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WHISPERS FROM THE UNCONSCIOUS: MEMORY, TRAUMA, MOURNING, AND THE SHADOW SELF IN *A RAIN OF RITES*

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ABSTRACT

Jayanta Mahapatra's *A Rain of Rites* is a haunting exploration of inner psychological conflict, cultural dissonance, and spiritual disillusionment. This paper applies psychoanalytic literary criticism to examine three representative poems—"A Rain of Rites", "The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street" and "Hunger"—as narratives of trauma, memory, repression, and the fractured self. Drawing on Freudian and Jungian theory, the analysis investigates Mahapatra's symbolic language and his invocation of the unconscious to expose a deeply internalized response to collective and personal grief. His poetic world is one where loss is omnipresent, desire is marked by shame, and rituals fail to offer redemption. The poetic persona in these poems is often portrayed as riven between longing and guilt, caught in the echo of a cultural and spiritual identity that is no longer whole. Mahapatra's restrained yet visceral style brings forth images of decay, silence, and absence, allowing the poems to function as both emotional confession and cultural critique. Eventually, *A Rain of Rites* becomes a textual space for negotiating the unspeakable aspects of the human psyche—the shadow self, the repressed desire, and the irretrievable past.

Keywords: psychoanalysis, memory, trauma, loss, mourning, repression, shadow self, guilt, desire, unconscious, cultural dissonance, ritual, displacement

Jayanta Mahapatra, one of the significant figures in contemporary Indian English poetry, is recognised for his introspective, shadowed, and emotionally condensed verses that frequently explore the inner worlds of pain, silence, memory, and cultural displacement. He reconnoitres, writes R. Parthasarathy, "the intricacies of human relationships, especially those of lovers, with a robust tenderness. About the poems themselves there is an unexpected quietness" (59). His poetry is not only anecho of the visible but also an enunciation of the hidden—the dominion of the unconscious, haunted by repression, guilt, and trauma. "My poems are generally thought to be abstruse", (Das 133) the poet asserted in an interview, and that is why, he added, the readers usually become impatient to dig out meaning which, most of the time, remains hidden behind the veil of "symbols, metaphors and images" (Das 130).

Among his earliest and most celebrated collections, *A Rain of Rites* (1976) stands out for its intimate representation of personal and historical concerns, where the poet contends with feelings of exile, fractured identity, and psychological dissonance. The poet, at times, stressed that he wrote because he felt lonely, and because the world is full of unanswered questions, and the answers lie deep within him. This submission underscores his inward-facing poetics, grounded in an exploration for lost backgrounds, suppressed memories, and interior pain. He is a highly "serious and sincere, persevering" poet, writes Madhusudan Prasad, with "amazingly impressive, almost startling" poems that capture his inner loss, turmoil, and the landscape that reflects his mindscape in varied ways and

shapes (181). He "does not indulge in verbal excesses", remarks Keki N. Daruwalla, and depicts, with ease and accuracy, the conscious and the unconscious, the physical and the psychological, and the inner turmoil and tribulations of his inner self (118).

The critical perspectives of psychoanalytic theory—particularly the frameworks laid down by Sigmund Freud, Carl Gustav Jung, and Jacques Lacan—offer powerful tools to unearth the dormant psychological tensions within Mahapatra's poetic expressions. Freud's concept of repression and the return of the repressed, Jung's notion of the shadow self, and Lacan's theory of the fragmented subject all illuminate the deep structure of his verse. These theories help in interpreting the poet's recurrent preoccupations with estrangement, erotic guilt, loss of cultural rootedness, and the quiet suffering of both the body and the soul. His poetry becomes, in Lacanian terms, a symbolic register where the unconscious articulates itself through metaphor, silence, and displacement.

This paper examines three poems from *A Rain of Rites*—"A Rain of Rites", "The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street" and "Hunger," —to argue that Mahapatra's poetics reflect a deeply psychoanalytic landscape. His poetic language is suffused in silence and ambiguity, often gesturing toward inner conflicts that resist resolution. These poems evoke a world where trauma is inherited, memory is fragmented, mourning is ritualized, and the self is divided between its conscious identity and its repressed psychic reality. By engaging with psychoanalytic criticism, the paper seeks to uncover the mechanisms of inner suffering and turmoil, and the symbolic textures of his work that resonate with the fragmented postcolonial self and the burdened private soul.

Jayanta Mahapatra's titular poem, "A Rain of Rites", encapsulates the fragmented psyche of a speaker navigating through melancholia, moral anxiety, and subconscious guilt. Rain, for the poet, is a mysterious phenomenon which gets imprinted in his poems at several places highlighting myriad conscious and unconscious experiences. In an interview with Abraham, Mahapatra states: "I shall always be haunted by the rain, be moved by it" because it "represents a sense of the mysterious which I cannot understand" (*Indian Literature* 153-154). He elaborates: "Rain does something to me I cannot explain. I can hide my face in the rain, be washed by it perhaps. It takes on different meanings at different times. Deliberate or unconscious? I can't say. But rain represents a correlation of my inner self I can recognise" (*Indian Literature*154). Rain, in a way, effects the poet in numerous ways—both physical and psychological. Although he is unable to distinguish it, he, in one way or the other, correlates his inner-self and unconscious with rain. "A Rain of Rites", perhaps, is an attempt to catch the poet's mood and his inner-self on the canvas of paper while highlighting his unconscious mind.

Written in elliptical imagery and existential mood, "A Rain of Rites" becomes a reflection of what Carl Jung calls the 'shadow self'—the hidden, repressed elements of identity that often surface in dreams, trauma, and moments of inner confrontation. His elegiac tone and repeated reference to rain underscore the emotional weight of displacement. In this way, the poem becomes an allegory of exile, where the self is caught between past rituals and present alienation, both longing for and rejecting a return to an idealized, unified self. The poem begins with the subdued lines:

> Sometimes a rain comes
> slowly across the sky, that turns
> upon its grey cloud, breaking away into light
> before it reaches its objective. (*A Rain of Rites* 10)

This "rain" serves as a metaphor for incomplete catharsis—the "objective" is never reached, signifying psychic repression. The slow, fragmented movement of the rain evokes a sense of

psychological paralysis. According to Lacanian theory, such hesitation mirrors the subject's struggle to access the real—those unarticulated traumas that language fails to fully capture (Lacan 59). The poet continues:

> The rain I have known and traded all this life
> is thrown like kelp on the beach.
> Like some shape of conscience I cannot look at,
> a malignant purpose is a nun's eye. (*A Rain of Rites* 10)

Here, the speaker acknowledges a lifelong entanglement with emotional and psychological burdens—"the rain I have known and traded." The simile "like some shape of conscience I cannot look at" signifies repressed guilt and self-revulsion. The "nun's eye" carries dual valence—it may imply sanctity watching over him or symbolize judgement and suppression.

The poem culminates in lines that reveal the speaker's confrontation with existential and ontological isolation: "Numbly I climb to the mountain-tops of ours/where my own soul quivers on the edge of answers." (*A Rain of Rites* 10) This image powerfully dramatizes the precarious self—dangling between self-awareness and oblivion. The phrase "quivers on the edge" suggests a psychic threshold, where the speaker's consciousness wavers between repression and revelation. Freud's notion of the uncanny—the return of the repressed—resonates here, as the self teeters on the edge of a recognition it cannot fully bear (Freud 244). In the closing lines:"Which still, stale air sits on an angel's wings?/What holds my rain so it's hard to overcome?" (*A Rain of Rites* 10). The "still, stale air" and the rain "hard to overcome" articulate a mournful stasis—a melancholic return to unresolved emotional terrain. The rain, as a metaphor of sadness and cleansing, remains suspended—symbolizing the memory that has neither been mourned nor expressed and hence, becomes the unspoken trauma.

Mahapatra's treatment of love and sex, unlike Kamala Das or Shiv K. Kumar never tickles our baser instincts, nor does he indulge in sentimental whispering, raving or blathering. In "The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street", a poem that is "precise, realistic and highly communicative", his treatment of sex is "indisputably delicate, unsentimental, restrained and, above all, realistic" (Prasad 190). The poem offers a multi-layered exploration of desire, shame, and the repressed unconscious. It opens with an inviting yet unsettling command: "Walk right in. It is yours./Where the house smiles wryly into the lighted street" (*A Rain of Rites* 17). Here, the whorehouse is presented as an almost inevitable locus—an arena into which the subject is invited to enter. Yet the juxtaposition of a "smiling" house with the phrase "it is yours" implies possession laced with moral ambivalence. This ambivalence foregrounds Lacan's theory of the split subject who is drawn inexorably to what is forbidden, as desire is always structured by an internal lack (Lacan 282).

The poet then shifts focus to the women associated with the space: "Think of the women/you wished to know and haven't./The faces in the posters, the public hoardings" (*A Rain of Rites* 17). These lines evoke an unresolved longing—a mourning for lost or unfulfilled desire. The invocation to "think of the women you wished to know and haven't" suggests an aching void, resonating with Freud's notion of the return of the repressed. The very images of faces on posters and hoardings serve as fragments of memory, operating as surrogates for a lost, almost idealized feminine presence (Freud 244). The poem thereby maps the internal terrain where the conscious subject is haunted by fantasies and unrealised desires.The poem deepens its psychoanalytic inquiry with the following lines:

And who are all *there* together,
those who put the house there
for the startled eye to fall upon,
where pasts join, and where they part. (*A Rain of Rites* 17)

Here, the "house" functions as a repository of collective memory and personal history—a sacred yet profane space in which past traumas converge and diverge. The image created in these lines serves as a mirror reflecting both the private and the shared unconscious, where memory is not linear but fractured, echoing the disjointed sensibility of postcolonial self. The suggestion that "pasts join" suggests that the site of the whorehouse is imbued with historical residue, manifesting the psychoanalytic idea of the uncanny: the familiar rendered disturbing by the evocation of repressed recollections (Freud 244). The poem, further intensifying the internal conflict, presents a vision of feminine loss and longing:

Then think of the secret moonlight of the women
left behind, their false chatter,
perhaps their reminding themselves of looked-after children and of home:
the shooting stars in the eager darkness of return. (*A Rain of Rites* 17)

The "secret moonlight" and "false chatter" evoke a spectral quality, reminiscent of Jung's shadow. These images suggest that what is left behind—what is suppressed—is not entirely annihilated but lingers as a vague, melancholic presence. As Julia Kristeva asserts, the unspeakable residue of trauma often returns in the form of fragmented, symbolic images that haunt the subject's unconscious (13). The "eager darkness" becomes a metaphor for an ambiguous hope and an abiding sense of exile, underscoring the speaker's inner mourning for a lost, unattainable wholeness. The final stanzas address the intimate encounter between desire and the self:

Even the women don't wear them—
like jewels or precious stones at the throat;
the faint feeling deep at a woman's centre
that brings back the discarded things:
the little turnings of blood at the far edge of the rainbow. (*A Rain of Rites* 17)

These lines underscore a poignant ambivalence: the women themselves are stripped of ostentation—they are not adorned with the trappings of idealized beauty, but rather marked by the vestiges of past pain ("little turnings of blood"). Such imagery resonates with Freud's concept of melancholia, where the loss is internalized and continually mourned (*Mourning and Melancholia* 245). The blood, at "the far edge of the rainbow," further symbolizes what remains after the promise of renewal is defiled by experience—a shadow of past violence and loss.The poetic persona concludes:

You fall back against her in the dumb light,
trying to learn something more about women—
while she does what she thinks proper to please you,
the sweet, the little things, the imagined;
until the statue of the man within
you've believed in throughout the years comes back to you, a disobeying toy—
and the walls you wanted to pull down,
mirror only of things mortal, and passing by. (*A Rain of Rites* 18)

These lines bring the analysis full circle. Here, the interplay between the self and the woman is

depicted as both a desperate attempt at understanding and a disintegration of established identity. The return of "the statue of the man within" symbolizes an internalized ideal that now rebels against its own mythos.

"The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street" reveals a space where desire, memory, and guilt are in perpetual interplay. The brothel serves as a stage for the unconscious to present its fragmented narratives—a place where repressed shame and longing converge in the mundane realities of urban life. Mahapatra's intricate layering of images invites the reader to confront the spectres of the past and the dark recesses of the self, thereby affirming that memory and trauma are ever-present, lurking in the shadowed corners of both individual and collective existence.

"Hunger", another important poem in the collection, unflinchingly unveils the interwoven textures of physical deprivation, sexual exploitation, and psychological trauma. The poem is a "masterly piece happily fusing the literal and the metaphysical", says Madhusudan Prasad, and "etches the contour of male sensuality in realistic terms" (190-191). Written in stark, spare lines, the poem explores how hunger—literal and metaphorical—disfigures both body and mind. From a psychoanalytic perspective, "Hunger" dramatizes the encounter between the conscious self and the repressed unconscious desires and feelings of guilt that society imposes, particularly through poverty, patriarchy, and sexual violence.

The poem opens with a sense of burdened embodiment: "It was hard to believe the flesh was heavy on my back" (*A Rain of Rites* 44). The physicality here suggests not just the narrator's own body but also the weight of guilt and complicity he carries. The body becomes a site of conflict—between desire and morality, between the self and the social. The poet writes, "Hope lay perhaps in burning the house I lived in" (*A Rain of Rites* 44), evoking a Freudian impulse towards self-destruction as a release from repression. This reflects what psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva refers to as the 'abject', the disturbing element of human experience that the subject must exclude to maintain psychic boundaries (Kristeva 4). In this moment, the speaker is overwhelmed by the visceral reality of poverty and sexual exploitation, and his fantasy of burning the house represents a desperate wish to annihilate the conditions and identities that trap him.

The transactional offering of the daughter—"My daughter, she's just turned fifteen... / Feel her. I'll be back soon, your bus leaves at nine" (*A Rain of Rites* 44)—reveals how the structures of poverty commodify the female body. From a Lacanian point of view, this act forces the narrator into an unbearable confrontation with the 'real'—the realm beyond language that disrupts the symbolic order. The girl, "long and lean," becomes a spectral figure whose "wormy legs" (*A Rain of Rites* 44) conjure the unconscious terrors of decay, mortality, and forbidden desire. The speaker does not act, but instead registers and internalizes the horror of the moment. This inaction does not absolve him; instead, it magnifies the trauma.

Mahapatra's imagery of the sea and the shack works on multiple symbolic levels. The sea evokes the unconscious, the primal depths where desire and trauma coexist. The shack "opened like a wound" (*A Rain of Rites* 44), symbolizes a gaping entry into a painful past or psychic rupture. The "sticky soot" that "crossed the space of my mind" (*A Rain of Rites* 44) embodies the residue of the encounter—irreversible, contaminating. In psychoanalytic terms, the speaker's failure to act—paralyzed by the "sky" falling on him—mirrors what Cathy Caruth defines as "the belatedness of trauma," where the event is only known in its haunting aftermath (11). His experience cannot be integrated into the conscious mind, thus forming part of the repressed shadow self that haunts the psyche.

"Hunger", thus, becomes a narrative of internal disintegration where the personal collides

with the collective. The girl is not just a victim of her father's desperation but a symbol of intergenerational trauma that Mahapatra forces the reader to witness. One finds, John Oliver Perry opines while commenting on poems like "Hunger", "some searching understanding of one's feelings about his inner world, highly imagistic meditations set frequently in natural scene", his poems "brood darkly, coming to very uneasy terms with the questions imposed by his world and his Karmic sense of guilty involved in it" (61).The "rain" of memory, guilt, and desire that pervades "Hunger" aligns with the broader themes of the collection—haunted recollection, psychological repression, and the fragile human conscience.

Jayanta Mahapatra's *A Rain of Rites* emerges as a compelling tapestry of repressed memories, fragmented selves, and unresolved psychological trauma. Through the close analysis of "A Rain of Rites", "The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street" and "Hunger", this paper has attempted to excavate the shadow territories of the poet's inner world, where memory, guilt, mourning, and unconscious longing converge in lyrical form. The world of Mahapatra's poetry, Bruce King opines in this connection, is based on "uncertainty, self-doubt, guilt and brooding" (202) which "suggests more than is said as it reveal areas of the mind unstructured by rational concepts and logic" (199). His poetic voice, often marked by quiet intensity, speaks not only of individual distress but also of collective disillusionment in a world marked by spiritual erosion and cultural displacement.

In "Hunger", desire is exposed as a transaction that betrays deeper emotional and ethical wounds. The body becomes the site of guilt and survival, with the speaker oscillating between empathy and shame. "A Rain of Rites" moves inward, reflecting the self's fragmentation and its yearning for stability in the face of psychic dislocation. In "The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street", we witness a brutal confrontation with repressed desire and the emptiness of erotic and emotional transactions—an encounter with the shadow self that cannot be resolved by social or religious ritual. Bruce King has rightly said that Mahapatra relies on recurring symbols to provide "coherence to non-linear, fragmented structure" of the mind of his poetic persons who is an "estranged, distanced, sensitive artist (giving) emphasis on subjective memory and the inner self, the psychological" (194).

In these poems, Mahapatra's language is sparse, restrained, and deeply symbolic—his images often function like dream-fragments, invoking Freudian and Jungian associations: the skull in the sand, the distant echo of a name, the dark alleys of Calcutta, the old woman before the temple gates. These motifs reflect the workings of a psyche shaped by trauma, repression, and the ceaseless mourning of what is lost—be it innocence, faith, identity, or homeland. His engagement with the unconscious and the unresolved past situates him within a broader modernist tradition, yet his rootedness in Indian landscapes and rituals gives his voice a distinct cultural resonance. What emerges from this rain of rites is not redemption, but a haunting awareness of the irreconcilable self—a self always in search of coherence amid inner fragmentation and existential mourning. Mahapatra's *A Rain of Rites* is not only a meditation on the personal and cultural psyche but a poetic documentation of the human condition marked by loss, longing, and the echoes of the unconscious.

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