

Dawn at Puri

The poem “Dawn at Puri” by Jayanta Mahapatra presents a series of images woven around the temple of Lord Jagannath and the sea beach of Puri, an ancient city holy to millions of Indians.

The poem opens with the narrator alluding to the dawn of a new day at the sea beach (of Puri). The vision of the morning twilight is far from that of peace and calm. It rather fills one with a sense of unease and apprehension of something intriguing and ominous.

The reference to the incessant cawing of crows near the burning ghat, where a human skull lies in the sands – brings out the image of a land full of squalor, hunger, poverty and deprivation.



The second stanza reinforces the ambience of gloom presented earlier as it introduces a host of elderly widows draped in white sarees. The women leading a life of austerity and self-denial are waiting outside the temple of Lord Jagannath, the presiding deity of the holy city, in the hope of salvation and peace as a reward for their life-long penance.

But as one moves to the third stanza the narrator’s deep skepticism about the efficacy of the women’s belief in the impending reward from the Lord comes to the fore. They appear to be caught in the net of a desire for divine grace that is likely to elude them forever. The idea conjures up the image of fishes in the fisherman’s net.

In the fourth stanza, the dim morning light reveals some decayed and scabrous shells leaning against one another. They symbolize the poor and deceased outcasts or beggars afflicted with leprosy who are not allowed to enter the temple, and thus the blessing of the Lord ironically eludes those who are in need of the most.



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The fifth stanza presents a sudden shift of vision from objective to subjective when the persona of the narrator merges with that of the poet. The lone body burning on the funeral pyre reminds the poet of his own mother.

In the last stanza, one finds him recall the last wish of his aging mother to be cremated at the burning ghat of Puri in her quest for salvation.

The poem ends with the poet's observation of the narrow band of smoke rising uncertainly up to the sky with frequent influx of wind from the sea. The concluding image reiterates the poet's skeptic view of life where the desire for divine grace and salvation towards the mitigation of hunger, poverty, disease and death is impeded by a profound sense of doubt and uncertainty.

The locale of the poem transcends its geographical boundary and encompasses the whole of India as a land of fascinating contradictions.

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