

Stories Silenced by the Social Stereotypes: Foregrounding Narrativity in Jayanta Mahapatra's Lyrics with Special Reference to "Summer"

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Abstract

Jayanta Mahapatra, a legend in Indian English Poetry, is celebrated for mirroring society in short lyrics. Mahapatra's poetry is rooted in Odisha's culture and reflects the complexities of human existence in India. While his poems have been explored for socio-cultural themes and his poetic style, subtle narratives of social issues remain veiled in the silent spaces of his verses. This paper foregrounds the subtle narrative in Mahapatra's "Summer" by employing H Porter Abbott's comprehensive narrative theory, as explicated in The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative. Employing Abbott's conceptualisation of setting, characters, sequence of events, narrator, and narration, this paper proposes to unravel Mahapatra's empathetic narrative of rural women, their identity crises, and the dominance of social stereotypes over her volitions. By synthesising Abbott's theoretical explanations of narrativity with close readings of Mahapatra's poem, this paper aims to offer a new dimension to the dynamics of storytelling within the realm of poetry.

Keywords: Porter Abbott, Jayanta Mahapatra, Narrativity, Narrative Elements, "Summer"

Introduction

Indian English literature has always captured the essence of Indian society, socio-economic crises, and gender hierarchies. Especially, the realistic lives of rural Indian women, framed within a social setup, have been highlighted in several works. Bearing the weight of social expectations, these women share a marginalised status, with their identity tied to their familial bonds and social roles. From Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Rajmohan's Wife* to Kalamala Markandeya's *Nectar in a Sieve*, Indian English Writers explored rural women's silent suffering and indomitable strength in traditional domestic sphere. Jayanta Mahapatra, a short story writer and a poet, often foregrounded the unheard voices of rural women, subtly highlighting the social stereotypes that dictate them. When asked about his focus on rural women in one of the interviews, he said, "I can see the pain in the eyes of women as they pass by the road every day; their eyes seem to say: we are the beasts of burden, like cattle. It is about this pain I would like to write because I can't do anything else ..." (Mahapatra 155). His poems create an interplay of emotions and

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experiences with lyrical precision and evocative imagery that transport readers to a poetic landscape. Madhusudan Prasad appreciated Mahapatra's prowess in capturing the essence of time and memory in "Caught in the Current of Time: A Study of the Poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra". Dr S. Chelliah and Syamsundar Padihari delved into Mahapatra's profound connection with Odisha's landscape, appreciating his adeptness in employing "suggestive and startling imagery" (38). Further, Bijay Kumar Das' *The Poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra* emphasises Mahapatra's exploration of socio-cultural themes of India. While the themes and lyrical precision in his poems are widely explored, the underlying narratives within his verses remain under-researched. This paper aims to analyse Mahapatra's select lyrics for hidden narrativity in his poetic style with a detailed examination of "Summer" from *Rain of Rites*. Since 'narrativity' is not an obvious style in a lyric as it is in fiction, it needs to be systematically explored in a lyric. Narrative theories offer methodical tools to study narrative structures to foreground narrativity in genres like lyrics. Thus, this paper unravels the neglected narratives of rural women, subtly present in "Summer" and other lyrics, using H. Porter Abbott's comprehensive narrative framework.

Methodology

H. Porter Abbott is known for his contributions to narrative theory. In *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, Abbott highlights various facets of narrative theory, forms of narrative and narrative elements like setting, characters, sequence of events, narrator and narration, focalization, etc. Abbott's aim was not to add to the theory of narrative but to provide a comprehensive text that incorporates all relevant explanations, highlighting the universality of narrativity. Though much of his work is devoted to narrativity in literary fiction, film and drama, he emphasises that narrativity "is found in all activities that involve the representation of events in time" (Abbott xi). Despite the universality of the narrative theory discussed in Abbott's work, its application in poetry in the Indian English context is notably absent. By synthesising Abbott's theoretical explanations with close readings of "Summer", this paper aims to analyse the underlying narrative in "Summer", offering new insights into the art of storytelling in poetry.

Given the subtle nature of narrativity in lyrics, this paper employs a systematic step-by-step procedure to underscore the narrative elements and foreground the narrative otherwise dissembled in the poem's verses. The first step is to understand the role of figurative language in foregrounding narrativity in poetry. This will guide the reader to the story structures underlying the lyric and situate the poem in a broader cultural context. The second step is to identify the "setting" in the poem. According to Abbott, the setting consists of "all those elements within which the entities of a story take part in the story's events" (Abbott 195). Establishing the setting in a poem will enable a reader to understand how characters and events in the narrative unfold. This setting will act as cultural or social contexts that influence the lives of the characters in the poem. Then, the development of the "characters" within the poem is examined. Characters are "any entities involved in the action that have agency. These would include, in addition to persons, any quasi-volitional entities like animals, robots, extraterrestrials, and animated things" (188). There can be two kinds of characters: "Round Characters" and "Flat Characters". According to E.M. Forster, "Round characters have varying degrees of depth and complexity and therefore, cannot be summed up in a single phrase" (qtd. in Abbott 126), and flat characters have "no hidden complexity" (126). Identifying and examining characters in a lyric will shed light on how characters within a lyric reflect cultural relevance in a particular society. The fourth step is understanding the "sequence of events" within the poem. They refer to a "chain of causally connected events in a story" (194). Events that are "necessary for the story to progress" (21) are referred to as "constituent events", and events that "do not help in narrative progress" (21) but provide contexts to the setting and constituent events are identified as "supplement events".

This step will enable a reader to map the timeline, highlighting the progression of the narrative through the characters' actions. The next step is to determine "focalization" in the poem. Focalization is the "perspective in which the narrated situations and events are presented" in a narrative (195). Here, the 'voice' of the 'narrator' is examined, helping the reader connect sympathetically with the characters' lives.

Analysis

Role of Figurative Language in Foregrounding Narrative Structures in Lyrics

"Summer" projects the everyday life of a mother and her daughter through an intricate narrative within its concise verses. Before studying narrative elements in the poem, it is essential to understand how Mahapatra's style, use of poetic devices, and figurative language provide a strong basis for understanding narrativity in his lyrics since it is 'style' that conceals stories in a lyric. The narrative elements may not be apparent on the surface of a lyric; narrativity is dissembled in the poetic diction, elements, and devices. Thus, it becomes imperative to study the poetic diction in a lyric before employing narrative theory. Doing this enables the reader to construe how poetic elements contribute to a structured progression of hidden narratives in lyrics. In lyrics, images, and symbols serve as linking devices in the process of narrative-building. They shape a reader's perception without detailed explanations. Mahapatra's poems are replete with images and symbols. Mahapatra himself agreed to this and said, "I don't write simple poetry, where statement makes the understanding of the poem complete. I depend on images and symbols to complete them" (188). For instance, "the mango tree" (Mahapatra 14) in "Summer" serves as a marker of the Indian cultural setup. Such symbolic representations help in translating visual markers into narrative and thematic elements, which aid in studying the narrative. Abstract elements and symbolic imagery, when linked together with narrative concepts like "setting", aid in creating "story worlds" within the poems.

Images help in character portrayal in the poems. For instance, analysing the image "10-year-old girl combing her mother's hair" (Mahapatra 14) reveals the two central characters in "Summer" – a young girl and her mother. Examining such images enables the reader to interpret their roles as "characters" that are confined to narratives of womanhood. Poetic devices like imagery and symbolism situate the narratives in a social-symbolic framework, creating a narrative lens to interpret individual actions as a part of the broader cultural setup that defines a woman's life. Poetic images guide the perceptions of a reader through the implied narrator's voice. The line "Who needs the future" (14) is a rhetorical question that hints at the future of the girl already determined by society. This also showcases the girl's resignation, as she silently accepts the responsibilities imposed on her. Here, "future" stands as the symbol of confinement of the possibility of growth in a girl's life.

Analysing images, metaphors, and symbols in Mahapatra's "Summer" helps the reader structure a narrative, build a story world, sketch the characters, and construct the thematic progression of events. This process of foregrounding the narrative in verses using the techniques of narrative theory will help the reader unveil complex socio-cultural critiques embedded within seemingly simple verses.

Narrative Elements in "Summer"

Identifying and understanding narrative elements in the poem makes narrative-building a scientific and systematic process, not just bringing the tale to light but also delineating the process of foregrounding narrativity in a lyric.

Setting

In a narrative, 'setting' encompasses the time, place, and context in which the story takes place.

It is the background against which the events within a narrative unfold.

Understanding 'setting' in "Summer" is crucial to situate the poem in the rural Indian context. The evocative imagery builds a layered setting in the poem.

Physical Setting

The opening lines of the poem evoke a sense of warmth and serenity with a description of a tranquil summer day "under a mango tree" (Mahapatra 14). Despite 'serenity' in the setting, a sense of desolation and emptiness is felt through the image of "the cold ash/ of a deserted fire" (14). Juxtaposing warmth and coldness emphasises the characters' sense of disconnectedness from their surroundings. The cold ash symbolises something that once had life (dreams and aspirations in the girl's life), a fire that is now extinguished.

Domestic and Social Setting

In the next lines of the poem, the domestic setting is brought out through the image of a 10-year-old girl combing her mother's hair, where crows of rivalries are quietly nesting (Mahapatra 14). Words like "crows" and "nesting" create a social setting that reflects external pressures in a girl's life, with 'crows' acting as an invisible yet influential agent, and 'quietly adding an unsettling dimension to the serene physical setting.

Symbolic Setting

"Home" in the poem can be examined as a symbolic setting. It is not just a physical space but a symbol of the transient nature of a woman's life. The line "the home will never/be hers" (Mahapatra 14) directly points to the societal norm that expects a girl to leave her family after marriage. It emphasises her temporary position in a family where she is merely a passive entity fulfilling the stereotypical roles determined by society.

Psychological Setting

As the narrative progresses, internal and imaginary spaces are evoked in the line "in a corner of a mind" (Mahapatra 14), suggesting an internal landscape filled with memories, emotions, and aspirations, adding depth beyond the external physical setting. The image "a living green mango/ drops softly to earth" metaphorically suggests a woman's relinquished dreams and aspirations. As the tender feminine lives leave behind their familial bonds, their wistful longings make another imaginary space dominated by a patriarchal domestic world.

Throughout the poem, 'setting' is evoked through a combination of natural images, domestic scenes, and introspective reflections, highlighting the universal crises of displacement, unnoticed sacrifice and societal norms that control the decisions of women. The poem's immersive descriptions and sensory details engage readers with the mental landscape of the poem, and its interconnected images form an "iterative narrative" (Genette 11).

Characters

In a narrative, characters are usually humans or entities that aid a story's progression through their actions, thoughts, and interactions. These include protagonists, antagonists, or supporting static symbols.

Mahapatra's "Summer" does not have characters that are developed in a conventional way with detailed descriptions or backgrounds. However, "Summer" gives the reader a glimpse into the lives and emotions of women through the characters of a 10-year-old girl and her mother. They serve as the focal point of societal pressures and cultural stereotypes.

Round Characters

The 10-year-old girl and her mother are the round characters, introduced to the readers with the line “a 10-year-old girl combs her mother’s hair” (Mahapatra 14). This action takes place in the physical setting of the poem - “under the mango tree” (14). While the action of combing in the poem is simple, the reversed roles, making ‘girl’ the agent and mother the passive theme, frame their growth in a deterministic manner. As the young girl combs her mother’s hair, she is silently donning the role of a nurturer. This action reflects the expectations imposed on women from a young age. Placing this in the social and domestic setting foregrounds their passive roles and “stagnant silence” (Prasad 367) in a stereotypical society, projecting them more as flat characters who lack agency. However, against the psychological setting, we see that the young girl and her mother have potential and passion to aspire and grow.

Flat Characters

Flat characters are often one-dimensional; they represent a single trait and do not undergo any transformation. They are the supporting symbols or agents that aid in the development of round characters.

In “Summer”, the flat characters, “crows of rivalries” and “home” represent forces and external pressures in a girl’s life. They symbolise the collective agents of social limitations. Though silent, yet all-pervasive and oppressive presence of crows as socially dictated norms suppresses (flattens) the lives of the girl and her mother and restricts their growth. They do not directly interact with the round characters, but act as silent, judgmental observers. Symbolically, “Home” is also a flat character in “Summer”. It personifies an agent of confinement and expectations. The line “the home will never be hers” offers a glimpse of women who suffer and feel alienated in their own homes. This line is an expression that reveals that home for a girl is never a space of personal freedom or security but an inevitable symbol of transience and detachment. It is a cultural marker of societal norms that dictate a woman’s journey. In a rural Indian setup, for a girl, home is a place where she is expected to fulfil her roles as daughter, wife, and mother. Home in “Summer” is an immutable force that highlights how women in rural India are conditioned to accept their roles.

While the round characters in the poem give the reader a scope to explore the psychological and emotional complexities of a woman’s life, the flat characters, which are the symbols of a male chauvinistic society, restrict the development of the round characters, confining them to their prescribed roles. The interplay between the round and flat characters highlights how a patriarchal society restricts a woman’s identity and reduces them to flat representations as their dreams remain deserted or dead.

Sequence of Events

The sequence is a chronological order of the narrative’s actions and events. In “Summer”, the sequence of events is a thematic progression of emotions and not a chronological plotline. The poem’s fragmented scenes of interconnected moments connect readers to the emotional journey of the characters as they jostle between internal conflicts and external pressures.

The opening line, “Not yet” (Mahapatra 14), establishes a sense of anticipation and hesitation about the future. This line leads us to the setting created by the image of “cold ash/ of a deserted fire” (14), symbolising a sense of desolation. The question of who is anticipating or what they are anticipating arises. These ambiguities are resolved in the next few lines, via the social setting, when the reader is introduced to the central characters of the poem, the 10-year-old girl and her mother. In the action of the young girl combing her mother’s hair, where the “crows of rivalries” are quietly nesting (14), the domestic scenes are juxtaposed with the emotional

landscapes of the character. As the poem's narrative progresses, there is a sense of realisation and acceptance of the character's fate dictated by society. The image of dropping off the green mango (14) is crucial in sequencing the events. It connects the image of 'the mango tree' with the events, 'the girl combing her mother's hair' and 'that the home will never be hers', with the girl, metaphorically represented as a "green mango", finally getting disassociated with her home, vis-à-vis the mango tree. "A living green mango / drops softly to earth" suggests a girl's relinquished dreams and aspirations. This marks the culmination of the poem and its characters' emotional journey, where she silently accepts the roles society imposes on her.

Constituent Events

Constituent events are the main events in a narrative; these events form the central narrative arc of the poem.

In "Summer", the act of a 10-year-old girl combing her mother's hair under a mango tree (Mahapatra 14) is a constituent event. It highlights the traditional role of a girl/ woman. It hints at the ritualistic role of servitude that a girl is expected to take up. As Roy aptly writes in his work "Imagery in the Poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra: A Study", "In a patriarchal society, a woman can never truly have liberty and freedom, especially after she becomes a wife" (134). Patriarchal societies idealise women as nurturers and caregivers, and frame marriage as the ultimate destination in a woman's life. Such a construct not only denies a woman the space for personal growth and self-expression but also reinforces the notion that her worth lies in her self-sacrifice. This imposed expectation from women forms the second constituent event of the narrative – the green living mango dropping softly to earth (Mahapatra 14). While the mango symbolises growth and vitality in a girl's life, its dropping softly highlights the relinquishment of her home and dreams to fulfil socially dictated responsibilities.

Supplement Events

Supplement events enrich a narrative by providing context and emotional depth. In summer, the event "where crows of rivalries are quietly nesting" (14) is a supplementary event. It metaphorically captures the silent yet all-pervasive societal surveillance over a woman's life. It symbolises the patriarchal forces that dictate a woman's conduct. Further, it intensifies the poem's emotional depth.

Narrator, Narration, and Focalization

A Narrator can take various forms, a character that participates in the narrative, called the first-person narrator; a third-person narrator, who is "not a character in the story" (Abbott 196); or an omniscient narrator, who is "assumed to know everything connected with the story narrated" (194). In a narrative, the narrator can also be an omniscient third-person, who, as a distant observer, narrates the events as they happen.

Focalization determines the perspective through which a reader witnesses the unfolding of the events.

"Summer" employs a third-person narrator with an omniscient point of view, presenting an objective perspective on the events and emotions. The use of "her" instead of "my", "our", etc., in the lines "A 10-year old girl combs her mother's hair", "The home will never be hers", "In a corner of her mind" (Mahapatra 14) presents a third-person point of view. Through its introspective reflections and vivid imagery, "Summer" invites readers to empathise with the characters' struggles, highlighting the themes of displacement and sacrifice.

The narrative voice in "Summer" plays the observer who notices the lives of the young girl and her mother. Through its detached narration, the voice reveals how the setting of the "Home"

and “crows” impose social constraints on the characters. The passive actions of “combing” and “soft dropping of the mango” highlight the inevitability of the girl and her mother’s future. The voice does not engage with the narrative but acts as a silent witness to the struggles of women. “Mahapatra uses a sad and serene voice to give her thoughts a narration” (Roy 133). The real-time projection of events as they happen allows the reader to connect with the narrative and its characters. The narration of the static settings and passive actions of the characters directs the reader to construct a natural narrative that highlights how a woman’s future is shaped by social and physical boundaries. As the reader understands the subtle relationship among the setting, characters, and the sequence of events, the underlying theme of objectification of women and their suppressed identity in a patriarchal framework is naturally brought forth. This observation underscores how cultural stereotypes limit a woman’s identity to a set of predefined roles, leaving no room for individuality. Through its subtle narrativity, “Summer” critiques these roles and gives a voice to the stories of women silenced by social stereotypes, and thus, urges the readers to reflect on the socio-cultural frameworks that shape a woman’s identity.

Narrativity and Mahapatra’s Other Lyrics

Subtle storytelling with the portrayal of the plight of rural Indian women through lyrics is unique to Mahapatra’s style. The silenced voice of the marginalised needs a subtle space to narrate its unheard tales, and Mahapatra’s lyrics are swelled with such stories preserved in the poetic veils. The detailed analysis of “Summer” using a narratological approach systematically foregrounds the tale of rural women concealed in the symbolic and metaphoric diction. This narrative style is evident in other poems by Mahapatra, as well. For instance, “Dawn at Puri” from the collection *A Rain of Rites* and “Tomorrow I Could Find Myself Lying About My Life” from *Hesitant Light* narrativise the lives of rustic women living in death, as briefly illustrated in the subsequent sections.

Narrative Elements in “Dawn at Puri”

In “Dawn at Puri”, the setting is filled with emotional and cultural resonances, evoked in the title of the poem. The poem is set against the backdrop of Puri, a coastal city in Odisha. While the initial image of “endless crow noises” (Mahapatra 28) sets a sombre tone to the poem, the image “skull on the holy land” (28) evokes the themes of the inevitability of death and the transient nature of human existence. Further, “White clad widowed women waiting to enter the great temple [the temple of Puri Jagannath]” (28) is the main event in the narrative, which sheds light on the marginalised status of widowed women in society. Their waiting outside the temple represents their exclusion from society. In this poem, white-clad widowed women are round characters who serve as the focal point of societal pressures and cultural stereotyping symbolised by “Crows” (28) as flat characters, who assume the role of patriarchal gaze, constantly hovering and watching over a woman’s life. The poem’s narrator is omniscient. The interaction among the narrative elements – voice, characters, events, setting – reveals a widowed woman’s lifeless narrative concealed in the powerful imagery and subdued in hackneyed cultural practices associated with Puri.

Narrative Elements in “Tomorrow I Could Find Myself Lying About My Life”

The poem begins with the description of “fireflies float[ing] around the tamarind tree in rain” (Mahapatra 41), creating a serene natural setting. Since tamarind trees are abundantly found in the forest areas of Bissamcuttak and Kshipur blocks of Rayagada, Odisha, this description sets the poem against a rural Indian backdrop, which could be the Rayagada region of Odisha. The image of “rains” adds to the sombre tone and suggests a cycle of life caught in passing time. The

line “The house sits large and lonely...” (41) conveys a sense of isolation and incompleteness. A house is usually considered a symbol of stability, security, freedom, and family, but here, it is “lonely”. The poem’s narrator is a character in the poem. This is evident through the use of “I” and “my” (41). The narrator is not a detached observer but a character who relates personal experiences. Though the gender of the voice in the poem is not explicit, the domestic atmosphere created by the images, like “a large and lonely house” (41), and reference to the “dream children” (41), hints at an implied female tone, aligning with the cultural implication of how a woman always thinks about her home and her children. Despite the hidden identity of the speaker, the tone and themes, the domestic imagery, and setting of the poem assert that the first-person voice of the poem is a woman, possibly a mother, who is the primary character of the poem. The woman’s voice in the narrative is complex and multi-dimensional, quietly reflecting on her life. The “dream children” (41) in the poem are flat characters. They exemplify the potential of the future generations. However, from the mother’s experience, these “dream children” are also confined and limited to the gendered roles thrust on them by society. Understanding the setting, voice, narration, and development of characters in the poem will enable a reader to construct a meaningful sequence of events from the fragmented descriptions. The title of the poem, which is also similar to its closing line – “Tomorrow I could be lying about my Life” (41) – points to the central conflict of the poem and piques the reader’s interest, hints at an ongoing struggle and gives the poem an iterative structure. It emphasises the mother’s façade, as she hides and lies about her life. The interplay between the small, fleeting fireflies (moments or dreams) and the tamarind tree (woman) in the rain (rituals) hints at the social norms that drench a woman’s life as she helplessly watches the rare moments of joy “float” away. The tale of a woman in this poem is cyclical; it closes as it begins. She realises that “tomorrow” she might be lying about her life, pretending a life that is complete. But it is incomplete as she helplessly waits for summer that never comes, caught in responsibilities and unfulfilled dreams.

Conclusion

Synthesising the theoretical explorations of Porter Abbott with close readings of Mahapatra’s select lyrics reveals the dynamic nature of storytelling even in lyrics. Though short, these lyrics carry intense narratives of socio-cultural norms that readers can deeply resonate with. By foregrounding narrativity in “Summer”, “Dawn at Puri” and “Tomorrow I Could Find Myself Lying About My Life”, this paper reveals how Mahapatra’s poetry, while mirroring societal complexities, also contributes to the literary landscape with its empathetic and unique narrative voice. This analysis also reinforces how Mahapatra’s poetry becomes a medium for articulating silenced emotions and marginalised expressions.

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