UNIT 15: JAYANTA MAHAPATRA: "DAWN AT PURI"

UNIT STRUCTURE

15.1 Learning Objectives

15.2 Introduction

15.3 Text of the Poem

15.4 Context of the Poem

15.5 Explanation of the Poem

15.6 Style and Language

15.7 Poetic Techniques

15.8 Let us Sum up

15.9 Further Reading

15.10 Answers to Check Your Progress

15.11 Model Questions

15.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to :

- explain the poem "Dawn at Puri"
- explain the context of the poem
- describe the poetic devices and the language employed by the poet
- evaluate and appreciate the poem in its totality

15.2 INTRODUCTION

After a discussion on the life and works of Jayanta Mahapatra in Unit 14, this unit makes an attempt to acquaint you with the poem "Dawn at Puri" composed by Jayanta Mahapatra who has occupied a prominent place among the Indian poets writing in English. You may have read some of his important poems like "Again, One Day", "Walking by the River", "Indian Summer", "Hunger", etc. Mahapatra, in his poems, writes more about Orissa

than about India as a whole. You must have certainly heard about or visited Puri sometime in your life and here visit Puri through the eyes of Mahapatra. In the poem under discussion, Mahapatra attacks age-old traditions and practices which make people suffer rather than give peace and solace.

We will discuss in detail the stated issues in the following sub-units. We will also analyze the poem in a critical fashion which will help you make sense of the intention of the poet behind writing this poem. After reading this unit, you will be interested in reading his poems and also about his eventful life.

15.3 TEXT OF THE POEM

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**

The frail early light catches

Ruined , leprous shells leaning against one another ,

A mass of crouched faces without names,

And suddenly breaks out of my hide

Into the smoky blaze of a sullen solitary pyre

That fills my aging mother:

Her last wish to be cremated here

Twisting uncertainty like light

On the ***shifting sands***.

Glossary :

Holy sands: the sun bathed beach of Puri.

Empty Hunger: it is the back of the skull which is empty. Also represents bowl of a beggar. Here it talks about the material hunger of people who throng the temple premises.

Widowed Women: widows who live a life of austerity in temple premises.

Strands of faith: here the poet talks about cruelty in customs. Widows live a self imprisoning, austere life which reflects in-humanity in customs.

***Twisting uncertainity* :** it means that rational explanation of customs and traditions cannot justify the faith of custom – ridden devotees.

***Shifting sands* :** It refers to time.

15.4 CONTEXT OF THE POEM

"Dawn at Puri" is taken from the collection *A Rain of Rites* . The poem is set in Puri in Orissa which is the holy city of Lord Jagannath. *A Rain of Rites* is a collection of poems which Jayanta Mahapatra wrote in the middle phase of his poetic career and is shaped by the cultural heritage of Orissa in particular and India in general. *The rain*, as suggested by the title is the dominant metaphor in this volume of poetry. The rites and rituals here are concerned with priests and temples, widows, cremations, even the fate of Indian women is symbolized here through various images. Jayanta Mahapatra, like **Arun Kolatkar** in *Jejuri,* is disappointed with the hollowness of traditional practices and customs. Here in this poem Mahapatra depicts the holy city Puri which is famous as one of the most revered pilgrimage towns for Hindus.

15.5 EXPLANATION OF THE POEM

The poem "Dawn at Puri" describes the familiar landscape in the holy city of Puri. Before we begin to discuss the poem, let us note that Mahapatra is deeply rooted in India and he cannot forget his culture and ethos in which he was born. Though the language of expression is English but his sensibility is

'Oriya'. We repeat this point because in order to comprehend the prescribed poem it is important to understand his philosophy while he wrote this poem. Here in the poem under discussion, Puri is the living 'protagonist' for him. Puri is not only a setting but also a protagonist because he presents a graphic description of Puri as a central character. Here Puri is personified.

In Puri, we find a stretch of beach called Swargadwara or 'Gateway to heaven' where the dead are cremated. Many pious Hindus and widows consider it possible to attain salvation by dying at Puri. Mahapatra states: "Her last wish to be cremated here/ twisting uncertainly like light/ on the shifting sands."

Puri is not only famous as a place for four ' dhams' or 'sacred cities' but also for the 'math' or the monastery set up by Shankaracharya. Lord Jaggannath is the main deity in Puri who is in the form of Lord Vishnu. The way Mahapatra delineates the events and incidents in the poem shows us that he disapproves of what is going on under the cover of tradition and practices. You will notice how life "lies like a mass of crouched faces without names *"*and you can also see that how people are trapped by faith underlined in the expression "caught in a net". The shells on the sand are "ruined", "leprous" is suggestive of decadence and infirmity. The poem evokes loss of identity, anonymity, death, disease and decadence. As I have mentioned above, most of the Hindus wished to be cremated in the land of Lord Vishnu. The speaker's mother also had such a last wish, the wish to be cremated in Puri. This is fulfilled by the effort of her son in the blazing funeral pyre which is seen as "sullen*"* and "solitary*"*. The poem winds up on an uncertain note like the corpse of his dead mother.

Don't you think that the title evokes many interpretations? The title of the poem is very suggestive as it does not talk about only one particular dawn which might have been particularly unpleasant because one's mother is not cremated everyday. The poet is suggesting that all dawns at Puri are more or less similar with dead mothers being cremated everyday and crows' cawing along with skulls and hunger indicating poverty ridden India which shows absolute "Indianness". The poem is about feelings and compassion for the

people who suffer. Thus the poem is really a scathing attack on tradition and traditional practices which are mostly ruthless and biased. The poet bears no sympathy for rituals and hollow traditions. What we notice in the poem is basically ruthlessness of tradition, the indifference of the society and fossilled Hindu culture.



LET US KNOW

Jayanta Mahapatra like other Indian English poets writes many poems with specific Indian titles, "Indian Summer", "Evening in an Orissa Village", "The Orissa Poems" etc. Many of his poems like "Indian Summer" portrays the Indian landscape and the changing seasons.



ACTIVITY 15.1

1. Can you think of some other poem where the title depicts a landscape of India?

2. Do you feel that you have now understood the poem better? Try to explain it to another friend of yours with a different perspective and see how well you have understood it.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1: What is the poet trying to convey about the rituals connected with Puri through the poem "Dawn at Puri"?

Q2: What is the significance of the title 'Dawn at Puri'?

15.6 STYLE AND LANGUAGE

This is a short poem of 18 lines consisting of six stanzas of three lines each. A distinctive feature of Jayanta Mahapatra's style in general is the symbolic and opaque manner of speech in place of a direct, descriptive mode.

Symbols have a functional use in his poems for expressing what cannot be easily expressed. His choice of diction is generally simple. The language of Jayanta Mahapatra is descriptive. Language is so wonderfully knitted that it presents a graphic description of Puri. The language is intricate yet free-flowing. The craftsmanship of the poet is revealed through his style and the way he plays with the language. The free verse used by him gives to the poem a certain ease and fluency. His choice of diction is generaly complex. He uses abstractions like love, solitude, death, etc. In "Dawn At Puri"", the dawn itself is a metaphor for diverse human activities, in the beach and near the temple. The "widowed women" with "austere eyes" is a fine imagery to suggest the emptiness of the lives of the widows who line up early in the morning near the temple door.



LET US KNOW

In the poem "Taste For Tomorrow" from the volume *Waiting,* we find a vignette of Puri with many symbols and images of reality.

At Puri, the crows

The one wide steet

Lolls out like a giant tongue.

Five faceless lepers move aside

As a priest passes by.

And at the street's end

The crowds thronging the temple door.

A huge holy flower.

15.7 POETIC TECHNIQUES

"Dawn at Puri" is a beautiful poem giving full play to images that are vivid and hard hitting. The sentences are purely descriptive and you can notice that whatever the poet has described we feel as though it is happening before

our eyes. Are you able to literally visualize Puri? The poet beautifully creates the mood leading from one imagery to the other. The "skull on the holy sands/ tilts its empty country towards hunger" suggests the hunger of the entire nation. The images are mostly negative and critical. "Ruined, leprous" suggests decay and sickness. The image of blazing funeral pyre is suggestive of death that keeps happening every moment, everyday, everywhere. The images reflect, anger and a sense of decadence; images are realistic and they capture the contours of the temple environment. "Dawn at Puri" exemplifies the fact that the poet opens up questions beyond the temple without supplying answers. The title of the poem is also very suggestive. In this connection we can say that Mahapatra's images are drawn from a) the external world of phenomena, b) the surrealistic world. The image for him is his typical way of responding to experiences. In the poem "Dawn at Puri" the external reality of the natural landscape, be it the long stretching beach or the temple scene ("white clad, widowed women……. Waiting to enter the temple") as such does not seem to be important. Nature is simply a metaphor for human conditions. Therefore, the "beach" image acquires a universal significance for death. ("Ruined, leprous shells leaning against one another, mass of Ruined, leprous shells leaning against one another, mass of crouched faces; sullen solitary pyre".



LET US KNOW

Mahapatra says: "Today's poem utilizes a number of images and symbols to form a whole leaving the reader to extricate himself with the valid meaning and argument from them. This is true of much of the poetry that has been written.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q3: Comment on the poetic techniques used by the poet?

Q4: Explain "Ruined , leprous"?



15.8 LET US SUM UP

In this unit you have read about the great Indian English poet Jayanta Mahapatra and his poem "Dawn at Puri". By now you must have understood that Mahapatra's poetry is shaped by Oriyan sensibility. "Dawn at Puri" captures the curves of a morning landscape on the beach of Puri. Mahapatra's depiction of the temple environment is both absorbing and realistic. In fact, this presentation of the temple ambience reminds us of Arun Kolatkar's "Jejuri". The images of crows, the skull, the widows, the lepers etc. raise important questions beyond the temple. You must have noticed how Mahapatra in this poem juxtaposes memory, faith and metaphysical belief. You have then learnt about the various poetic techniques employed by the poet. An explanation of the poem will enable you with deeper understanding and also a short note on the style and language. You should now be able to illustrate, explain and appreciate Jayanta Mahaptra's poetry in general and the poem in particular effectively. The learner can read more to appreciate other Indian English poets.



15.9 FURTHER READING

1. Pandey, Mithilesh K. (1999). *Contemporary Indian Literature*: *A Humanistic Perspective*. Kalyani Publishers : New Delhi

2. *Indian English Literature*. IGNOU: 2001.

3. *Understanding Poetry: The Indian Poets*. IGNOU: 1991.



15.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q1: The poet tries to convey a scathing attack on tradition and traditional practices which are mostly ruthless and biased, the indifference of the society and the fossilized Hindu culture.

Ans to Q2: With the title of the poem, the poet suggests that all the dawns in Puri are more or less similar with dead mothers being cremated everyday and not just one particular dawn which might have been particularly unpleasant.

Ans to Q3: Mahapatra uses visualization and images through words drawn from the external world of phenomena and the surrealistic world. Also the title of the poem is itself very suggestive.

Ans to Q4: The meaning suggests the mass of broken remnants of shells which is compared symbolically to death and sickness.



15.11 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1: What is the central idea of the poem "Dawn at Puri"?

Q2: In the poem "Dawn at Puri" what are the images you can find?

Q3: Give a detailed analysis of Jayanta Mahapatra as an Indian English poet.

Q4: What is the significance of the following lines:

"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

Q5: How does an evening end in Puri ? Comment

Q6: "Her last wish …..shifting sands". Explain these lines.

*** ***** ***



REFERENCES

1. Alfred, Bendixen and Stephen Burt. (2014). *The Cambridge History of American Poetry.* Cambridge: CUP.
2. Baym, Nina. Ed. (2007). *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.
3. Boynton, Percy H.: *American Authors of Today: II. Robert Frost*. The English Journal, Vol. 11, No. 8, (Oct., 1922), pp 455-462.
4. Cox, James M. (ed.). (1962). *Robert Frost: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Eaglewood Cliffs, N.J. Prentice Hall, Inc.
5. Isaacs, Elizabeth. (1962). *An Introduction to Robert Frost*. Allan Swallow.
6. Iyengar, K.R. Srinivasa (2013 rpt.). *Indian Writing in English*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd.
7. *Indian English Literature* .IGNOU: 2001
8. King, Bruce. (1987). *Modern Indian Poetry in English.* New Delhi: OUP, 1987
9. Mehrotra, Arvind Krishna (ed.) (2010). *A Concise History of Indian Literature in English*. New Delhi: Permanent Black.
10. Mc Phillips, Robert T. *Diverging and Converging Paths: Horizontal and Vertical.*
11. *Movement in Robert Frost's Mountain Interval*. American Literature, Vol. 58 No. 1, (Mar., 1986), pp 82-98.
12. Narasimhaiah, C. D. Ed. (1997). *Indian Response to American Literature*. New Delhi: Kalyani Publishers.
13. Ousby, Ian. (1992). *Companion to Literature in English*. London: Cambridge University Press.
14. Paniker, K. Ayyappa (ed.). (1991). *Modern Indian Poetry in English*. Sahitya Akademi: New Delhi, 1991
15. Parthasarathy R. (ed.). (1976). *Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets*. OUP: New Delhi, 1976

16. Pandey, Mithilesh K. (1999). *Contemporary Indian Literature*: *A Humanistic Perspective. Kalyani* Publishers : New Delhi.

17. Poirier, Richard. (1977). *Robert Frost : The Work of Knowing*. Oxford University Press.

18. *The Poems of Robert Frost*. (1946) New York: Modern Library.

19. Singh, Kanwar Dinesh. (2008). *Contemporary Indian English Poetry: Comparing Male and Female Voices*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors Pvt Ltd.

20. Understanding Poetry: The Indian Poets . IGNOU.1991