

Introduction

The poem Dawn at Puri by Jayanta Mahapatra is set in the town of Puri which is situated in Orissa (India). In this symbolic and metaphorical poem, the poet talks about the hollowness of the rites and rituals common in Indian society. The poem consists of six stanzas having 3 lines each. There is no rhyme scheme.

- **Stanza 1**

The poet is near a famous Hindu temple situated on the bank of a river. He finds numerous crows making noise. It should be noted that the crowing of the crows is not pleasant at all.

It indicates that there is a dead body that they want to eat. Hence the tone of the poem is quite a sad right from the beginning. There is **a skull in the holy sands**.

The word Holy is ironical because during cremation nothing is left except the ashes. However, the presence of the skull symbolizes the hollowness of rites and rituals of his community and also the poverty which dominates the poet's country i.e. India.

Thus the town of Puri here symbolizes the whole country. And if the skull remains intact after cremation in such a holy and sacred city, the poet wonders what would be the condition in other cities that are not **holy**.

Stanza 2

In the second stanza, the poet takes his attention towards the **white-clad widowed Women**. The women are white-clad because, in Hinduism, the women have to wear white clothes till death after their husbands die.

The poet, rather than using "widows" calls them "**Widowed women**" which points to the patriarchal norms of Indian society which make the woman widow after the death of her husband. She has to wear white sarees, give up worldly desires and sexual pleasures.

The women have **past the centers of their lives**. **Centres** here refer either to their husbands or desires. Whatever may be the exact meaning, they are now without something which was their center i.e. purpose of their lives.

If the center symbolizes the husband, the line again suggests patriarchal dominance. An individual's center is his/her own self. However, in a patriarchal society, the case is different for women.

They have to become selfless and make their husbands the centers of their lives and thus without them, they are without identity and purpose.

The women seem to be **waiting to enter the Great Temple**. The phrase **Great Temple** is quite ironical because the poet suggests the hollowness of rituals in the beginning. The women are perhaps made to believe that the temple is great and they can find peace there only.

Stanza 3

The eyes of the **widowed women** are described as **austere**. **Austere** here means without any desire for worldly pleasure and desire. The women after losing their husbands have given up worldly lives.

The poet says that their **austere eyes stare like those caught in a net** i.e. being desireless, they seem to have been caught in a net. Here **net** is the symbolic net of the patriarchal society. Like a trapped bird, the women have lost the freedom of their mind and body.

While standing there to enter the temple, they are hopeful for a peaceful life. Entering the temple is the only desire left in them like seeing the morning light is the only desire and hope of a trapped bird.

Stanza 4

Next, the poet describes **leprous shells** who are **ruined** and are **leaning against one another**. Leprous shells here either refer to the beggars who are always near the temple asking for money or the low cast people who are not allowed to enter the temple.

Being in masses, and their faces **crouched** (i.e. upper area of the body bent forward) they are without names or identity. Again we find discrimination against the beggars who seek materialistic things in a spiritual and holy land or the low-caste people who cannot go inside because of their cast. Whatever the case may be, the lines suggest the hollow and discriminatory nature of the rites and ritual of Indian society.

Stanza 5

Suddenly, the poet's thoughtfulness is interrupted by **the smoky blaze of a sullen solitary pyre**. The dead body is joyless and alone though being cremated in Holy Land. The burning pyre reminds the poet of his old mother.

Stanza 6

The poet memorizes his mother's last wish that was to be cremated here. I think the second last line continues from the smoky blaze of a sullen solitary pyre. The poet says that the smoke rising from the pyre is twisting because of the air that comes from the river.

The air twists the pyre's smoke that makes the poet wonder the certainty of the dead person's eternal peace because, in spite of being burnt in a holy place, the smoke of the pyre which is perhaps his soul is affected by air. At the same time, the light is falling which keeps shifting on the sand.

By comparing the light's uncertain position to the pyre's smoke, the poet questions the very belief on which all the rites and rituals are formed and performed. It is thus also uncertain.

Hence there is dawn not only the physical but also metaphorical i.e. poet's realization that his very belief is hollow which in spite of being uncertain has trapped the women, discriminated against some people on the basis of cast and made the people believe in the afterlife which is uncertain.