

Silenced Flesh, Sanctioned Hunger: The Predicament of Women in Prostitution in Jayanta Mahapatra's Calcutta Poems

Pragnya Paramita Samanta¹, Dr. Suropriyo Chakraborty²

^{1,2}Assistant Professor, Department of English, NIST University, Berhampur, Odisha

Abstract

Between the lyric hush of the imagist poem and the clamour of a society that trades in hunger, Jayanta Mahapatra's "Hunger" and "The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street" stage some of the most disquieting encounters in Indian poetry in English. This paper investigates how the two poems render women ensnared in the sex trade, and whether their austere, image-driven art exposes the economic and patriarchal machinery of exploitation or quietly reproduces the silence it seeks to indict. Drawing on feminist, postcolonial and formalist criticism, it reads "Hunger" as a poem in which carnal appetite and material want converge in a single transaction, yet in which the girl is denied any interior voice and the encounter is filtered wholly through the visitor's consciousness. It then shows how the Calcutta poem transposes these concerns into an urban, commercialised register, where second-person address, fragmentary imagery and an externalised view of the woman present the brothel as an anonymous, endlessly repeatable institution. Calcutta is considered as a symbolic space of contrast and moral ambiguity, and subaltern readings, which lament the absence of female speech, are weighed against readings that prize the poems' unsentimental refusal of rescue. The paper argues that the poems sustain both interpretations at once, and that their unresolved ethical discomfort is not a flaw of the criticism but the defining signature of Mahapatra's poetics of witness: an art that denies readers the consolation of innocence and holds them answerable for the structures of poverty and desire it lays bare.

Keywords: Indian English poetry; prostitution; female agency; subaltern silence; poverty and patriarchy; imagist witness; male gaze

Introduction

Jayanta Mahapatra (1928–2023) stands among the pioneering voices of modern Indian poetry in English, and his career spans a period in which Indian writing in English moved from the margins of the national literary conversation towards international recognition. In "Casting Shadows and Sunlight: Deconstructing the Cultural Kaleidoscope in the Select Poems of Jayanata [sic] Mahapatra" (2023), Andleeb Zahra places him among the "earliest Indian English poets to receive recognition both domestically and internationally" (Zahra 29). He was the first Indian poet writing in English to receive the Sahitya Akademi Award, an honour that marked a turning point not only in his own career but in the wider acceptance of English as a legitimate vehicle for Indian poetic expression, and it cemented his reputation as a writer whose work deserved sustained critical attention rather than passing notice.

A former physicist who wrote from the eastern state of Odisha, Mahapatra brought to his poetry an unusual combination of scientific precision and lyrical density. His verse carries a stark, image-centred awareness of postcolonial India's social afflictions: poverty, hunger, caste hierarchy, and the misuse of women's bodies. His scientific training is often invoked to explain the exactness of his imagery, since his poems tend to render suffering not through abstract moralising but through concrete, almost clinical observation of physical detail, whether that detail concerns a starving body, a cracked wall, or the ritual gestures of a transaction. Paired with a poet's sensitivity to rhythm and sound, this scientific eye produces a body of work that resists easy categorisation and sits somewhere between documentary witness and lyric meditation.

Two of his most unsettling poems engage directly with the sex trade: "Hunger" and "The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street." Both belong to a broader current in his work that returns repeatedly to female suffering as a lens through which to examine the failures of a society still structured by economic deprivation and patriarchal custom, and both have become staples of classroom discussion and scholarly essays precisely because they refuse the reader a comfortable moral resolution. In each poem a woman's body sits at the crossing point of financial desperation and male desire, functioning at once as an object of economic exchange and as a site on which larger social forces become visible. This positioning of the female body between hunger and appetite, between survival and consumption, gives both poems their disturbing power. It has also prompted a long-running question: does Mahapatra depict the circumstances of women pushed into prostitution, or does he inadvertently perpetuate them? Readers have debated whether his unflinching, image-driven method is a genuine act of social conscience or whether it slides, almost despite itself, into an aesthetic consumption of the very suffering it claims to expose.

This paper examines how the two poems represent women trapped within the sex trade. It contends that Mahapatra's approach amounts to neither outright moral judgement nor voyeuristic spectacle, but to an unsettled, image-based act of witness that lays bare the workings of poverty and patriarchy while still risking the aestheticisation of the women it portrays. The argument is deliberately placed between the two poles that have tended to organise critical response. On one side stand readings that treat Mahapatra as a moral realist whose spare, unsentimental style exposes exploitation more effectively than direct condemnation could. On the other stand readings that treat the same restraint as a symptom of complicity, a formal silence that mirrors, and perhaps reinforces, the silencing of the women depicted. Rather than adjudicating between these positions, the paper proposes that the tension between them is the most productive way of understanding Mahapatra's achievement, since the poems seem calibrated to produce exactly this interpretive discomfort.

Drawing on feminist, postcolonial and formalist approaches, the paper considers Mahapatra's handling of female agency, the function of Calcutta as a symbol of moral ambiguity, and the continuing disagreement over whether his female figures emerge as objects of compassion or as targets of an unrelenting male gaze. It begins by situating his treatment of prostitution within a broader poetics of social witness. It then turns to a close consideration of "Hunger," attending to the poem's rural setting, its central irony of a double hunger, and its refusal to grant the exploited girl any interior voice. From there it moves to "The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street," which transposes the themes of "Hunger" into an urban, commercialised register, before considering Calcutta itself as a symbolic space whose reputation for vice and contrast reinforces the poems' concerns. The paper then weighs feminist and subaltern readings that treat the poems as protest against readings that find in them a reproduction of the

silence they expose, and it closes by arguing that this impasse is not a flaw to be resolved but a central feature of Mahapatra's ethical seriousness.

The interpretive difficulty that animates this inquiry should be acknowledged at the outset. Any paper that analyses literary depictions of the sexual exploitation of women and girls must reckon with the risk that sustained scholarly attention, however critical in intent, can begin to resemble the aestheticising gaze it sets out to interrogate. This paper attempts to manage that risk by keeping its focus on the mechanisms of representation, on how the poems construct meaning through image, perspective and silence, rather than lingering on exploitative content for its own sake. Its aim is not to decide whether Mahapatra was, as a person or a poet, a feminist or an exploiter, a question that is probably unanswerable and not the most productive one to ask. Its aim is to trace, as precisely as the available scholarship allows, how his poems produce the unresolved ethical discomfort that so many careful readers report.

It is also worth asking why this pairing of poverty and sexuality has proved so durable a subject in modern Indian poetry in English, and why Mahapatra in particular has become so closely associated with it. Postcolonial Indian writing in English emerged, in the decades after independence, into a literary landscape still working out its relationship to indigenous traditions and to the inherited conventions of English verse. Many of its most significant practitioners found in the depiction of social suffering, whether poverty, caste discrimination or communal violence, a way of asserting that English could carry distinctly Indian subject matter rather than remain a borrowed colonial tongue. By making the exploitation of women's bodies a recurring subject within this larger project, Mahapatra places himself within that movement while marking out a distinctive contribution, since few of his contemporaries returned to the intersection of hunger, poverty and sexual exploitation with the same persistence or the same unflinching visual detail.

Mahapatra and the Poetics of Social Witness

The core of Mahapatra's poetic voice lies in the friction between dense, sometimes elusive imagery and a sustained commitment to depicting social conditions. The friction is not incidental. The same lines that reward slow, meditative reading for their sound and image also direct the reader's attention outward, towards the material conditions of poverty, caste and gender that shape everyday life in Odisha and in India more broadly. This double commitment, to inner life and to social scrutiny, operates with particular force in the poems concerned with prostitution. In "Picturization of Women: With Reference to the Select Poems of Jayanta Mahapatra" (2023), I. M. Sheeba Alorcious and K. Balachandran argue that the women of his verse move beyond being mere characters to become "profound representations of societal paradigms and discourses" (Alorcious and Balachandran 50).

This observation implies that any individual female figure in Mahapatra's verse, however vividly rendered in physical detail, should also be read synecdochically, as a stand-in for a much larger population of women whose lives are shaped by the same economic and social pressures. The quality is part of what makes the Calcutta poems so unsettling. The specificity of the imagery, a particular girl, a particular street, a particular transaction, keeps insisting on its own individual reality even as the poem's larger design gestures towards a collective condition shared by countless women outside the frame of the poem.

Mahapatra's readiness to address subjects that many contemporaries avoided, among them brothels, child prostitution and rape, sets him apart from poets such as Nissim Ezekiel or A. K. Ramanujan, who

typically approach sexuality through irony or mythology rather than blunt documentary realism. Where Ezekiel's treatment of desire often carries a wry, self-deprecating humour, and where Ramanujan frequently filters sexual and familial tension through classical Tamil and Sanskrit allusion, Mahapatra tends to strip away such mediating devices. He offers a nearly reportorial account of transactions and encounters that leaves little room for ironic distance. The difference is not merely stylistic. The absence of irony or mythological framing forces the reader to confront the material conditions of exploitation more directly than a more stylised treatment would allow.

His poetic universe also contains a wide array of female figures, among them wives, lovers, prostitutes, temptresses, rural women, urban women and young girls, each bearing its own symbolic weight within an overarching tragic outlook. No single female figure can therefore be read in isolation. The women of Calcutta's red-light districts are one strand in a continuous thread of female suffering that runs across the poet's career, connecting the prostitute of the city street to the widow of the village, the abandoned wife and the hungry child, all of whom appear as variations on the same theme of women bearing the material costs of a patriarchal and economically unequal society.

This tension between imagistic density and social commentary also explains why Mahapatra's poetry has attracted so many critical approaches: formalist readings that concentrate on sound, syntax and image; sociological and historicist readings that treat the poems as documents of Odishan and Indian social conditions; and the feminist and postcolonial approaches on which this paper draws most heavily. Each foregrounds a different aspect of the same poetic method, and the resulting body of scholarship testifies to a style that rewards varied interpretive frameworks without collapsing into pure aestheticism or pure reportage. The same formal features that critics praise as evidence of his skill as an imagist are also the features that raise the most serious ethical questions about his representation of exploited women. If the poems consistently refuse to separate personal consciousness from social observation, the women who appear in them cannot be read merely as private symbols serving the poet's psychological or aesthetic purposes; they must also be read as figures embedded in a real social world whose economic and patriarchal structures the poems are, at some level, attempting to document.

The literary-historical moment is also relevant. The 1970s, when both poems were published, were years of considerable turbulence in India, marked by economic hardship, the aftermath of the 1971 war and the resulting refugee crisis, and the imposition of the Emergency in 1975, during which press freedoms and civil liberties were suspended for nearly two years. Mahapatra's poems do not address these events directly, but the pervasive sense of institutional instability helps explain the tenor of his social commentary, which is marked less by confident political assertion than by a watchful, unresolved unease about the capacity of familial, economic and civic institutions to protect the most vulnerable. Read against this backdrop, the wavering, ambivalent quality of his treatment of prostitution can be understood not only as an idiosyncratic stylistic choice but as a poetic response to a moment in which certainty about social progress or moral clarity was itself in short supply.

A brief comparison with other poets of his generation sharpens what is distinctive here. Kamala Das wrote extensively and with searing candour about female desire and confinement within marriage, but her poems foreground a first-person female consciousness and grant their speakers an interiority that Mahapatra consistently withholds from the exploited women of his Calcutta poems. Arun Kolatkar depicted the urban and rural poor of Maharashtra with an eye for grotesque, unsentimental detail that in some ways resembles Mahapatra's own realism, yet his poems on marginalised figures rarely centre on the dynamics of sexual transaction that occupy Mahapatra so persistently. Placed beside these

contemporaries, Mahapatra's combination of an externalised third-person or second-person perspective, a documentary attentiveness to economic desperation and a sustained focus on the commercial exchange of women's bodies emerges as a distinctive contribution to the poetic treatment of gender and poverty in postcolonial Indian literature.

“Hunger”: Poverty, Filial Betrayal and the Body as Currency

“Hunger” first appeared in Mahapatra's 1976 volume, *A Rain of Rites* and remains one of his most widely reprinted and most contested poems. Its frequent anthologisation and regular place on university syllabi ensure that it is also one of the most debated, and much of that debate centres on the ethical questions this paper takes as its focus. The poem recounts an episode, apparently drawn from the poet's own memory, in which a male visitor meets a fisherman who, driven by severe poverty, offers his fifteen-year-old daughter in exchange for payment. The autobiographical resonance that many readers detect adds a further layer of discomfort, since it places the poet, and by extension the reader, uncomfortably close to the visitor whose desire sets the poem's events in motion.

The title works on two levels at once: the visitor's sexual craving and the family's literal hunger for food. The double meaning is not mere wordplay. It forces two registers of need, one carnal and one biological, into the same economic transaction, collapsing the distance between lust and survival until, within the world of the poem, they become almost indistinguishable. In “Reverberation of Women Sexuality in Jayanta Mahapatra's Poems: ‘Hunger’ and ‘The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street’” (2020), Anu Filda Varghese notes that the poem sets “hunger due to poverty and hunger for sexual gratification” side by side (Varghese 229). The pairing gives the poem its moral architecture. Neither party's motivation is presented as simply villainous or simply pitiable; each operates within a set of pressures, sexual desire on one side and economic desperation on the other, that together produce an outcome neither would necessarily choose under different circumstances. This refusal to isolate a single villain implicates an entire social and economic system rather than locating blame in one corrupt individual.

The rural, coastal setting does considerable work here. The fishing village is a world defined by scarcity that fluctuates with the tides and seasons, in which a poor catch can mean the difference between subsistence and starvation for a whole family, and it is against this chronic, weather-dependent precarity that the fisherman's decision must be understood. Readers who expect a villainous father are set up to be unsettled by the poem's refusal to caricature him. His desperation reads not as simple moral failure but as the logical, if devastating, endpoint of a life lived permanently on the edge of catastrophe. The matter-of-fact, businesslike tone presents the transaction with the same unremarkable inevitability that might attend the sale of a boat or a portion of the catch, and this normalisation is one of the poem's most quietly devastating formal achievements.

For many readers what makes “Hunger” especially disturbing is that Mahapatra never gives the girl an inner life or any capacity to resist. She is not permitted to express fear, hope, resignation or any other interior state that might allow the reader to understand the transaction from her point of view. She remains a largely silent presence whose physical description substitutes for psychological interiority, almost automaton-like, her body handed over as though devoid of emotional involvement. In “Evolution of Themes in Mahapatra's Poetry across Different Phases” (2024), Neeru Tandon and Yashika Bajpai remark that the father's command to the visitor presents his daughter “as if she is a commodity to be spent” (Tandon and Bajpai 32). The automaton-like rendering forces the reader to supply the horror that the girl herself is not shown expressing. Some readers take this as a devastating commentary on how

completely economic desperation can erase a person's visible humanity; others take it as a further act of erasure.

Her silence has become a key focus of feminist analysis, because the poem exposes the economic pressure that leads to child prostitution while filtering that exposure entirely through the male visitor's mind. Everything the reader learns of the encounter, its atmosphere, its emotional charge, its ethical weight, arrives mediated by the consciousness of the person who benefits from the transaction rather than the person who is harmed by it. In "Depiction of the 'Whore Image' in the Poems of Jayanta Mahapatra: A Critical Analysis of Select Poems" (2023), Milind Raj Anand and Neetu Sharma observe, of Mahapatra's female characters in general, that they are "viewed through the male centered lens" (Anand and Sharma 38). The asymmetry is the poem's most significant limitation for many feminist readers, however sympathetically the visitor's guilt is eventually rendered. The result is that the poem's form re-enacts the erasure of female subjectivity that it condemns: readers encounter only the visitor's shame, arousal and later discomfort, and never the girl's own testimony about her situation. Even a poem whose explicit content condemns the exploitation of a young girl can, through its narrative choices, perform a version of the silencing it seeks to critique.

Yet not every reader accepts that the poem simply colludes with the objectification it portrays. Its stark specificity, the father's businesslike manner, the thin, malnourished body of the girl and the visitor's delayed awareness of his own ethical failure, can be read as a deliberate technique of exposure rather than approval. On this reading Mahapatra's refusal to soften or explain away the transaction is precisely what allows the poem to function as effective social criticism, because a more sentimental or explanatory treatment would let readers distance themselves from the discomfort the poem is designed to produce. By declining to offer an easy position from which to judge the fisherman or the visitor, the poem places readers inside the ethically compromised position the visitor occupies: watching, complicit and only belatedly troubled by what they have witnessed.

The visitor's psychological trajectory, from desire, to transaction, to a delayed and incomplete recognition of what he has taken part in, provides the closest thing the poem offers to an explicit ethical arc. His shame arrives only after the fact, almost as an afterthought to his satisfaction, a sequence many readers find as troubling as the transaction itself, since it suggests that ethical recognition in this system consistently lags behind the wrongdoing and never prevents it. Rather than functioning as a redemptive gesture that softens the poem's critique, the delayed guilt reinforces it, showing how easily desire can override, or at least postpone, moral judgement even in a person capable of feeling that judgement once the transaction has run its course.

The poem's compressed length and controlled pacing matter to this debate. "Hunger" achieves its effect through a small number of carefully chosen images and a tightly managed sequence, from the visitor's arrival to his negotiation with the father to the encounter with the girl, leaving little room for digression or explanatory commentary. Readers who favour the exposure reading point to this economy as evidence of Mahapatra's control over his material, since he trusts the accumulated weight of a few precisely rendered images to carry the full ethical charge without stepping outside the frame to tell the reader how to judge. Whether the economy serves the critique or merely intensifies the complicity remains a matter of disagreement, although the brevity itself is widely regarded as a deliberate and effective formal strategy.

This same push and pull between exposing wrongdoing and being complicit in it resurfaces, in a more developed form, in the companion poem set in Calcutta itself, where the intimate, familial scale of

“Hunger” gives way to a different social setting, governed not by personal desperation between people who know each other but by the impersonal machinery of an established commercial institution.

“The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street”: Commerce, Desire and the City

“The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street” carries the themes of “Hunger” into a city context, trading the personal desperation of one fishing family for the detached, businesslike world of an established brothel. The shift from an isolated coastal village to the crowded, anonymous streets of a metropolis is more than a change of backdrop. It alters the terms on which the central transaction takes place, replacing a single, identifiable act of familial desperation with an institutionalised economy of desire in which countless similar transactions occur daily, each indistinguishable from the last. In “Ethos of Orissa Landscape and Indian Sensibility in the Poems of Jayanta Mahapatra” (2023), Manu Joshi and Sharmila Saxena capture the change in a single phrase: in this poem, “Love yields place to commerce” (Joshi and Saxena 41).

Written in the second person, the poem walks an implied customer through the street, into the courtyard and finally through the encounter itself. The second-person address draws the reader directly into the position of the customer and refuses the comfortable distance that third-person narration would provide, forcing the reader to inhabit, at least grammatically, the consciousness whose desire the poem is simultaneously examining and implicating. It also gestures towards the generic, repeatable nature of the transaction. The unnamed “you” is interchangeable with any number of other customers who might occupy the same grammatical position on any other night, and this interchangeability reinforces at the level of syntax the poem’s argument at the level of content: that the brothel is a system designed to process a continuous stream of anonymous, functionally identical encounters, in which neither the customer nor, more troublingly, the woman he meets is treated as mattering very much.

The poem is frequently discussed in terms of its imagist qualities. Instead of commenting directly, Mahapatra conveys the visit through a chain of sensory impressions: light crossing a doorway, hushed exchanges, the rehearsed movements of the women. The impressions accumulate without any authorial commentary telling the reader how to feel, a technique consistent with his broader reliance on image over statement, but one that carries particular ethical stakes when the subject is the commercial exploitation of women’s bodies. Some readings suggest that the poem directs its irony at the wider commercial exploitation of female images, implying that the faces used to stir desire in the public marketplace are continuous with those of the women inside, both reduced to objects of male consumption. If so, the critique extends beyond the brothel to implicate an entire visual and commercial culture in which women’s faces and bodies are routinely deployed to generate desire and profit.

The poem differs from “Hunger” in its handling of perspective. In “Hunger” the speaker is directly involved in the encounter and the confessional intimacy of the telling gives the girl’s situation a human proximity, however filtered. In the whorehouse poem the woman is described from the outside, observed rather than heard, and she comes across as detached, unaffected and professionally indifferent towards her clients. The observational mode keeps her inner life at an even greater remove than in the earlier poem, and invites the reading that Mahapatra portrays prostitution not as an individual’s personal tragedy but as a routine, almost bureaucratic system of desire in which the woman is an unfeeling participant rather than an engaged one.

That reading has provoked worthwhile debate. Some argue that the emotional distance is itself social commentary: by withholding melodrama or visible anguish from the woman, Mahapatra shows how completely the commercial sex trade has drained emotional significance from what is, in name, an

intimate act. On this view her apparent indifference is not a failure to grant her interiority but a bleak, accurate representation of what sustained participation in a commercialised sexual economy does to a person's affective life. A related reading reassigns the ethical weight of the poem, suggesting that its true subject is less the woman's body than the customer's divided consciousness, caught between the satisfaction of desire and the discomfort of recognising what that satisfaction requires, so that the poem condemns the customer's hypocrisy instead of offering the woman up to the reader as a source of titillation. Others take a more favourable view still, arguing that the poem pushes back against the assumption that a woman who sells sex is somehow diminished as a person, and insists on her ordinary humanity, however constrained, beneath the surface of the transaction. On this account the restraint that troubles other readers is a form of respect, a refusal to sensationalise her circumstances in a manner that would itself violate her dignity.

The debate belongs to a wider set of concerns about how literature represents sex work, concerns that long predate Mahapatra. Representations of women in the sex trade have tended to fall into a narrow set of recurring types: the pitiable victim awaiting rescue, the hardened cynic beyond feeling, and the alluring temptress whose sexuality is offered primarily for the reader's pleasure. Much feminist critical energy has gone into showing how each of these types, however different on the surface, denies the women depicted a full, self-directed interior life. The whorehouse poem resists the most obvious of them, since it declines to render the woman either as a victim seeking rescue or as a temptress inviting desire, and opts instead for the comparatively unusual figure of professional indifference. Whether this third option is a genuine advance, a woman defined by neither victimhood nor allure but by something closer to weary competence, or merely substitutes one limiting type for another, is a question this paper leaves open, though raising it clarifies why the poem resists any single critical verdict.

The poem's formal texture matters as well. Rather than following a single line of action, it accumulates fragmentary impressions, a doorway, a light, a movement, a face, which the reader must assemble into a scene largely through inference. The fragmentary method mirrors the anonymity and interchangeability that the poem attributes to the institution it depicts: just as the customer moves through a sequence of largely indistinguishable encounters, the reader moves through imagistic fragments that never cohere into the unified, individualised portrait that fuller narrative development might supply. The much-discussed emotional detachment is therefore not only a matter of what is said about the woman's inner life; it is built into the structure of the poem. The recurring play of light and shadow reinforces the point. The brothel is at once a public, commercially advertised institution, visible enough that the implied customer can locate and enter it without difficulty, and a space whose interior workings, the actual experiences of the women who work there, remain shrouded and glimpsed only in fragments. This visual logic expresses the selective visibility that structures commercial sex work more generally, a visibility that readily displays the institution's availability while obscuring the individual lives that sustain it.

Calcutta as a Symbolic Space of Moral Ambiguity

Mahapatra's decision to set the poem in Calcutta carries deliberate weight. The choice of setting is rarely incidental in his poetry, and selecting Calcutta rather than his native Odisha suggests a considered symbolic strategy rather than biographical convenience. Both colonial and postcolonial Calcutta held a long-standing image, in Indian and Western literature alike, as a city of sharp contrasts, between affluence and poverty, respectability and vice. This reputation for extremity, for housing side by side the grandeur of colonial architecture and the desperate poverty of its slums, has made Calcutta a recurring

symbolic site in Indian English literature, a city whose geography seems to embody a society caught between tradition and modernity, wealth and want. Its long association with organised prostitution also lends the poem's setting an authenticity that a generic urban backdrop could not supply, grounding the depiction of an institutionalised sex trade in a specific and recognisable social geography.

The city therefore functions less as a passive setting than as a symbolic expression of the poem's key themes: anonymity, commercial exchange, and the breakdown of the familial, communal and religious bonds that might otherwise govern sexual conduct in a more intimate, rural setting. In the village of "Hunger" every party to the transaction is known to every other. The father, the daughter and the visitor exist within a small, legible social world in which reputation and relationship still carry some residual weight, even as economic desperation overrides them. Calcutta offers no such legibility. Its scale and anonymity dissolve the social bonds that, in the village, at least provide a backdrop against which the violation can be measured.

While the coastal village presents prostitution as a desperate transaction between a known father and a known customer, the Calcutta brothel presents it as an institutionalised urban system in which customers and women alike are interchangeable, anonymous participants in a recurring commercial ritual. This shift from an identifiable, one-off transaction to a repeatable ritual is among the most significant differences between the two poems, and it maps onto the broader historical transition from small-scale, informal exploitation to the organised sex industries that developed in Indian port cities such as Calcutta under and after colonial rule. A number of readers accordingly see the poems as two halves of one critique: together they follow prostitution from its rural roots in family poverty to its consolidation as organised urban commerce, implying a continuum in which personal desperation is steadily folded into an impersonal economic system. The same pressures that drive a single father to sell his daughter in a moment of crisis are shown, on a larger scale, to have produced a commercial infrastructure that sustains thousands of similar transactions in the anonymous streets of the city. On this view the two poems are concentrated expressions of a concern that runs throughout Mahapatra's poetry, namely the way poverty renders women's bodies available for exploitation whatever the social setting.

Calcutta's history under British rule adds a further dimension. As a major port and administrative centre of the Raj, the city developed over the colonial period an extensive and largely tolerated infrastructure of commercial sex that catered in significant part to a transient population of soldiers, sailors, traders and officials far from their own families and communities. The institutionalised character of prostitution that the poem depicts is therefore not simply a feature of modern urban life in general but carries specific historical roots in the economic and administrative arrangements that colonial Calcutta fostered, arrangements that postcolonial Calcutta inherited and in certain respects continued. Setting the poem in Calcutta rather than in an invented or generic city allows Mahapatra to draw, even if only implicitly, on this genealogy of commercialised sex work, and so adds historical resonance to a critique of a system that treats women's bodies as an anonymous, replaceable commercial resource.

The contrast between village and city also maps onto oppositions that recur throughout modern Indian literature: tradition and modernity, community and anonymity, the moral legibility of small-scale rural life and the moral opacity of large-scale urban existence. Mahapatra is hardly alone in exploiting this contrast, but his application of it to prostitution gives it an unusually concrete and disturbing form. The reader is asked to weigh not the relative merits of village and city in the abstract but the specific difference between a single act of desperate exploitation, however devastating, and an entire system organised around the perpetual repetition of such exploitation on an anonymous, industrial scale.

Feminist and Subaltern Readings: Agency, Silence and Objectification

A significant portion of recent scholarship on Mahapatra's depiction of prostitution draws on feminist and subaltern theory, asking whether his female figures possess any real agency or remain permanently spoken about rather than speaking for themselves. This scholarship places the Calcutta poems within wider debates about the representation of marginalised subjects, debates that ask not only what a text says about its subjects but whose voice is permitted to articulate that meaning and whose is excluded from its formal architecture. The patriarchal logic the poems expose is stated bluntly by Ajeet Kumar Gupta in "Navigating Social Realism in the Poems of Jayanta Mahapatra" (2023), who writes that, for men in the world the poet describes, a woman is "just a sexual object meant to satiate their physical needs" (Gupta 44). Gupta's sentence describes the attitude the poems indict, but it also names the risk that a poem's own form can reproduce the attitude it indicts: the girl and the brothel worker are objects of description and pity, rarely given direct speech, so that even the most sympathetic portrayals risk repeating the marginalisation they aim to expose. The problem lies less in Mahapatra's intentions, which may well be sympathetic, than in the formal structure of the poems, which consistently withholds direct speech from the women whose suffering they otherwise take pains to document.

This concern parallels the question that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak posed in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988). Spivak's question, originally raised in a different theoretical and geographical context, translates readily onto the Calcutta poems because both raise, in acute form, the problem of representation without self-representation. The reader learns a great deal about what happens to these women, and something about how their circumstances make an observing male consciousness feel, but almost nothing about how the women themselves understand, narrate or resist their situations. Spivak's formulation emerged from a specific concern with how colonial and postcolonial archives, legal, administrative and historical, record marginalised subjects, particularly women, only through the mediating voice of more powerful actors. A poem is a very different kind of document from a colonial court record, and a poet's imaginative sympathy is not equivalent to the extractive, often violent mediation that concerned Spivak. Nonetheless, the structural problem persists in an attenuated form: however sympathetic the poet's engagement, the poems remain an act of speaking about these women rather than a space in which they might speak for themselves.

Some critics resist an overly rigid application of the subaltern framework, arguing that demanding direct subaltern speech as the sole criterion of ethically adequate representation sets an impossibly high bar that would disqualify a large proportion of socially conscious literature, including work written in explicit solidarity with marginalised populations. They suggest that the more productive question is whether poems that withhold direct speech nonetheless convey an accurate and ethically serious picture of the structural forces bearing down on the women they depict. Judged by this more forgiving standard, "Hunger" and "The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street" fare considerably better, since both show a sustained, historically grounded attentiveness to the economic and patriarchal mechanisms that produce and sustain the exploitation they depict. Critics working from the strict standard will continue to find the poems ethically troubling however sympathetically their arguments are framed, since no contextual justification changes the formal fact that the women never speak in their own voice. Critics working from the forgiving standard will continue to find in them a serious engagement with the structures of poverty and patriarchy. Both standards are internally coherent and both draw on established traditions within feminist and postcolonial theory, so there is little reason to expect the disagreement to resolve, and this paper has tried to represent both fairly rather than argue for the superiority of either.

Those who view Mahapatra's feminist commitments more favourably distinguish between the absence of a female voice and the absence of a critical perspective. A poem can function as effective protest against injustice even while declining to imagine, within its narrow formal boundaries, a way for its female subjects to escape the conditions it describes. By this account the refusal to sentimentalise or rescue his female characters is an act of honesty: rather than offering false reassurance, the poems compel readers to reckon with the unresolved, structural nature of the exploitation on display. A poem that manufactured an artificial escape or redemption would be less honest about the social conditions it attempts to depict, since real economic and patriarchal structures rarely offer such tidy resolutions to the women trapped within them. The relational definition of female identity that structures the girl's fate in "Hunger", in which a woman exists as daughter, wife, widow or, in the most stigmatised case, as a woman who sells sex, operates just as forcefully in the anonymous, urban context of the whorehouse poem, where women are likewise defined by their function within a transaction between men, the customer and, implicitly, whatever social or economic structure compels their participation in the trade.

The scholarly split between those who see Mahapatra's silence-filled portraits as complicit and those who see them as intentional, unsentimental exposure seems unlikely to be settled, partly because the poems support both interpretations at once. This interpretive instability is not a weakness in the scholarship but an accurate reflection of a genuine ambiguity built into the poems' formal choices. Because Mahapatra restrains himself imaginatively and avoids direct commentary, his poems can be read as unflinching indictments of a system that commodifies women's bodies, or as aesthetic objects that, through careful attention to sensory detail, risk turning suffering into artistic spectacle. Still, most readers agree that the Calcutta poems avoid the easy comfort of melodrama and linger instead in moral unease, the unease of the customer and, by extension, of the reader. That lingering unease, rather than any clear moral verdict, may be the single most consistent effect attributed to these poems across the interpretive spectrum, whether it is judged an ethical achievement or an ethical failure.

The persistence of this debate across decades testifies to the poems' capacity to remain generative objects of critical attention. Poems that offered a single, stable, easily paraphrased position on the ethics of prostitution, whether wholly condemnatory or wholly complicit, would probably have exhausted their critical interest far sooner. Scholarly disagreement should therefore be read not as evidence of critical confusion or of the poems' failure to communicate a position, but as a measure of their density as literary artefacts, artefacts that hold in productive tension a genuine sympathy for exploited women and a formal method that persistently withholds those women's own voices.

The tension also raises a methodological question familiar from feminist criticism: how to evaluate a male author's representation of female suffering when it is animated by evident sympathy but constrained by an inevitably partial, externally positioned vantage point. Mahapatra, writing as a man observing, directly or through inherited report, the exploitation of women and girls within a trade he was never subject to, occupies a position structurally similar to that of many male authors whose sympathetic treatments of female suffering have drawn feminist scrutiny for centring a male consciousness as the vehicle through which exploitation becomes legible. Situating him within this pattern does not resolve the debate over his Calcutta poems, but it suggests that the difficulties his critics identify are not unique to him; they belong to a larger, unresolved conversation about the ethics and limits of cross-gender representation of exploitation.

A counterfactual exercise clarifies what is at stake. A version of "Hunger" that granted the fifteen-year-old girl a direct interior monologue, articulating her fear, resignation or resistance in her own words,

would answer the problem of subaltern silence. It would also risk a different ethical and aesthetic difficulty, since a poet of considerable social and educational privilege who ventriloquised the precise inner experience of an impoverished, exploited child might be accused of another, equally troubling, form of appropriation. Mahapatra's actual choice, to withhold that interiority rather than presume to construct it, can be understood as a response to this dilemma, even if it leaves the girl's own perspective permanently inaccessible. The dilemma recurs in the whorehouse poem, where a more expressive, emotionally legible portrayal of the woman might constitute an improvement or merely a different imposition. Defenders of the restraint argue that emotional legibility would risk converting the woman into the very consumable spectacle that the poem's critique of commercialised female imagery tries to resist, since a reader invited to feel cathartic emotion on her behalf might leave with a moral satisfaction the social reality of sex work does little to justify. Critics who favour a more expressive approach reply that this restraint still leaves the woman without any means of articulating her own experience, reducing her again to an object of interpretation rather than a subject capable of self-representation. The paper does not adjudicate between these positions, since the difficulty of the underlying representational problem is what gives the poems their continued interest.

A related point concerns the second-person address. Had Mahapatra written the whorehouse poem in the third person, describing an unnamed customer from the outside as he describes the woman, the distribution of ethical implication would have shifted, allowing the reader a more comfortable distance from the customer's desire and guilt alike. By addressing the reader directly as the implied customer he prevents that distancing and forces the reader to occupy, at least provisionally, the subject position whose desire and complicity the poem is examining. Combined with the externalised treatment of the woman, this produces an asymmetry worth naming: the reader is granted uncomfortable proximity to the customer's consciousness while being held at an observational distance from the woman throughout, an asymmetry that mirrors, at the level of form, the asymmetry of power and visibility that structures the commercial transaction.

Finally, both poems continue to be assigned in university courses on Indian English literature, postcolonial studies and gender studies, which has generated a secondary body of commentary on how instructors and students should approach texts that depict child exploitation and commercial sex work without the explicit ethical framing a contemporary classroom might expect. The classroom sharpens the question this paper has asked throughout: does the refusal of direct moral commentary invite precisely the critical, historically grounded discussion modelled here, or does it risk presenting scenes of exploitation to students without adequate interpretive scaffolding? Most instructors appear to resolve the tension by supplementing the poems with the feminist, postcolonial and historical apparatus surveyed in this paper, which suggests that the poems' ethical ambiguity is best met not by avoidance but by sustained critical engagement.

Conclusion

"Hunger" and "The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street" continue to rank among the most examined portrayals of prostitution in Indian English poetry, largely because they leave the ethical tensions they raise unresolved. This lack of resolution does not diminish their significance. It is a primary source of their continued critical relevance, since each new generation of readers finds in them fresh occasions to reconsider the difficult relationship between artistic representation and the exploitation it depicts. In both poems, women pushed into the sex trade by poverty and patriarchal forces are rendered with an imagist

precision that lays bare the mechanisms of their exploitation, while being granted almost no voice of their own. This combination of precise exposure and persistent silence is what makes the poems at once so effective as social critique and so vulnerable to the charge that they reproduce, in their form, the marginalisation they set out to condemn.

The survey undertaken here suggests that Mahapatra's engagement with Calcutta's sex trade resists reduction to either straightforward protest or unwitting complicity in objectification. It occupies an unsettled middle ground where compassion for the exploited sits uneasily beside a persistent formal silencing of the women themselves. This middle ground is not merely a by-product of scholarly disagreement but an accurate description of something genuinely present in the poems, a tension that Mahapatra may not have fully resolved and perhaps could not have resolved given the historical and social position from which he wrote.

Rather than a flaw, this ambivalence may be one of Mahapatra's most important contributions to postcolonial Indian literature: a refusal to let either his readers or himself escape accountability for the structures of poverty and desire that continue to shape such lives on the streets of cities like Calcutta. By declining to offer either a comfortable condemnation of individual villains or a sentimental rescue of his female subjects, he forces readers into the position of implicated discomfort that his poems' male observers occupy, a discomfort that constitutes not a failure of empathy but its most demanding and honest form. The very qualities that have made the poems objects of sustained controversy, their imagistic restraint, their withheld female voice and their refusal of easy moral resolution, are the qualities that ensure their power to unsettle readers into a fuller reckoning with the economic and patriarchal structures that sustain the exploitation of women far beyond the particular streets Mahapatra chose to depict.

The critical engagement that two comparatively short poems have attracted also says something about the value of literary study as a mode of ethical inquiry into problems that might otherwise be approached primarily through sociology, economics or policy analysis. Mahapatra's poems do not, and could not, offer solutions to the economic desperation or the patriarchal structures they depict. They offer a sustained, formally disciplined act of attention to the human costs of those structures, an attention that remains deliberately uncomfortable rather than reassuring. Literature focused on social suffering succeeds not necessarily when it resolves the ethical questions it raises but when it keeps them alive, urgent and unsettled for each new reader, and Mahapatra's Calcutta poems, read together, achieve that unresolved, productive discomfort, securing their place among the most consequential treatments of prostitution, poverty and gender in modern Indian English poetry.

Future scholarship might extend this analysis in two directions. A comparative study placing Mahapatra's Calcutta poems beside poetic and prose treatments of sex work by women writers, Indian and international, could clarify what is gained and lost when the formal choices examined here, externalised perspective, withheld interiority and imagistic restraint, are set against works that grant their female subjects direct narrative voice. Archival and historical research into the conditions of prostitution in Calcutta in the 1970s could likewise sharpen understanding of how closely Mahapatra's imagined brothel corresponds to the documented social realities of the period. Such avenues lie beyond the scope of this paper, but they suggest that the critical conversation, far from having reached a final settlement, continues to open onto productive questions about the relationship between poetic form and the representation of exploited women.

Works Cited

1. Alorcious, I. M. Sheeba, and K. Balachandran. "Picturization of Women: With Reference to the Select Poems of Jayanta Mahapatra." *The Creative Launcher*, vol. 8, no. 3, June 2023, pp. 50–56, <https://doi.org/10.53032/tcl.2023.8.3.06>.
2. Anand, Milind Raj, and Neetu Sharma. "Depiction of the 'Whore Image' in the Poems of Jayanta Mahapatra: A Critical Analysis of Select Poems." *Dialogue: A Journal Devoted to Literary Appreciation*, vol. 19, no. 2, Dec. 2023, pp. 35–39, <https://doi.org/10.30949/dajdtla.v19i2.7>.
3. Gupta, Ajeet Kumar. "Navigating Social Realism in the Poems of Jayanta Mahapatra." *Dialogue: A Journal Devoted to Literary Appreciation*, vol. 19, no. 2, Dec. 2023, pp. 43–46, <https://doi.org/10.30949/dajdtla.v19i2.9>.
4. Joshi, Manu, and Sharmila Saxena. "Ethos of Orissa Landscape and Indian Sensibility in the Poems of Jayanta Mahapatra." *Dialogue: A Journal Devoted to Literary Appreciation*, vol. 19, no. 2, Dec. 2023, pp. 40–42, <https://doi.org/10.30949/dajdtla.v19i2.8>.
5. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, U of Illinois P, 1988, pp. 271–313.
6. Tandon, Neeru, and Yashika Bajpai. "Evolution of Themes in Mahapatra's Poetry across Different Phases." *Journal of Teaching and Research in English Literature*, vol. 15, no. 2, Apr. 2024, pp. 29–40.
7. Varghese, Anu Filda. "Reverbaration of Women Sexuality in Jayanta Mahapatra's Poems: 'Hunger' and 'The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street.'" *Literary Herald*, vol. 6, no. 3, Oct. 2020, pp. 228–31.
8. Zahra, Andleeb. "Casting Shadows and Sunlight: Deconstructing the Cultural Kaleidoscope in the Select Poems of Jayanata [sic] Mahapatra." *Dialogue: A Journal Devoted to Literary Appreciation*, vol. 19, no. 2, Dec. 2023, pp. 29–34, <https://doi.org/10.30949/dajdtla.v19i2.6>.