

## Exploring The Aftermaths Of Materialism On Modern Society: The Psyche Of Modern Humans In Selected Poems Of Jayanta Mahapatra And Shanta Acharya

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### Abstract

*Society and literature are very complimentary to each other like the two sides of a coin and poetry being the elite form of literature always portray society accurately though it is symbolical in nature. Literature as a mirror reflects the values, norms and conflicts of a society and writers often include the real-life experiences and social issues in their writings. Jayanta Mahapatra is the first poet to receive Sahitya Akademi award in the Indian English poetry. Through images, symbols and metaphors his poems explore the varied activities of human beings. The selected poems of Mahapatra are analysed to understand the absurdity of lives of modern world people and how it reflects the mental landscape of them. Shanta Acharya is one of the most innovative, creative and progressive poets of contemporary India. Her poetry sees through the physical world and uncovers some ambiguous nature of society. There is humour, sarcasm, spirituality, questions, philosophy, imagery, arguments which enforce the ideas of multiple vision of poetry. Acharya classifies the sources of contemporary world that portrays the meaninglessness of relationship, emotions and other human factors. Both the poets address the pessimistic attitude growing in contemporary modern society, environmental issues such as climate change, pollution, drought and social isolation. The paper aims at presenting Jayanta Mahapatra and Shanta Acharya, the poets of international repute, deals with the materialistic world in the modern society and its consequences on the human psyche. This paper explores their works the complexities of human psychology, pervasive sense of absurdity and existential angst in contemporary life through the lens of Mahapatra and Acharya by depicting the incomprehensive nature of modern existence.*

**Keywords:** Absurdity; Contemporary Life; Environmental Hazards; Human Psyche; Modern Society and Materialism

### Introduction:

*... but the present suffices.*

*Indefinable, like life, with the government wrong,*

*the thinking wrong, the world wrong. .... Jayanta Mahapatra*

Materialism is a massive fact of the modern ways of human living. It is the ineluctable outcome of the phenomenal dominance of the rationalistic approach to life, of the spread of scientific knowledge and consequential loss of religious faith in modern humans. Advancement of science and technology has resulted in a definite shift in human attitude from the age-old spiritual values, pursuits and pleasures to materialistic accumulations and worldly possessions. In his article titled "Materialism: Trait Aspects of living in the Material World," the noted scholar, R.W. Belk, has aptly described materialism "as the importance a consumer attaches to worldly possessions, suggesting that at the highest levels of materialism, possessions assume a central place in a person's life and are believed to provide the greatest sources of satisfaction" (Belk, 1985). George Eliot addressed materialism in the context of human morality, wrote: "The growing prevalence of materialism seems to me the greatest danger threatening the well-being of mankind. It tends to weaken the bonds of human sympathy and degrade moral aspirations" (Eliot, 1871, p. 245).

In modern society, materialism increasingly dominates the contours of individual identities and collective aspirations. The contemporary life's shift towards an economy and culture driven by the acquisition of goods and wealth has exerted profound implications on the human psyche, the general propensity with which is seeking deeper meaning and fulfilment. As material wealth becomes increasingly intertwined with personal worth and societal value, the psychological and existential ramifications are both profound and paradoxical. The paradox lies in the realization that material accumulation frequently fails to address deeper emotional and existential needs which ultimately questions the humanity of contemporary people. The quest for tangible success and personal satisfaction often leads to absurd relationships and environmental degradation. The absurdity in personal and social relationships amongst human beings reflects the social disorders and criminal behaviours. About the origin of the concept of absurdity, the renowned novelist and existential thinker, Albert Camus writes, "The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world" (Camus, 1942, p. 30). In *Waiting for Godot*, Samuel Beckett masterfully portrays existential absurdity through characters who wait endlessly without purpose: "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful!" (Beckett, 1953, p. 41) Beckett's characters experience the futility of existence, engaging in repetitive and meaningless actions, which reflect the absurdity of human life. The chaotic nature of existence becomes particularly relevant in this milieu and this intersection of materialism, environmental degradation, and the human psyche needs a critical examination of the contemporary beings' values and priorities. In this context, the poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra and Shanta Acharya appears of considerable significance and therefore, calls for pertinent revaluation.

To begin with, Jayanta Mahapatra (1928-2023) is renowned for his deep, contemplative poetry. His poetry predominately deals with among other things, the motif of human existence, modernism, cultural identity, history, myth, natural landscapes, and social issues. Mahapatra was awarded by the Sahitya Akademi in 1981 for his long poem, "Relationship". His poetry probes into the deep recesses of human psyche, the degrading state of the contemporary human society, and the surrounding environment. It urges the readers to reconsider the definitions of success and well-being in an era marked by serious psychological turmoil, and social and environmental crises. His poetry dominates the theme of paradoxical relationships between material progress and social and ecological disorder which leads to feelings of inadequacy and diminished self-worth, affecting overall psychological well-being. Whereas, Shanta Acharya (1953), is a luminary poet in the realm of contemporary poetry. As a poet, she often engages herself with the issue of human condition and digital influences on human beings. Her poetic trajectory presents the scenario where it shows the absurd relationships in the modern world. Engaging it as a compelling theme, she reflects the transformative effects of contemporary technology and cultural shifts. Her poetry, moreover, presents modern features of fragmented communication, alienation, existential crises and concerns, industrialisation, modernity, as well as environmental hazards. And, in the realm of contemporary poetry, many poems by both Mahapatra and Acharya deal with modern social issues. They are expressive of urgency and depths of social critique. Further, a compelling dimension of their work has remained examining the aftermath of materialism. This paper tries to explore how the poets address the pervasive influence of consumer culture and its effects on individual and collective identities through textual analysis. The thematic undercurrents of materialism in Acharya and Mahapatra's poetic creation and the insight into their vision constitute the focal points of the paper. The poems have been selected here for our purpose exclusively on the basis of their varying approaches to the topic of modernism and environmental crises.

To the end of mapping out the footmarks of materialism in the pages of Jayanta Mahapatra and Shanta Acharya's poetry, let us have a closeup view of some of their individual poems. Let us look at the poetic oeuvre of Mahapatra first. The province of this veteran Indian poet's poetry is pervaded by multifarious human predicaments like poverty, hunger, man-perpetrated violence and brutality both of his native Indian province, Odisha, and the world at large.

In the poem "Violence", for example, Mahapatra explains the societal function, the imagery of constrained youth, educational system and the symbolic representation of economic structures in the contemporary world that portrays how materialistic and hierarchical structures constrain individual growth and creativity. The materialistic values that dominate society are symbolically explained by Mahapatra in the following excerpt from the poem under present reference:

Perhaps I would want to touch  
nothing here.  
The children sit in their classrooms,  
shrunk like caged slaves,  
pointing accusing fingers-  
hands that keep their hold

on coins in their pockets  
with peaceful Gandhi heads.

Hands

that open and close,  
gasping in the darkness (The Lie of Dawns 134).

In “Deaths in Orissa” Mahapatra vividly illustrates the state of agriculture in Odisha and the deaths caused by hunger. The changes in climate patterns, irregular rainfall and rising temperatures, affect crop yields and farming practices. Odisha experiences both droughts and floods, which affect severely agricultural productivity. Increased deforestation for development projects and logging has led to soil erosion and reduced fertility, which also very badly affect agricultural output. The poem suggests a state of decay of crops and the helplessness of farmers to witness the harsh impact on their livelihood. The physical and emotional tensions are explained in the following lines:

Nothing but the paddy’s twisted throat  
exposed on the crippled bleak earth,  
nothing but impotence in lowered eyes,  
nothing but the tightening of the muscles  
in Bhagyabati’s neck which her outcaste mother  
would herself have liked to throttle to death, ... (ibid 138)

Mahapatra reflects on the rise of hatred amongst modern people and the impact of it on both individuals and societies in such poems as “Dawn”, “Scream” and “Plot”. The poet considers hatred amongst people as something absurd and meaningless. He is appalled to see how it leads to severe forms of violence. Mahapatra addresses the social disorders as an impact of modernism and materialism that affect the entire communities by fostering fear, misdeeds, criminal acts etc. He is disappointed with his helplessness about these intolerance and crimes and seeking legal responses in the poem “Plot”:

How can the afternoon hold us  
like a keening hymn in the dark wounded fields  
we keep pressed between our palms?  
How can the hatred of men protect us  
from ourselves? (ibid 162)

Materialism and social unrest are significant in the poetry of many British poets. Poetry that reflects materialist themes associated with the society can be found in William Blake’s poem. William Blake in the poem “London” presents the city’s material condition and highlights the oppressive and dehumanizing effects of urbanization and social inequality. The poem describes poverty, corruption and exploitation prevalent in London at that time. Blake writes:

In every cry of every Man,  
In every Infants cry of fear,  
In every voice: in every ban,  
The mid-forg’d manacles I hear  
How the chimney-sweeper’s cry... (Blake, 1794)

Similarly, T.S. Eliot critiques the superficiality of contemporary culture in “The Waste Land”, and “The Hollow Men” where material concerns overshadow intellectual pursuits and the materialism of the modern world is juxtaposed with a sense of spiritual barrenness. The lines “This is the way the world ends/ Not with a bang but a whimper” (Eliot, 1925) suggests the futility of a world that has forsaken spiritual and moral depth for ephemeral material gains. Life in the contemporary society is materialistic and full of crimes such as murder rape and other complex phenomena. Mahapatra deals with various socioeconomic factors like poverty, unemployment, and poor education in his verses. He deals also with psychological factors like depression and trauma, that pave path for prevalence of crimes in society. In the poem “Death’s Wild Land: Eleven Poems” Mahapatra describes the victims of murder and rape who suffer severe psychological and emotional trauma. The rise of digital technologies has contributed to increased social isolation. It has resulted in the deplorable state of dehumanisation too. He emphasizes the loss of humanity in contemporary society. He raises serious concerns about the erosion of fundamental human values and interpersonal connection as well. With a deep note of sadness, the poet has written in the fifth poem of the series under reference,

To be human  
is to see in a dream perhaps  
the one who can never be seen;  
perhaps to hire out a tractor  
to work the fields

or to hook the slippery little carp  
which swim  
among the muddy paddies (The Lie of Dawns 120).

Mahapatra's poems also deal with consequences of the materialistic world that harms the eco-system with pollution, deforestation and urbanization. He addresses the injustice, helplessness, loss of humanity that brings conflict on a larger scale for the human race.

Like Mahapatra, Shanta Acharya is also perturbed to see the devastating impacts of digital technology and materialistic pursuits on the routine life of modern men and women. She brings to fore the absurdity in modern relationships, and shows in the poem "City Life" how work in excess dominates daily life. In the opening couplet, she spells out, "Getting up early, having gone to bed late/is City life, in between work there is no respite" (Imagine 61). Acharya addresses disillusionments and contradictions that arise out of contemporary society's obsession with consumerism and impacts of digital technology. Her poem titled "Dear Tech Support" illuminates the absurd nature of modern existence, critiquing how materialism and digital culture shape and undermine the human experience. It highlights the superficiality of modern society examining critically the overemphasis on material wealth and consumption. The poem explains how people commercialise relationships nowadays and the digital medium may sometimes hinder the development of deep emotional bonds. The poem is full of irony and absurdity found in modern relationships when the priorities are the materialistic expectations. The dynamics of modern relationships are characterized more by consumerist values than by traditional notions of emotional reciprocity or moral engagement. The possessions are prioritized over emotions and also provides negotiable ideas to shape a relationship to explore the dark and destructive aspects of modern culture:

Last year I upgraded Boyfriend 5 to Husband 1  
and noticed a distinct slowdown in the performance  
of the flower, jewellery and other network applications  
that had operated flawlessly in the boyfriend system. (Imagine 104)

Similarly, in the poem "Dear Customer", she depicts how consumerist values can lead to superficiality and a lack of deeper meaning in people's lives. The presence of shallowness of consumerism in this poem critically encourages a shift from a consumerism mindset to one that values personal growth and environment stewardship. Like "Dear Tech Support", this poem critiques the modern contemporary lifestyle which overshadows human emotions and feelings. Modern advancements like industrialization, urbanization, and technological growth have impacted the greenery of Earth. Acharya's poems reflect her deep concern for the preservation of the environment in the face of modern progress in the poem "The Vulnerable Plot of Green". It denotes how urbanization taking over the greenery:

No longer sacrosanct  
the vulnerable plot of green,  
begging, *Please keep off the grass*  
on rusting metal plates. (Imagine, 7)

Shanta Acharya brings out the contemporary urban life and hypocrisy, the absurdity of modern life. In the poem "Shaadi.com" Acharya combines the comical voice with highlights of paradoxical elements about the modern pattern of marriage in wedding sites. It raises some questions about the authenticity by mentioning the vulnerability in technological dependence as well as the relationship focused upon material success and consumption. The poem addresses the familial pressure of marriage by using the irony of how this pressure is leading individuals to settle down regardless of their personal readiness or circumstances? For her the choices between self-growth and marriage are quite transparent. This poem underlies the cultural expectations, societal pressure of marriage as a necessity though it is not a survival necessity. She interprets the eventual possible outcome in the long-term. She always taps into the inner reservoirs of truthfulness and maintains a state of peace of mind. The context of her voice where she expresses the criterion of marriage preference in the poem "Shaadi.com" shows the mental conditioning of people from ages:

Age: doesn't matter. Marital status: Doesn't matter.  
Children: Doesn't matter. Country of residence: Doesn't matter.  
Height: Doesn't matter. Education: doesn't matter.  
Religion: Doesn't matter. Occupation: Doesn't matter.

I was inundated with suitors, crashing my computers. (Imagine 176)

Materialism weakens the social bonds, as individuals prioritise personal well-being and gain. Acharya effectively employs this theme in her poetry, illustrating the consequences of materialism with precision and depth. Materialism also leads to the depletion of natural resources and pollution. Human activities and urbanization lead to the loss of

forest cover, disrupting ecosystems and biodiversity. This loss of forests also diminishes the capacity of the land to retain water, exacerbating soil erosion and reducing the availability of freshwater. Acharya addresses these themes in “The Sundarbans” where she reflects on the consequences of human exploitation of nature, emphasizing the need for ecological awareness and preservation of natural resources. Her work embodies a deep connection with the natural world and a critique of the ways in which modern society disregards the delicate balance of ecosystems. The poem suggests that human activities will lead to the eventual degradation and disappearance of the Sundarbans, “The Sundarbans may one day disappear/ leaving no man fit to take the measure of another.”

Acharya also captures the environment shifting and the human impacts where she addresses the fragility of the natural world and the destructive forces of modern civilization. In her poem “Survival” for instance, she has written about the irreversible harm humans have inflicted on other species, a theme relevant to the existence of crabs, lobsters, snails, and other creatures affected by the pollution and environmental degradation. As she has put it,

Crabs, lobsters, beetles, scarabs,  
snails, turtles, tortoise-  
all self-contained, sensitive creatures-  
supporting their crosses on their backs  
negotiate in an uncertain,  
unpredictable, unforgiving world,... (ibid 88)

With an unmissable tone of irony, Acharya has implicitly underlined how modern humans have become increasingly self-centred, losing the understanding of the indispensable value of healthy coexistence. As a result, creatures like crabs, snails, beetles, turtles and lobsters continue to lose their habitats and try to protect themselves with their shells to survive. Acharya’s poems point finger at the increasing menace posed to the survival of other species. Indirectly though, her writings on Nature, invites a deeper contemplation of the human responsibilities toward preserving biodiversity.

As outlined above in reasonable details, both Jayanta Mahapatra and Shanta Acharya have expressed their deep concerns over the adverse effect materialism has exerted on contemporary human living. It is no wonder, their poetic concerns have been taken note of by several scholars of the day. In their research article, Muthuraman and others (2020) for example, have brought to fore the miserable human conditions of Odisha in the light of Mahapatra’s poetry. The miserable conditions they have highlighted include untold suffering, aching hunger, abject poverty and endless exploitation of women. The paper aptly highlights Orissa’s socio-cultural environment in the light of Mahapatra’s poetic portraits of the issues. As a matter of fact, expressions like ‘Blind Beggar’, ‘Blind Singer’, ‘Dowry’, ‘Poverty and Sexuality’, and ‘Death’ are very much telling about the present day human condition. Side by side, they offer a nuanced understanding of the pervasive challenges humankind confronts as well as experiences in the present era. The vivid articulation of reality has rendered Mahapatra’s poetry vague and refined in several respects. Similarly, Venugopalrao (2018) in his research paper observes that Mahapatra’s poetry has dominantly discussed human conditions. It demonstrates how misery is common to all human beings and how they (humans) always search for a solution from the physical environment. The paper also speaks about human civilization, about how humans are engaged in their struggle against the scourges of antagonistic forces of existence to lead a life of security and comfort. The researcher writes, “The long tale of human civilization reads like a big struggle of man to hold his own against the scourges of antagonistic forces of existence. It is always a struggle to lead a life of security and comfort. The first man when he found himself sufficiently secure against natural forces, turned his attention to ways he could find relief from stress and strain. Initially sports and as his mental faculties grew, song, dance and drama and then adventures in various forms of literature took the centre stage of all human endeavours in various forms of literature took the centre stage of all human endeavours.” (Venugopalrao, 416) Human misery is mitigated by certain values of the spirit and soul such as love, universal brotherhood, and treatment of everybody on equal terms. Mahapatra examines every event with the humanistic eye by considering the present and past and his poetry reads like a tale suffused with an endless concern and sympathy for humanity. While traditional analyses might confine themselves to the socioeconomic aspects of poverty, G. Ranjit and Rajkumar (2020) argue in their writeup for an expanded interpretation that incorporates an eco-critical perspective. Mahapatra’s sole inspiration is his interaction with the nature and his intimate relationship to it. In Mahapatra’s poems this approach highlights the interconnectedness of social and ecological issues like river Daya represents the history, glory and memory of Odisha. The poem “Relationship” deals with Mahanadi, Konark temple, Chilika, Chandipur, the architectural wonders of Konark, Puri and Bhubaneswar which are linked with a dreadful myth that the current situation is shown against the past: “The first part of his work Relationship deals with river Mahanadi, which is a major influence in his writings, Konark temple- which he explains the marvel rendered by his ancestors and the old harbors like Chilika and Chandipur. He

feels nostalgia very often and is intertwined in this poem. He presents the current plight of Odisha and remembers the glorious heritage which he bemoans now of its inability to revoke now. He traces the vague grandeur tradition of the Odisha culture and feels sympathetic of the marvelous past.” (G. R. & Rajkumar 7) The work emphasizes on the elements of ecocriticism, environmental crisis, sustainable resources etc. The paper cites from the poetry of Mahapatra examples of a harmonious coexistence with nature in the past.

### Conclusion

The contemporary era has brought about a great change in human lifestyle characterized by prioritization of materialistic pursuits and consumerist value systems over the traditional one of moral values and spiritual pursuits. By moral and spiritual standards, this degradational shift in lifestyle has led to gross societal decay, manifesting in increased unrest, crime, violence, and frustration. Materialistic prosperity has rendered human beings more and more self-centred. While materialistic advancement offers economic opportunities, cultural experiences, and technological advancements, it also comes with significant social, environmental, and personal challenges. This change has radically altered daily routines. Such change in attitude has created an environment where inter-personal relationship as well as communal harmony is overshadowed by relentless pursuits of consumeristic satisfaction. The aftermaths of materialism in contemporary society have far-reaching and often detrimental effects on individuals, communities, and environment as well. Psychologically, materialism diminishes well-being, and breeds a cycle of unfulfilled desires. Socially, it promotes a consumer culture. Environmentally, it leads to resource depletion, pollution, and climate change. On the cultural front, it undermines diversity and leads to mechanistic homogeneity which in its turn gives birth to a serious existential crisis. It characterizes a profound imbalance in the society. The poems chosen and discussed in brief above are indicative of such degradational effects or aftermaths of materialism. The reality of the contemporary materialistic world has been poetically projected with subtle artistic skills and craftsmanship by Jayanta Mahapatra and Shanta Acharya.

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