

Dawn at Puri by Jayanta Mahapatra

'Dawn at Puri' by Jayanta Mahapatra is a poem of Modern Indian Writing in English. Along with A.K. Ramanujan, Mahapatra is remembered as one of the pioneers of modernist writing in India. In the poem, the poet presents the picture of the Puri sea beach at dawn and its resemblance to the people living there. Puri is a famous tourist spot in India, located in Odisha. It is also famous for its Jagannath Temple. Jagannath is an avatar of Lord Vishnu and the state observes a huge religious gathering for Lord Jagannath during the season of Monsoon.

The Poem

*Endless crow noises
A skull in the holy sands
tilts its empty country towards hunger.*

*White-clad widowed Women
past the centers 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 fail 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 uncertainly like light
on the shifting sands*

Summary of Dawn at Puri

In 'Dawn at Puri' Mahapatra uses the imagery of the sea beach to portray its proximity to life. 'Dawn at Puri' by Jayanta Mahapatra presents a picturesque description of the seashore and the pilgrims visiting each day to visit the famous temple of Jagannath. At the beach, there are numerous crows gathering here and there. In this noisy ambiance the poet observes a skull resembling poor and hungry millions of our country. Thereafter the poet shifts his vision and looks at the temple where "white-clad widowed Women" are waiting to enter the "Great Temple". The poet sees a deep religious yearning in their eyes. In the next section of 'Dawn at Puri', Mahapatra shifts again to the seashore and now he rather sees empty shells lying there instead of crows. It is actually an instance of symbolism which will be discussed later in the analysis

section. In the landscape suddenly a heap of smoke seeks the attention of the poet. It is actually coming out of a cremation pyre. The poem ends with the wish of the poet's aging mother. She wants to be cremated at her native place like the mentioned pyre on the seashore.

Structure of Dawn at Puri

The structure of 'Dawn at Puri' by Jayanta Mahapatra closely connects to the theme of the poem. It is suggestive at the same time illustrative. The six stanza poem has an evenness in its structure. It has three visually descriptive lines imitating the waves of seawater on the sandy shore. The falling waves in the structure of the poem come into attention from stanza four. The metrical structure of the poem imitates the rhythm of the sea. A mixture of trochaic, iambic, and anapaestic meter helps the poet to achieve this sound effect. There is not any specific rhyme scheme in the poem. Instead of that, the poem is metrical and rhythmic for the equal distribution of foot in each stanza. The majority of the foot contains anapestic meter. An anapest is a metrical foot consisting of two short or unstressed syllables followed by one long or stressed syllable.

Literary Devices in 'Dawn at Puri'

Let us look at the literary devices used in each stanza of 'Dawn at Puri' by Jayanta Mahapatra.

Stanza 1 –

In the first line of the poem, "Endless crow noises" is a hyperbole. In the second line "skull" is a metaphor of poverty and hunger. These problems still haunt the lower section of Indian society. In the third line, "empty country" is a metonym for the people living in India. Here the poor people of India are hungry or their belly is empty for the need for food.

Stanza 2 – In the first line of this stanza, "White-clad" is a metaphor of the white saree worn by Hindu widowed women. In this stanza "past the centers of their lives" is another metaphor. It means that the widows have passed the age of 50. In the last line, "Great Temple" is a symbol of the famous Jagannath Temple of Odisha.

Stanza 3 – In this stanza the "austere eyes" is an example of synecdoche. Here the poet associates the widows with only their eyes. Readers can treat the word "austere" as a transferred epithet or hypallage. This quality actually belongs to the "widowed Women" in the poem. In the next section, readers can find a simile. Here the poet compares the widows' eyes to the eyes of the fish caught in a net. In the last line "dawn's shining strands of faith" is a metaphor. Here the sunlight at dawn is like a ray of faith to the poet.

Stanza 4 – In the fourth stanza of 'Dawn at Puri', Mahapatra personifies the early light of the dawn and compares it to a woman. The "leprous shells" in the poem is an example of a personal metaphor. By this phrase, the poet tries to compare the old widows to the shells lying on the shore.

Stanza 5 – In this stanza, the "sullen solitary pyre" is the use of personification or readers can say it is an example of a personal metaphor.

Stanza 6 – In the last stanza of the poem Mahapatra compares the twisting of her to the “light on the shifting sands”. Here the poet uses the literary device called a simile.

Analysis of ‘Dawn at Puri’

Stanzas 1 and 2

Endless crow noises

(...)

are waiting to enter the Great Temple

In the first two stanzas of ‘Dawn at Puri’ , Jayanta Mahapatra presents two images to the readers. The former tells the readers about the ambience of Puri sea beach at dawn. The latter reminds us of the pilgrims gathering around the Jagannath Temple before sunrise. Apart from the broad images depicted in the poem, there are some minor images which are of no less importance. One such image is of the human skull. The poet mentions this in the poem to make the readers aware of the problem of hunger and poverty prevalent in rural India.

In the second stanza of the poem, Mahapatra presents the imagery of the widow women waiting to enter the “Great Temple” of Lord Jagannath. At this stage of their lives, only faith and devotion to the almighty can only keep their spirit of living alive.

Stanzas 3 and 4

Their austere eyes

(...)

a mass of crouched faces without names,

This section of ‘Dawn at Puri’ contains another set of images like the previous section. In this section, Jayanta Mahapatra brings the image of the fishes caught by a net into the light. It is one of the familiar images of the people who have already visited Puri. The poet compares the eyes of those fishes showing the last hope of life and liberty, to the eyes of the widows. Their condition is similar to those fishes; both caught by the net of life and struggling. In the next section, the poet uses the image of the “shells” to compare the lonely and hopeless state of the widows. Like the shells leaning against each other on the shore, the widows also gather at the temple and sit there in the manner of the shells. According to the poet they have “crouched faces without names”. There is no need to differentiate them by their names. Their condition makes them an entity of loneliness and hopelessness. In this way, the poet tries to depict their short but simple annals of life.

Stanzas 5 and 6

and suddenly breaks out of my hide

(...)

on the shifting sands.

Jayanta Mahapatra in the last section of 'Dawn at Puri' depicts the last stage of life by producing the image of the "sullen solitary pyre". The smell of pyre makes the poet's mother aware of her mortality. Her attitude towards death is significant in the poem. Instead of fearing her approaching death, she welcomes it. She wishes to die in her native land with which her bond is deep and unbroken.

A. Short Answer type Questions

1. Which sea beach is mentioned in the poem Dawn at Puri?

Ans:Puri sea beach is mentioned here.

2. Why is Puri sea beach famous for?

Ans:Puri sea beach is famous for Temple Lord Jagannath.

3. What does the poet see on the sea beach?

Ans:The poet Jayanta Mahapatra sees a human skull on the sand of Puri sea beach.

4. What indicates the human skull on the sea beach?

Ans:The skull on the beach indicates the poor condition of Indian economy and shows the pathetic condition of hungry Indian.

5."Endless crow noises"—Where does the poet observe this scene? What was the time?

Ans: The poet hears the crows' endless noises at Puri sea beach.

The time was dawn.

6."tilts its empty country towards hunger"—What tilts its empty country towards hunger?

Ans: A human skull of an unburnt dead body on the Puri sea beach tilts India's empty economy towards hunger.

7. Who was waiting to enter the Great Jagannath Temple of Puri at dawn?

Ans:A group of widow women who crossed their half of lives were waiting to enter the Great Jagannath Temple of Puri at dawn.

8. How were the widows dressed? How old were they?

Ans:The widows were dressed in white sari.The widows crossed half of their lives.

9. Why were the widows waiting on the sea beach?

Ans:The widows are waiting on the Puri sea beach to enter great Jagannath temple and they are bound to religious custom.

10. How were the eyes of the widow women? / "their austere eyes....."—Explain.

Ans:The eyes of the widow women were austere like the eyes of the fish caught in a net.

11. Why are the eyes of widow women compared to the eyes of fishes caught in the net?

Ans: When a fish gets caught in a net, it has nothing to do. Similarly, being a widow, those women are bound to obey social, religious rule whether they want or not. They cannot break the system.

12. "Past the centres of their lives"—Explain the line.

Ans: This line refers to the widow women waiting to enter Jagannath Temple of Puri at dawn. This line indicates that those widow women have crossed half of their lives i.e. important part of their lives.

13. "a mass of crouched faces without names"—About whom was this remark made? Why are they without names?

Ans: This remark was made about the group of widows who were waiting on the Puri sea beach to enter Great Jagannath temple. Being widow, those women have no name because the society gave them only one identity that they are 'widow'.

14. "..... and suddenly breaks out of my hide"—What comes out of poet's hide?

Ans: Suddenly, the memory of the poet's dead mother comes out of the poet's hide.

15. What was the poet's mother's last wish?

Ans: Poet Jayanta Mahapatra's mother wanted to be cremated on the holy sea beach of Puri because it was believed to be the Swargadwar to get rid of earthly bound.

16. "Twisting uncertainty like light"—Explain.

Ans: The poet did not believe in the spirituality of Puri because under this spirituality there were poverty, division of caste, creed and torments. But his mother wished to be cremated on the sea beach of Puri being sacred. So, in spite of being rational, he had to change her thoughts uncertainly like light on the shifting sand.

B. Broad Questions

Q.no.1. "A skull in the holy sands tilts its empty country towards hunger."—Explain the lines. / What picture do we get of our country?

Answer: These lines occur in Jayanta Mahapatra's poem Dawn At Puri. Puri is the name of a famous town in Orissa which is considered sacred because of the temple dedicated to Lord Jagannath. Here, the poet has tried to unveil the original economic and religious scene of Puri as well as whole country that never gets revealed. Once the poet walks on the beach at Puri. He then notices a skull on the beach where bodies are normally cremated. The skull is a part of a cremation that has not been completely burnt by the funeral pyre. This skull is emblematic of the poverty and spiritual handicap of Puri, in spite of all the religious connections and connotations. The skull represents the hollowness of life, and the inevitability of death. Puri here, functions as a miniature metaphor of India. The term 'empty country' reflects the pathetic economic condition of most of the people of India

Q.no.2. Condition of Indian widows described in the poem Dawn at Puri by Jayanta Mahapatra. (LINE 4—12 LINES)

Ans: While walking on the Puri sea beach at dawn, the poet Jayanta Mahapatra notices a gathering of widows on that holy sea-beach. The poet describes their appearance and their pathetic condition magnificently. They are dressed in white sari. The phrase “past the centers of their lives” signifies that they are at least middle aged woman. On the other hand it may be interpreted that they have crossed their most important portion i.e. center of their lives. They all are waiting to enter the Great Temple of Lord Jagannath to worship. They do it as a ritual only for their dead husband. Their eyes are described as austere as if they have no joy, no worldly longings or desire because they are widows. They seem very much helpless and now they are bound to suffer like a fish caught in a net having nothing to do to get rid of. They are gathering like the unimportant “ruined’ leprous shells leaning against one another” on the beach. The phrase “a mass of crouched faces without names” also suggests that those widows have no proper identity or individuality. They are presented as a common noun in the society.

Q.no.3. “And suddenly breaks out of my hide Into the smoky blaze of a sullen solitary pyre.....Twisting uncertainly like light on the shifting sands”---- Explain.

Answer: At the break of dawn as the poet looks at the single funeral pyre burning on the Puri sea beach and a sudden thought occurs to him that of his mother’s last wish. The phrase “And suddenly breaks out from my hide” echoes the thought springing out; just as the poet sprung out from his mother’s womb (hide). His aged mother wished that she be cremated at this particular place as it is the gateway to Heaven or the ‘Swargadwara’. It comes across very strongly to the poet. Rites and rituals are mandatory. However, perhaps, performing one’s mother’s last wish is far more important than these obligatory dictates of religion and doctrines of custom. It ‘dawns’ on him all of a sudden. The symbol of Dawn is thus a type of realization.

Q.no.4. Describe the religious condition of India as mentioned in the poet Dawn at Puri by Jayanta Mahapatra.

Ans: Once at dawn, the poet Jayanta Mahapatra visits the famous Puri sea beach. He hears the endless twittering of the crows that fills the lonely sea-beach. Suddenly he notices a human skull on the beach. This part of the human body reminds the poet that while cremating a human dead body, it is left unburnt by the funeral pyre. This skull is a symbol of poverty and the pathetic economic condition of India. Also, it shows the spiritual handicap of the so-called Puri known for its spirituality. This skull also reveals the immortal truth of every human being as well as every natural object that everything is subjected to decay or death. How we know Puri as a religious place full of sacredness, calmness, purity and peace, that is literally true; but like darkness beneath the lamp, Puri has become a skeleton without a pulse of economic stability. Actually, the poet wants to present the hollowness of the Puri that is hidden under the cover of spirituality. Besides the presentation of suffering widows displays the real scene of religion.