



## Allegory of Hunger, Exploitation, and Moral Decay in Jayanta Mahapatra's "Hunger" and "The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street"

*Sima Barman*

*Independent Research Scholar, Dept. English, Gour Banga University (Malda College PG Section), West Bengal, India*

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### **Abstract**

*Hunger, as both a physical condition and a symbolic construct, occupies a central position in the poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra. This paper examines the allegorical dimensions of hunger in Mahapatra's poems "Hunger" and "The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street". Moving beyond its literal connotation, hunger is presented as a complex metaphor for socio-economic deprivation, moral disintegration, and emotional emptiness in postcolonial India. Through the application of Marxist and Postcolonial and Feminist theoretical frameworks, the study investigates how Mahapatra exposes structures of exploitation and systemic inequality. The poems reveal a world where poverty compels individuals into dehumanizing conditions, reducing human relationships to economic transactions. Mahapatra's use of stark imagery, my minimalistic language and symbolic representation intensifies the emotional impact of these realities. This paper argues that hunger functions as a multi-dimensional allegory- encompassing bodily deprivation, psychological longing, and ethical collapse. Ultimately Mahapatra's poetry serves as a critique of societal indifference and readers to confront the persistent realities of marginalization and human suffering.*

**Keywords:** *Hunger, Allegory, Marxism, Postcolonialism, Feminism, Exploitation*

### **Introduction**

Jayanta Mahapatra stands as one of the most profound voices in Indian English poetry, known for his introspective style and engagement with social realities. Born in 1928 in Cuttack, Odisha, Mahapatra emerged as a pioneering figure whose poetry reflects the complexities of Indian life, particularly the struggles of marginalized communities. He was the first Indian English poet to receive the Sahitya Academy Award, marking his significant contribution to Indian literature.

Mahapatra's poetry often revolves around themes such as memory, identity, suffering, and existential crisis. However, one of the most striking aspects of his work is his exploration of Hunger- not nearly as a biological need but as a condition deeply embedded in socio-economic and cultural contexts. In poems like "Hunger" and "The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street", hunger becomes a central motive that exposes the harsh reality of poverty exploration and human degradation.

This paper aims to analyse how Mahapatra employs hunger as an allegorical device to critique postcolonial Indian society. By examining these two poems through Marxist and postcolonial and feminist lenses, the study seeks to uncover the deeper meanings embedded in his portrayal of marginalized lives.

### **Literature Review**

Scholars have widely acknowledged Mahapatra's ability to portray the inner and outer landscapes of human suffering. According to critics, his poetry is marked by a deep sense of realism combined with symbolic intensity.

Bruce King observes that Mahapatra's work reflects “a personal vision that merges private experience with public reality”, highlighting the interconnectedness of individual and collective suffering.

Peter Barry, in his discussions on literary theory, emphasizes that texts often reveal underlying power structures when analysed through critical frameworks. Applying this idea to Mahapatra's poetry allows us to see how hunger operates as a signifier of broader social economic conditions.

Postcolonial critics such as Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin argue that literature from formally colonized nations often exposes the lingering effects of colonialism, including poverty and inequality. Mahapatra's depiction of urban and rural poverty aligns with this perspective, presenting a society still grappling with its historical and economic burdens.

While previous studies have explored themes of suffering and identity in Mahapatra's poetry, this paper specifically focuses on hunger as an allegorical construct, integrating these Marxist and postcolonial and feminist approaches for a more comprehensive analysis.

## **Objectives**

This study aims to examine hunger as a complex allegorical structure in the selected poems of Jayanta Mahapatra, moving beyond its literal interpretation as mere physical deprivation. It seeks to analyse how Hunger reveals deeper socio-economic inequalities and structures of exploitation embedded within postcolonial society. The study further explores the representation of gendered bodies, particularly focusing on the commodification of women within patriarchal and economic systems. In addition, it aims to investigate the ethical implications of representing suffering in literary texts, questioning the role of both the poet and the reader in the process of meaning making. Finally the research applies Marxist, Feminist, and Postcolonial theoretical frameworks to provide a comprehensive critical understanding of hunger as a multidimensional and ideological construct.

## **Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretive methodology grounded in close textual analysis. The primary texts include Mahapatra's poems “Hunger” and “The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street.” Secondary sources consist of critical essays and theoretical works relevant to the study.

The research employs an interdisciplinary approach, integrating Marxist, Postcolonial, and Feminist frameworks. Close reading techniques are used to analyse imagery, symbolism, tone, and narrative voice. Special emphasis is placed on the function of allegory as a dynamic and unstable structure.

The study also adopts a critical perspective on representation, examining how the depiction of suffering may involve ethical complexities and power dynamics. This approach enables a deeper understanding of how hunger operates not only as a material but also an ideological construct.

## **Analysis of “Hunger”**

Mahapatra's “Hunger” presents a haunting negative that exposes the brutal realities of poverty and its exploitation. The poem describes an encounter between the speaker and the fisherman who offers his daughter in exchange for money.

The opening lines said the two of deprivation:

“It was hard to believe the flesh was heavy on my back”.

This line conveys both physical and psychological burden, suggesting the weight of existence under conditions of extreme poverty.

One of the most poignant images in the poem is:

The boy's eyes still follow the fish that are too far away.

This symbolizes unattainable aspirations and the endless cycle of deprivation. Hunger here is not only physical but also aspirational—a longing for a better life that remains out of reach.

The most disturbing moment occurs when the father commodifies his daughter:

“My daughter, she’s just turned fifteen... Feel her. I’ll be back soon.”

This line encapsulates the moral collapse induced by poverty. The daughter is reduced to a commodity, her identity erased by economic necessity. From a Marxist perspective, this reflects the dehumanizing effects of class oppression.

Furthermore, the poem highlights the internal conflict of the speaker, who becomes complicit in this act of exploitation. This complicity suggests that societal structures implicate not only the oppressed but also those who benefit from the system.

From a postcolonial perspective, the fisherman’s plight represents the marginalized communities left behind in the process of national development. The poem thus critiques the failure of postcolonial society to address basic human needs.

Analysis of “The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street”

In “The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street,” Mahapatra shifts his focus to an urban environment, portraying the lives of women trapped in prostitution. The poem presents a grim picture of Calcutta, where poverty and exploitation coexist with urban modernity.

The line:

“The faces in the posters, the public hoardings”

Captures the monotony and despair of their existence. Their lives are marked by repetition and lack of agency.

Another striking image is:

“Where parts join, and where they part”

This line emphasizes the transient nature of male desire, contrasting it with the enduring suffering of the women. It also highlights the commodification of female bodies in a patriarchal society.

From a Marxist viewpoint, prostitution is portrayed as a direct consequence of economic inequality. The women are forced into this profession due to lack of alternatives, becoming victims of a system that prioritizes profit over human dignity. From a postcolonial perspective, the urban setting reflects the uneven distribution of wealth and resources. Calcutta, as a symbol of modernity, simultaneously reveals the deep-rooted inequalities that persist in postcolonial societies.

Hunger in this poem extends beyond physical need to include emotional and psychological dimensions. The women experience a hunger for dignity, respect, and escape from their circumstances.

Hunger as a Multidimensional Allegory

In both poems, hunger operates as a powerful allegorical device with multiple layers of meaning.

## **Physical Hunger**

The most immediate form of hunger is the need for food and survival. Both poems depict characters struggling to meet basic needs.

## **Economic Hunger**

Hunger reflects systemic inequality and class oppression. The characters are trapped in conditions that perpetuate poverty.

## **Emotional Hunger**

The absence of love, care, and human connection is evident. Relationships are reduced to transactions.

## **Moral Hunger**

The erosion of ethical values is a recurring theme. Survival often requires moral compromise.

## **Existential Hunger**

At a deeper level, the poems suggest a longing for meaning and identity in a fragmented world.

Mahapatra's use of simple yet evocative language enhances the impact of these allegories. His poetry compels readers to confront uncomfortable truths about human existence.

A Marxist reading of the poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra reveals how material conditions and class structures fundamentally shape human relationships, moral consciousness, and systems of exploitation. In "Hunger" and "The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street," Mahapatra presents a world where economic deprivation is not merely a background condition but the determining force that governs human behavior, reducing individuals to commodities within a system driven by survival and exchange.

Moreover, the poem reflects the concept of reification, where human qualities and relationships are transformed into things. The women are no longer perceived as individuals with subjectivity but as objects within a system of consumption. This process dehumanizes them, reinforcing the hierarchical structure of class and gender.

At the same time, Mahapatra's poetry suggests that such exploitation is not confined to isolated spaces but is embedded within the larger socio-economic fabric. The whorehouse is not an exception but an extension of a society where inequality is normalized and perpetuated.

Thus, a Marxist analysis of "Hunger" and "The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street" demonstrates that Mahapatra's poetry offers a powerful critique of class inequality and capitalist logic. By depicting the commodification of human bodies and the internalization of exploitative structures, the poems expose the deep entanglement of economic conditions and human consciousness. Ultimately, Mahapatra reveals that hunger is not simply a biological need but a socio-economic force that shapes, distorts, and often destroys the very foundations of human dignity and moral existence.

A postcolonial reading of the poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra reveals how hunger operates as a powerful allegorical expression of historical marginalization, structural inequality, and the incomplete realities of decolonization. In "Hunger" and "The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street," Mahapatra presents a social landscape shaped by the lingering effects of colonial rule, where political independence has failed to dismantle deeply entrenched economic and cultural hierarchies.

Postcolonial theory, as articulated by thinkers such as Bill Ashcroft and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, emphasizes that colonialism does not end with formal independence; rather, its structures persist through economic disparity, cultural domination, and the continued marginalization of subaltern groups.

Mahapatra's poetry reflects this continuity, depicting a society in which poverty and deprivation remain pervasive despite the promises of national progress.

In "Hunger," the fisherman's condition can be understood as emblematic of the subaltern subject, whose existence is shaped by forces beyond his control. His interaction with the speaker, marked by hesitation and desperation, reflects this condition.

In "The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street," the urban setting further complicates the postcolonial condition. The city, often associated with progress and modernity, is revealed as a site of contradiction, where economic growth coexists with extreme forms of exploitation. The brothel becomes a symbolic space that reflects the fractured reality of postcolonial urban life.

The concept of the subaltern, as discussed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, is particularly relevant here. Spivak argues that subaltern subjects are often denied the ability to represent themselves, their voices mediated through dominant structures of power. In Mahapatra's poetry, this silencing is evident in the absence of direct female voices, as their experiences are filtered through the perspective of the observer.

Additionally, the poems reflect the cultural and psychological dimensions of postcolonial identity. Hunger, in this context, is not only a physical condition but also a sign of cultural dislocation and existential emptiness. The characters inhabit a world where traditional values have been destabilized, yet new structures of support have not emerged, creating a fragmented social reality.

Thus, a postcolonial analysis of “Hunger” and “The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street” demonstrates that Mahapatra’s poetry offers a nuanced critique of the ongoing realities of marginalization and inequality. Hunger emerges as an allegory of the postcolonial condition itself—a condition marked by the persistence of structural injustice, the silencing of subaltern voices, and the contradictions of a society caught between past and present.

Feminist theory, particularly as articulated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, emphasizes the silencing of the subaltern woman within dominant discourses. Spivak’s assertion that the subaltern cannot speak becomes crucial in understanding Mahapatra’s poetic representation, where female figures are present yet voiceless, their experiences mediated through male perspectives. This absence of voice reflects not only narrative limitation but also a structural condition of marginalization.

In “Hunger,” the daughter’s presence is marked by her near invisibility as a speaking subject. Her identity is constructed entirely through the gaze of the father and the speaker, reducing her to an object within a transactional exchange. The moment of encounter is framed through physicality rather than subjectivity.

Moreover, the daughter’s silence is not incidental but deeply significant. It illustrates the condition in which women, particularly those from marginalized socio-economic backgrounds, are denied the ability to articulate their own experiences. This aligns with Spivak’s argument that the subaltern woman’s voice is systematically excluded, reinforcing structures of power that privilege male authority.

In “The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street,” the feminist dimension becomes even more pronounced through the collective representation of women within the brothel. These women exist within a system where their bodies function as commodities, their labor defined by the demands of male desire, a longing that remains unfulfilled, pointing to the emotional and psychological dimensions of their marginalization. The women are not only economically exploited but also deprived of identity, recognition, and agency.

From a feminist standpoint, the brothel can be understood as a site where patriarchy and capitalism intersect. The women’s bodies are controlled and consumed within a system that benefits from their subordination. This reflects the argument of bell hooks, who emphasizes that gender oppression is inseparable from class exploitation, particularly for marginalized women.

At the same time, the poem raises critical questions about the nature of the poetic gaze. The women are observed from a distance, their inner lives inaccessible, which creates a tension between representation and objectification. While the poem seeks to expose their suffering, it also risks reproducing the dynamics of voyeurism, where the female body becomes an object of aesthetic contemplation.

Importantly, Mahapatra’s poetry does not offer a space for resistance or agency within these representations. The absence of female voice and action underscores the extent to which patriarchal structures limit the possibilities of self-expression. This lack of agency reinforces the tragic dimension of the poems, where women remain confined within systems that define and control their existence.

The present study of Jayanta Mahapatra’s poems “Hunger” and “The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street” demonstrates that hunger, far from being a mere physical condition, operates as a powerful and multilayered allegory that exposes the complex intersections of exploitation and moral decay within postcolonial society. Through a close and theoretically informed reading, this paper has shown that hunger functions not only as a symbol of economic deprivation but also as a force that reshapes human relationships, ethical values, and structures of power.

From a Marxist perspective, the poems reveal how material inequality and class oppression reduce human beings to commodities within a system driven by survival and exchange. The transformation of intimate relationships into transactional ones underscores the dehumanizing impact of economic structures that prioritize value over dignity. At the same time, a postcolonial reading highlights the persistence of structural marginalization in post-independence India, where the promises of freedom and development remain unevenly distributed.

Hunger, in this sense, becomes an allegory of the unfinished project of decolonization, reflecting the continued exclusion of subaltern lives from narratives of national progress.

What emerges most powerfully from this study is the centrality of moral decay as both a consequence and a condition of exploitation. Under the relentless pressure of hunger and survival, ethical boundaries are not simply violated but gradually eroded, leading to a normalization of practices that would otherwise be considered morally unacceptable.

Ultimately, this paper argues that the allegory of hunger in Mahapatra's work serves as a profound critique of a society where economic deprivation and ethical disintegration are inextricably linked. By exposing the interconnected dynamics of exploitation, marginalization, and moral collapse, the poems demand a more critical and self-aware engagement with the realities they depict. They urge us not only to witness suffering but to interrogate the structures that produce and sustain it, thereby transforming hunger from a condition of lack into a powerful site of ethical and political reflection.

This study also opens avenues for further research by encouraging scholars to explore the representation of hunger and marginality across other literary and cultural texts, including cinema and regional narratives, in order to develop a more comprehensive understanding of its socio-cultural implications. While the present analysis does not propose direct solutions, it emphasizes the importance of critical awareness and ethical engagement with structures of inequality, suggesting that meaningful change begins with a deeper interrogation of the systems that normalize exploitation and moral decay.

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