is being ignored, and it is going unmentioned.

“The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street” completes this survey. The poem opens with a command: “Walk right in. It is yours” (Mahapatra 17). This line takes on the women within. They are not explicitly described as being in the brothel. The poem, however, suggests an economic compulsion. The women think of “looked-after children and of home” even while working (17). This detail implies hard labour, rather than for desire. Exchange value again becomes personal worth, as in the case of the daughter in “Hunger”. The decision to enter this labour is influenced by the scarcity of materials rather than by free choice.

In each of the four poems, poverty can be heard again and again, but it is never resolved. It has been passed down from dad to daughter. Transitions from public street to private room. There is no one person responsible for it. It exists within the temple, the home, and the marketplace. This uniformity runs counter to the interpretation of poverty as local colour. It is rather a structural state, quietly reproduced by the very institutions that are supposed to alleviate it.

Social Inequality, Class Division, and Marginalised Communities

The four poems by Mahapatra show different marginalised groups. Every group comes across a different failing institution. In this section, we will explore this pattern. It demonstrates class division in a non-confrontational manner.

Firstly, the underclass is introduced in the context of the “Main Temple Street, Puri”. People with disabilities and children are seated around the temple. The temple itself “points to unending rhythm” (Mahapatra 16). This beat goes on and on. It does not notice the pain there. Louis Althusser’s theory of ideology describes this well. He names religion as one of several “Ideological State Apparatuses,” institutions like churches that reproduce belief without force (Althusser 143). This is how the temple works in the poem. It gives pilgrims significance and direction. There is no solution for the bodies that it leaves out at its boundaries. The sacred institution is transformed into a Marxist superstructure. It makes ritual the site of inequality. It recapitulates inequality in ritual. It does not solve that inequality.

In “The Tattooed Taste”, this is deepened. In the opening lines of the poem, “good flaccid fathers” (Mahapatra 55) are introduced. These men “grow their own vegetables” and “love their neighbours” (55). They also “dole out palmfuls of rice on holy Mondays” (55). On the surface, their generosity is great. It does not affect the structure of the building. The beggar and his paralysed son are outside of institutional care. It is this very space that Fernando De Maio and David Ansell refer to. They argue: “Structural violence explicitly identifies social, economic, and political systems as the *causes* of poor health.” (De Maio and Ansell 749). Ritual charity is not a system. It is a gesture within a system. The poem demonstrates this one act of kindness to those it would expect to aid and comfort.

“The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street” turns to a different marginalised group. In this place, women’s bodies are subject to a patriarchal-economic exchange. The poem speaks to the reader personally: “Walk right in. It is yours” (Mahapatra 17). This line encapsulates the objectification of women, rather than them being seen as people. However, the poem does not stop there. It also depicts their personal grief. The speaker imagines their “secret moonlight,” hidden behind “false chatter” (17). Marx’s term “alienation” accounts for this division. According to him: “since this is produced not for his own use and appropriation but for exchange” (*A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* 8). The women of this poem have the same disassociativeness. They are isolated from home life. They are also cut off from their own children, who are “dark, superfluous” (17). It is a combination of class and gender. These women are forced into commodified labour by poverty. The way that this labour is then carried out and evaluated is influenced by patriarchal forms.

This is a survey, but of another kind: Hunger. This study’s previous reading of the poem as commodification took place earlier. Instead of kinship as a means of class transcendence, here the concern is with kinship as a site of class reproduction. The father does not take advantage of a stranger. He abuses his own child. Breaking the barrier of poverty in this poem is not easy at all. It circulates within a family, from one family member to the next. It is a more discreet instance of structural violence than the temple or brothel display. There is no outside institution to it. The family becomes a site of its own inequality.

In none of the four texts does there appear to be one particular villain. It is not a character that causes this suffering. Harm walks in the temple, family and commerce. Ritual is all that religion can provide you, and that is not a remedy. Family does not provide protection; it provides survival. This characterises structural violence. Does not require an aggressor. It is only required that there be an ongoing system that runs even when people fall out of it.

Poetic Techniques as Vehicles for Structural Critique

Mahapatra does not make a direct criticism. He systematically constructs it through his technique. The argument is carried through imagery, irony and voice. Landscape has a particular significance. It remains indifferent to the suffering, but does not change it. These devices are examined in all four poems in this section.

In “Main Temple Street, Puri”, the imagery is the most significant. The last line of the poem has the sky “hanging on to its crutches of silence” (Mahapatra 16). This image depicts divinity as having a broken body. The sky (above) should symbolise strength and insight. Rather, it is barked, tied down and speechless. The poem also reveals human onlookers failing. The men go by with indifferent looks on their faces and ignore people with disabilities and the children. This is a failure of the human being, well explained by Raymond Williams’ concept of hegemony. He argues: “A lived hegemony is always a process. It is not, except analytically, a system or a structure. It is a realised complex of experiences, relationships, and activities, with specific and changing pressures and limits.” (Williams 112). The click of the camera is an example of the kind

of consent that the bystanders give. They do not attack anybody. They walk on. That habit is the form that the poem challenges.

“The Tattooed Taste” is more ironic. This poem plays off the contrast between a beggar and his paralysed son set against a nearby theatre marquee. The marquee’s “amber pearls of light” pull couples inside for entertainment (Mahapatra 55). The beggar is standing outside, but we cannot see him. Ritual is all he gets from religious men as they pass him by. Commercial and religious establishments are aglow with the attention of others. Neither turns towards the man on the street. This failure is expanded to cosmic proportions later in the poem. It describes forces that are “purposeful daggers that decide, / but will not kill for mercy” (57). This photo portrays power, but no compassion. Vittorio Bufacchi’s writing on violence is helpful here. He distinguishes visible force from a quieter kind of harm, “a violation” of rights that requires no direct attacker (Bufacchi 197). Mahapatra’s daggers “decide.” However, they still refuse to show mercy.

“The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street” employs another device: direct address. The first line of the poem is in the form of a direct address to the reader. It says, “Walk right in: It is yours” (Mahapatra 17). This “you” refuses distance. The reader is drawn into the transaction that the poem portrays. The reader is not allowed to just read about the brothel from the outside. This is a strategy similar to one central to structural violence theory. This type of harm is diffused among multiple perpetrators rather than a single one (Galtung 168). That is what makes the poem personal because it is addressed. The reader is now a node within the system being criticised.

The image “Hunger” switches to visceral imagery. Its final image fuses hunger with desire: “the fish slithering, turning inside” (Mahapatra 44). This line is a mix of both. Inside the speaker himself, there is a confluence of physical hunger, sexual desire and moral horror. This reading is supported by the work of Paul Farmer on structural violence: “that can move easily from the local to the large-scale, tying together the ethnographically visible with the deeper structures that generate or perpetuate poverty and inequality and with the meanings these events and processes are given.” (Farmer 323). The settling is exactly what Mahapatra’s image does. Poverty turns into a feeling, an inner experience, rather than an outer occurrence.

There is one pattern that relates all four poems. Landscape is a witness, no intervention. The sky watches in “Main Temple Street.” In “The Tattooed Taste”, the sea is pounding its feet on the rocks. The street is what keeps the brothel alive. The two natural and social environments have a common task. They remain present. They remain visible. They do not act. The most obvious formal evidence of Mahapatra’s argument is this passivity. There is no need for violent enforcement of inequality. Only institutions, human or elemental, that continue to monitor and stand still are required.

Human Dignity, Compassion, and the Limits of Social Critique

Mahapatra’s poetry records sufferings. It does not just record it, however. It also asks about the worth of documentation. This tension is explored in this section, which questions whether the poems are genuine, critical, or merely aesthetic sympathies.

The most stark moral dilemma is raised by “Hunger. The daughter is silent all of her life. She is only described by the male speaker’s perception. Her legs are “cold as rubber” (Mahapatra 44). Her body is a thing of desire and not thought. This lack of communication needs to be investigated. Commodification here is uncovered through a Marxist reading. However, the method of the poem cannot be fully accounted for by mere reference to the commodification. The mocking gaze comes back in the poem itself. The speaker’s sense of “The hunger there” is heightened as he documents the girl’s being exploited (44). It is helpful to use the concept of

reification, as applied by Georg Lukács. He describes: “a relation between people takes on the character of a thing ... an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people” (Lukács 83). It is the same with the daughter in this poem. For her, the encounter is her life. She is not in it; she is not outside of it. The poem may perpetuate that which it calls out.

“The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street” takes a different approach to this issue. It even “commodifies” women initially. She treats them as if they were available: “Walk right in. It is yours” (Mahapatra 17). However, the poem changes halfway through. It visualises the women’s inner thoughts. They consider ‘looked-after children’ and ‘of home’ (17). This addition adds to some interiority. It does not eliminate commodification. It complicates it. The final line of the poem extends this. Finally, the woman’s voice comes out in her own. “Hurry, will you? Go away, I say, let me go. “Her lonely breath thrashed against your kind” (18). There is no return to the desire of men in this line. It turns against it. The final line of the poem is an accusation against the reader, which it had started to insult.

At least “Main Temple Street, Puri” is not even resolvable. The last image in the poem is of the sky, which is mute and unable (Mahapatra 16). No character intervenes. No one is punished. No one is saved. That is a refusal, too, which is a stance. Paul Farmer’s account of structural violence supports this reading. Structural violence, he argues, is embedded in “large-scale social and economic structures,” not in isolated moral failures (Farmer 305). Mahapatra’s poem is formally similar to that argument. It has no bad guys to beat or any heroes to cheer. Without resolution, the poem is the argument.

The Tattooed Taste” is the best example of dignity in these circumstances. The beggar tells his paralysed son “a story of forgotten kingdoms, wars of the just” (Mahapatra 56). This act entails no material cost for him. Does not alter the structure in any way. It is still tender, however. This is a scene that corresponds to Galtung’s basic distinction between direct and structural harm (168). No one hits the boy. No one is directly punished for him. His health is still not at an optimum level – yet, out of the reach of any attacker. The father cannot fill that void for his boy. He can still deny that it is a complete definition of their bond. Mahapatra does not offer this tenderness as a remedy. He suggests it as a survival in an unchanging system.

Together, these four poems push literary boundaries of compassion. They observe, do not intervene. So, this is a legitimate question to ask. Does Mahapatra’s humanism question structural violence, or does it merely describe it sympathetically? The evidence indicates both. He does not solve the problems of poverty in his poems. They say that readers must read this without a “comfortable distance.

Conclusion: The Continuing Relevance of Mahapatra’s Poetry

Four poems of Jayanta Mahapatra have been discussed in this paper. Poverty is staged in each poem in a different social place. It is situated next to the sacred ritual, in “Main Temple Street, Puri”. It is enclosed in the commodified intimacy of The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street. It puts it in the same family as “Hunger. It is set on an urban street, next to religion and business in “The Tattooed Taste”. In these locations, there is one common thread. Poverty is not a random occurrence. It is initiated and maintained by institutions.

There is an explanation for this poverty according to Marxist criticism. When the goods and services are economically scarce, relationships become transactions. It occurs between the fisherman and the fisherman’s daughter. It is a situation that occurs between the women and their clients in Calcutta. Structural violence theory is one of the theories that help explain why this poverty persists. This illustrates the harm caused by an unseen aggressor. This is the plight of the children who are neglected on the temple street. As does the boy

with the disability, who is not included in ritual charity. When combined, these two frameworks make up a full picture. Marxism provides the cause. The theory of structural violence provides the mechanism of endurance.

Technique is as much a part of this argument as is content. Mahapatra seldom expresses his criticism directly. He constructs it through picture and sound. All of these silent works watch the seas, silence the skies, and address the reader. They suggest the reader. They refuse resolution.

The poems also experiment with their own techniques. In “Hunger”, the daughter does not talk. The poem is in danger of becoming the very thing it condemns. The poem of the brothel is another matter. It concludes with a self-reflection to the reader. This tension is continued throughout all four texts. Mahapatra’s poems point to criticism. It does not suggest any solutions.

This dual structure provides something that earlier readings of Mahapatra have not. The majority of previous criticism interprets him from a post-colonial or regional perspective. This paper reads him through the lens of economic structure and institutional harm.

His poems are still relevant today. Decades after independence, India remains unevenly developed (Sen and Drèze). Structural change remains absent, and ritualised charity steps in. Poems written decades ago, many of which Mahapatra’s readers will identify with, describe conditions that persist today.

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