

The Spiritual Dimension, The Sacred Dualities: Exploring Religion in Mahapatra's Poetic Landscape

Ashraful Alam Choudhury

Assistant Professor & Head, Department of English,
Khagarijan College, Nagaon, Assam, India

Abstract

Jayanta Mahapatra, one of the poets who have made the Indian English Poetry a novel scene in itself, paints a poetic terrain, influenced by two religious paths, which is his own Christian ethos and the prevalent Hindu ethos in Odisha. This sacred duality comes to the forefront of his poetic investigation in which the instruments of spiritual symbols are also as much anchors of his culture as they are instruments of social criticism. In such poems as Dawn at Puri, Indian Summer, and Hunger, Mahapatra uses imagery of Hindu rituals, but couples that imagery with a more abstract theme of marginalization, the oppression of women, and existential suffering. In the Imagist accuracy and allusion, he is critical about the falsehood of the religious practices that co-exist in the surroundings of poverty, caste discrimination, and patriarchal social systems. Though Hindu sacred geography gives much of his poetic vision form, his Christian vision sets a perspective and gives a touch of distance enabling him to challenge and recontextualize spiritual traditions. In this paper, I will discuss how the bicultural spiritual identity of the poet Mahapatra is referable to his poetic-making processes as well as to his light on the intersections of faith, suffering, the human state, etc.

Keywords: Jayanta Mahapatra, religious symbolism, spiritual duality, Hindu imagery, Christian perspective, social critique, Imagism, Odisha culture

Introduction

Jayanta Mahapatra (1928–2023), one of the most celebrated figures in Indian English poetry, carved a distinctive space in literary discourse through his introspective engagement with themes of spirituality, cultural identity, and social consciousness. His poetry does not approach religion through overt theological exposition, but rather through imagistic and emotionally resonant portrayals of spiritual landscapes rooted in his native Odisha. Born into a devout Christian household in the predominantly Hindu city of Cuttack, Mahapatra's personal and poetic identity was inevitably shaped by a profound spiritual duality. This intersection of Christianity and Hinduism provides the foundation for much of his poetic inquiry, serving both as an internal conflict and a lens through which he interprets the world.

Mahapatra's major works such as *A Rain of Rites* (1976), *Bare Face* (2000), and iconic poems like *Dawn at Puri*, *Indian Summer*, and *Hunger* explore the tensions between religious ritual and lived reality. These works reflect a deep ambivalence toward religious orthodoxy, exposing how sacred traditions often coexist with, and sometimes obscure, the realities of poverty, gendered suffering, and caste marginalization. His poetic style marked by minimalism, imagism, and cultural specificity fuses English literary form with the mythic and geographical textures of Odisha's spiritual sites, including Puri, Konark, and Bhubaneswar.

This paper investigates how Mahapatra's bicultural religious identity shapes his poetic landscape and interrogates the symbolic and structural functions of religious imagery in his work. It seeks to answer the following questions: How does Mahapatra's spiritual duality manifest in his use of religious symbols and sacred geography? In what ways do his poetic techniques enhance or challenge traditional notions of faith and ritual? And how do critics interpret his religious and cultural commentary through feminist, postcolonial, and socio-political lenses?

Literature Review

Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry has been the subject of extensive scholarly engagement, particularly for its thematic depth and cultural complexity. Critics consistently emphasize his nuanced handling of religious duality, his rootedness in the spiritual topography of Odisha, and his concern with marginalization and human suffering. This section surveys key critical works that provide foundational insights into these aspects.

In his seminal work *The Poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra*, Bijay Kumar Das (1992) underscores religion as a central force in Mahapatra's poetic imagination. Das observes that Mahapatra's Christian background, juxtaposed with the omnipresence of Hindu rituals in Odisha, lends his work a distinctive spiritual ambivalence. This duality, Das argues, enables the poet to maintain a critical distance from ritualistic practices, which he often portrays as hollow or oppressive.

M. K. Naik's essay "Two Worlds: The Imagery of Jayanta Mahapatra," included in *The Poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra: Some Critical Considerations* (ed. Madhusudan Prasad, 2006), explores how Mahapatra navigates between Christian scepticism and Hindu iconography. Naik highlights how Mahapatra transforms familiar religious spaces temples, cremation grounds, sacred cities into sites of both transcendence and critique. His poetry, Naik contends, does not affirm religious orthodoxy but instead meditates on its contradictions.

Jaydeep Sarangi and Gauri Shankar Jha, in their edited volume *The Indian Imagination of Jayanta Mahapatra* (2006), focus on how Mahapatra's religious imagery serves as a metaphorical critique of Indian society. They argue that Mahapatra uses spiritual symbols not for devotion, but to expose societal ailments such as caste hierarchy, patriarchal control, and ritualistic hollowness. In particular, Sarangi examines *Dawn at Puri* as a paradigmatic poem where faith and despair coalesce in the figure of widows and the imagery of unburnt skulls.

From a feminist standpoint, scholars like Jasmeet Kaur and Santosh Kumar Nayak have analyzed how Mahapatra's poetry illuminates gendered suffering through religious symbolism. In poems such as *Indian Summer* and *Dawn at Puri*, female figures appear not as spiritual agents, but as victims of ritualized exclusion. Their readings highlight how Mahapatra interrogates Hindu customs such as widowhood rites and caste-bound purity codes as instruments of systemic violence.

Makarand Paranjape, in *Indian Poetry in English* (1993), situates Mahapatra within the larger framework of postcolonial Indian poetics. Paranjape observes that Mahapatra's religious scepticism is part of a broader movement among Indian English poets who grapple with inherited spiritual frameworks in a newly postcolonial context. For Mahapatra, religious

imagery becomes a means to question not only faith but also national identity, history, and memory.

In sum, the critical discourse surrounding Mahapatra affirms the significance of religious duality in his work. His Christian-Hindu hybridity, imagist technique, and cultural embeddedness offer a complex poetic language that fuses the sacred with the social. Scholars agree that his poetry resists easy piety, instead probing the ritual structures that underpin and often constrain human dignity.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative literary approach to examine how Jayanta Mahapatra's dual religious identity influences his poetic use of religious imagery. The first one is close reading of important poems where we are to concentrate on symbolism, tone, and structure (e.g. Dawn at Puri, Indian Summer, and Hunger). The discussion is reinforced with contextualization bearing in mind that, Mahapatra is a Christian and Odisha is a Hindu cultural setting. Academic opinions such as postcolonialism, feminism, and cultural policies are embedded into the discussion of how his production has a commentary on ritual, social exclusion, and identity. It is possible to note similar thematic patterns in terms of spiritual struggle and social criticism by resorting to a thematic synthesis between poems.

Imagery and Religious Symbolism

The poetry that Jayanta Mahapatra has written is much invested in the application of imagery and religious iconographical figuration not as a means of decoration, but rather as a tool of criticism and thought. His use of religious themes and religious contexts does not strengthen the religious devotion, instead, it manifests the contradiction, pain, and silence involved in the religious traditions especially, Hindu like in Odisha. Mahapatra develops a poetic vision by using dark, sensory descriptions and along-with controlled diction: religious symbols are redefined and turned into symbols of social conflict and inner anxiety.

Zeranand (1969:Pg.110) uses the sacred city of Puri, one of the most popularly anthologized poems by Mahapatra, not as a place of transcendence, but as a territorial landscape of decay and marginalisation. The line read as first one is Endless crow noises which destroys the anticipated calmness of a pilgrimage area. These crows are symbols of death and impurity in Hindu culture and they precondition the train of thought aimed at contemplating the mismatch between ritual purity and actual suffering. The widows in white, as they sit by the temple, are characterized by the images of the net and harsh eyes that is compared to the creatures caught in a net. These men and women are not holy seekers, but mute martyrs of a culture that has locked them into strict roles of chastity and self-denial.

The appearance of the skull on the sands serves as an effective metaphor of a notion that ritual could not provide people with the real freedom. Located in a holy territory with a history of cremation, the undecayed skull turns out to be a symbol of spiritual and social neglect a left-over after a ritual could not digest it. By contrasting such harsh symbols against the religious background, Mahapatra implicitly accuses the problem of insincerity of religiosity and frailty of inner soul.

The structural elements in Dawn at Puri are free verse and consistent use of tercets that produce a rhythmic ebb and flow in the poem similar to that of the sea. The boundary between the lines becomes unclear with the help of the enjambment that reflects those unclear boundaries between religion and purposefulness, sanctity and hypocrisy. The last two stanzas change the focus of observation to the observations of the poet, the poet recalls how his mother had spoken that she wants to be cremated at Puri. This point adds an emotive note, which turns ritual space into the theater of self-accounting. The sacred in this sense is not a comfort, but an unsublimated desire and family burden.

Throughout the poetry of Mahapatra, romanticism is lost in such religious symbols as pyres, shells, bones, and temples. His use of diction is very specifically concrete as he has decided to use the visceral not the abstract to emphasize the materiality of faith and the bodies on which it acts. The images question the idea of spiritual elevation or substitute it with the images of the human weakness and deprivation. Instead of place of convergence between temporal and divine, the beach, say, turns into the place of erosion, as the norms of society and religious practices come into conflict instead of a harmonious intersection.

In the final point, the imagery and symbolism of Mahapatra make religion a battleground. Instead of certifying religion, he questions it revealing how it supports social stratifications and silences the helpless. Sacred makes the suffering visible and poetry is the arena where those silences can finally be spoken.

Social Critique and Gender Imagery

Jayanta Mahapatra takes the poetry beyond a contemplation upon the spiritual terrains, it is also an envenomed treatise of the social system that runs below and inside a religious establishment. Having touched on the imagery of religion, it should be noted that it is associated with marginalization, gender inequality, exclusion based on caste systems and poverty in his works. Instead of supporting the identity or faith on the basis of sacred settings, Mahapatra reconstructs the presence of systemic injustice acted out and sustained in such settings. This twofold requirement of esthetic beauty and social criticism mark a large part of the poetic spirit of his work.

In Dawn at Puri the most arresting social commentary comes by the picture of widows sitting in front of the temple. Having been dressed in the whiteness of their robes, they represent the religious purity, as well as social erasure. They are known as people who are no longer in the centre of their lives, according to Mahapatra, indicating not only their age but also their lack of ability to have a meaningful place in the society. Their eyes, described as austere, also convey the austerity that the process of Hindu widowhood imparts to silence, confinement, and loss of identity net-like. They are not subjects of a spiritual experience, but they are the leftovers of a patriarchal society which requires pain as a substitute of holiness. By rendering their powerlessness in the religiously-sacred ground of Puri, Mahapatra critiques the religio-cultural structures, that make the marginalization of women due to their gendered nature a given.

Another effective metaphor in the poem depicts a skull on the sands which even more demonstrates anxiety of the poet with pointless rituals. It is a left uncremated skull that symbolizes not only the process of decay of the body but also the representations of the

forgotten, the poor and the excluded whose deaths are not adequately recognized within the accepted religious paradigm. Beggars and lepers hover around the temple and they are addressed as a mass that does not have names, the expression of their existence on the verge of sanctity bears a lot of meaning to caste and economic disparity. The sacred space which is supposed to be an inclusion realm begins to be a boundary that delineates those among us who are privileged and those who are just mass.

The issue of gender critique is also enhanced in Indian Summer, where Mahapatra compares the chanting of religion with plea of silence of a good wife beside the bed. The term has cultural connotation of being good as in obedient, reserved, and patient. Sounds of funeral pyres in the background play a macabre contrast to her stillness. In this case, Mahapatra is bringing to light the performative aspect of home functions as well as ritual. The priests singing and rituals occurring outside the house are associated with voicelessness and passivity of the woman, which are symbols of personal, unspoken cost of these public practices. It is not that religion as such is condemned in this poem, but a latent and relentless highlighting of the fact that religious customs are normally built on the sweat, the wordlessness and the pain of females.

Probably the most shocking but at the same time illustrative poem in this context, is Hunger, where the possible infliction of suffering on a man can be seen through the eye of a poor fisherman who offers his daughter to the narrator. There are no direct religious contexts, but the poem bears the symbolic content of a ritualistic sacrifice. The girl changes into a voiceless transactional being, unlike offerings to worship the gods, empowered by the desire to survive. The poet's response an uncomfortable merging of hunger (literal and sexual) and guilt reveals the erosion of spiritual and ethical values in a society numbed by deprivation.

Through all these poems, religion as depicted by Mahapatra is not just a set of beliefs, it is also a social mechanism used to cover the social violence that is most times concealed. His women are never romanticized as widows, wives, daughters. Rather, they are shown as victims of a culture which celebrates them in words but closes their mouths. The bareness of his poetic language is evocative and thoughtful, and full of feeling but not melodramatic of their misery.

Conclusively, therefore, the question of gender and social inequality that Mahapatra evokes cannot be disassociated with his attack on religious rituals. He takes the sacred to reveal, not sanctify. His poetry encourages the readers to see beyond the beautiful nature of the spiritual symbols and face the unfair work of the system that tends to be behind their images. That way Mahapatra breaks ground in a new definition of the spiritual not as an escape to the virtual, but the reflection of bleakest reality.

Broader Poetic Reflections: Indian Summer & Hunger

Although Dawn at Puri is one of the most popular poems by Jayanta Mahapatra due to its religious imagery being explicit, the other poems like the Indian Summer and Hunger carry on and further elaborate on the discussion of ritual, suffering, and social disintegration. The poems are the continuation of his attack on spiritual and cultural constructs, though they assume different tones and contexts. In both, Mahapatra uses the restraint that is characteristic of his poetic style to create depths of emotional and moral contemplation under spare imagery and surface quietness of language.

The religious ritual has a slight but important presence in Indian Summer. The given poem starts with the following line, Over the sough of the solemn wind / priests sing more loudly than ever, which creates a certain effect of spiritual disturbance at once. The sombre tone of the wind draws the background upon which the ritual takes place. Chanting by priests have never been heard before, as the hint of the phrase implies, and not with a hint of divine intensity, but desperation or even overcompensatory acting. This is the point which Mahapatra makes here because religious sound is used as a filler in a spiritual vacuum and it does not represent profound belief.

At the center of Indian Summer is a woman referred to simply as the “good wife.” She lies on the speaker’s bed, not as a subject of intimacy, but as a quiet figure of endurance. The juxtaposition of her presence with the sound of funeral pyres outside evokes a sense of suspended life: she survives, but only in a ritualized role devoid of agency. The “good wife” embodies the cultural expectations imposed on women to remain passive, pure, and self-sacrificing. Her silence is not peace, but absence. Mahapatra’s use of religious imagery pyres, chants, wind serves to heighten her entrapment, positioning her as a casualty of spiritual and domestic expectations alike.

In contrast, Hunger adopts a rawer, more corporeal tone. Set on a beach devoid of temples or priests the poem centers around a fisherman who offers his daughter to the speaker in exchange for money. The daughter, like the widows and wives in other poems, is voiceless. But the context here is not ritual piety; it is survival. The act recalls a sacrificial offering, but one stripped of sanctity. The exchange of the girl’s body for economic relief exposes the moral collapse of a society where desperation overrides dignity.

Mahapatra’s imagery in Hunger is visceral: “the fish slithering, turning / inside” and “white bone thrash his eyes.” These are not metaphors of transcendence but of flesh, hunger, and guilt. The speaker himself becomes implicated in the social decay he observes, feeling the weight of both his desire and his revulsion. Hunger, in this context, is twofold both physical (the hunger of the poor for food) and psychological (the hunger for touch, power, or even release). Mahapatra offers no relief; he merely illuminates the stark reality where religion has no presence, and morality exists in fragments.

Together, Indian Summer and Hunger broaden Mahapatra’s poetic investigation. While neither poem explicitly unfolds in a ritual space like Dawn at Puri, both reflect deeply on the human cost of societal structures shaped by religion, poverty, and gender roles. The absence of formal religious sites in Hunger, and the distant ritual sounds in Indian Summer, suggest that Mahapatra’s critique transcends institutional religion it becomes a meditation on the emotional and ethical decay woven into the fabric of everyday life.

Ultimately, these poems reinforce Mahapatra’s larger poetic vision: that suffering is not peripheral to spiritual life but central to it; that ritual often obscures, rather than heals, pain; and that poetry must confront these realities directly, however uncomfortable they may be. Through these works, Mahapatra constructs a modern Indian spiritual consciousness one marked by unease, moral questioning, and a relentless search for human truth beneath the weight of tradition.

Discussion

The poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra serves as a zone of interaction between spiritual tradition and social reality which on many occasions are in conflict with each other. His poems contain crucial issues on the issue of religion and religion practice in the contemporary Indian society with regards to detail symbolism, sparse language and emotionally reserved tone. In the above analyses of Dawn at Puri, Indian Summer, and Hunger, it becomes clear that religious allusions are hardly ornamental or nostalgic gestures on the part of Mahapatra, but constitute the plainframe through which he undertakes an intense moral investigation of preconditions to human unhappiness, ostracism, and failure or ritual to bring transcendence.

One of the main messages, which can be identified in the writing by Mahapatra, is the gap between the rituals and empathy. In Dawn at Puri, the poet looks at a holy Hindu cremoter marking a cremation beach with a distance of emotions and conflicted feelings. Although the rituals are to portray peace, relief and spiritual meaning, it is the skulls, crows and widows images which stand out, disturbing as opposed to heart-warming. This also indicates that the poet is skeptical in regard to the way rituals are followed and the disparities that they are known to conceal. Instead of attacking religion head on, Mahapatra has taken a not so obvious yet nagging critique of the way religion is usually synonymous with social injustice, especially to women, the poor, and the unwell.

The presentation of women on ritual and spirituality is another worthy stream of discussion. Widows in Dawn at Puri and the good wife in Indian Summer are presented as silent and voiceless female agents, trapped by the religious norms instead of being freed by them. All these women are not demonstrated as fervent members of their religious world, on the contrary they are locked up in the regimes that demand to grieve, devote, or endure in a certain way. This is even more criticized in Hunger as the daughter of the fisherman is exploited; demonstrating how women bodies are bought and sold as there is nothing like morals or spirituality in the real sense. The manner in which Mahapatra depicts women in these poems also complements the feminist interpretation which shapes the religious ritual as laden with the formalization of patriarchal values particularly in the manifestation of the widowhood selecting the subject of purity and sacrifice.

The subtle but also important role of Mahapatra in establishing himself in the poetic world is the influence of his Christian background. Being brought up in a Christian family in a largely Hindu world, Mahapatra writes in a place where she has both the insider and the outsider view. This two-fold identity enables him to enjoy the cultural richness of Hinduism and at the same time create a critical distance as well. His style is frequently contemplative and guarded, and not caught in doctrinal trammels, and therefore there is the slightest sound of authority about his criticism. He does not hate religion, however, he is highly conscious of its inconsistencies. To a great extent, his poems express spiritual hunger and loss of faith, a kind of search in the emptied out areas brought about by tradition and injustice.

What is more, the work of Mahapatra makes a significant contribution to postcolonial Indian poetry in its efforts to rebel against the traditional orders of authority, religious as well as social in the very form. In writing in English and yet describing Oriya environments and Hindu

traditions, he disrupts the hierarchical contrasts between colonizer and colonized, sacred and secular and modern and traditional. The late Imagism, minimalism, and broken rhythms characterize him as an artist of modernism, but his subjects are closely connected to the land of India. This synthesis enables him to address his messages to both the global and local audience, raising universal questions of life and death, religion, and injustice using the symbols that are so distinctly regional.

Simply speaking, spiritual resolution in poetry is not a goal of Mahapatra. Rather, it presents a reflective space in which the reader is encouraged to think differently about the connection between belief and suffering, ritual and reality. His religious visions be it a temple, a funeral pyre or a shell with leprosy, all become a medium through which a greater scar in the society is divulged. Mahapatra attained success because he was able to turn sacred imagery into a moral query and his poetry has no purpose of confirming a belief, rather it is to fulfil the quest in probing the hazy and insecure human experience in the core of all spiritual tradition.

Conclusion

The poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra can be considered as a highly intellectual thought about the connection between the realm of faith, the self, and human suffering. His social position as a Christian brought up in a Hindu culture gives him a particular, very special, poetic voice one that treats religious images with a doubter and outsider awareness of their incoherency. This bi-focalism is the key to his poetic enterprise and he himself is able to exploit the aspects and at the same time comment on the rituals, symbols and spiritual geographies of India.

By conducting close readings of *Dawn at Puri*, *Indian Summer*, and *Hunger*, this paper has revealed how Mahapatra applies the religious space and symbols to act as mirrors like temples, pyre, widows, priests and offerings to reflect the fissures of the society. These religious elements are converted into instruments of revelation of the pain of the humiliated through his poetical form which is the imagist clarity, sparseness and symbolism. Be it the silent suffering of the widows, the wordlessness of survival of women or the hopeless commodification of bodies and bodies, this verse of Mahapatra always shows that religious ritual must be in a kind of limp conflict with the reality of life.

The result of his work is not a denial of spirituality, but an intellectual probing of its insignificance and disappointments. The poems by Mahapatra do not bring closure and surety, rather they leave the reader squirming uncomfortably to make them ask what is holy and why. He has also been critical of the performative nature of faith through his poetry; however, he also understands the human desire that makes us perform faith.

And the way Mahapatra tackles the issue of religion is neither reverential nor cynical, it is humane, doubtful and a little too human. He does not destroy belief but he puts it under the light and its shadows become visible. By so doing, he is redefining what the art of a religious poetry can do in a contemporary, pluralistic and diversified world where the sacred enters into constant dialogue with suffering, and where writing poetry intervenes as a form not of solutions, but of sincerity.

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