

DAWN AT PURI

Possible points:

1. Images in the Poem.
2. Criticism on the Indian Social Conditions.
3. Criticism on the ritualistic and religious traditions in India.

‘Dawn at Puri’ is an imagist poem (a poem consisting of a number of vivid, sharply etched, but not necessarily interrelated images). The Panorama of Puri (in Orissa- a land of ‘forbidden myth), artistically portrayed with vivid images and symbols, becomes evocative. In this symbolic and metaphorical poem, the poet talks about the hollowness of the rites and rituals common in the Indian society.

Puri is the name of a famous town in Orissa, which is considered sacred because of the temple dedicated to Lord Jagannath, the presiding deity of Orissa. It is particularly famous for the chariot festival of Jagannath; an annual ritual conducted for the glory of this deity and is attended by a large number of pilgrims. It is believed that the deity of Puri was carved out of a tree trunk that was washed ashore. Puri is regarded as a sacred site and it is the wish of every pious Hindu to be cremated there to enable them to attain salvation.

‘**Endless crow noises**’: a reference to the endless cawing of the crows, a visual as well as an auditory image. It indicates that there is a dead body they want to feed on. Hence the tone of the poem is quite sad from the very beginning.

‘**A skull on the holy sands**’: This is a startling imagery created with the juxtaposition of the abstract with the concrete, where the abstract ‘holy’ and the concrete ‘skull’ are grouped together. The word ‘holy’ is ironical because during cremation nothing is left except the ashes. However the presence of the skull symbolizes the hollowness of the various rituals in the community, and also poverty which dominates the country, India.

‘**Its empty country towards hunger**’: a reference to the poverty of the people of Orissa including the sight of the skull lying on the sea-beach symbolizes the utter destitution of the people. Puri symbolizes the condition of the whole country and the poet wonders that if this is the condition of a ‘holy’ city as Puri, then what would be the condition of other cities in the country which are not ‘holy’.

‘**White-clad widowed women**’: reference to widows wearing white saris and the phrase that points to their predicament as well as the rigidity of Hindu customs and rituals. In Hinduism, the women have to wear white clothes till death after their husbands die. Rather than using ‘widows’, the poet uses ‘widowed women’ to point the patriarchal norms of the Indian society.

After the death of their husband, the women were bound to give up worldly desires and sexual pleasures.

‘Past the centers of their lives’: having spent the middle years of their lives and passing their prime. The word ‘center’ may refer to two things – husbands or desires. The women are now without something which was their center, i.e., the purpose of their lives. If the center symbolizes the husband, then the line suggests patriarchal dominance. An individual’s center is his or her own self, but in a patriarchal society, the case is different for women. The women have to become selfless and make their husbands the center of their lives and thus without them, they are without identity and purpose.

‘Waiting to enter the Great Temple’: 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 very beginning. The women are perhaps made to believe that the temple is great and they can find peace there only.

‘Their austere eyes stare like those caught in a net’: ‘Austere’ here means without any desire for worldly pleasure. After losing their husbands, the women have given up their worldly pleasures. The misery resulting in utter hopelessness is clearly visible on their faces for there is an expression of solemnity in the eyes of the widows in which no worldly desire is perceptible and is full of desire like the eyes of creatures trapped in a net. The ‘net’ is the symbolic net of the patriarchal society. Like a trapped bird, the women have lost the freedom of their mind and body.

‘Dawn’s shining strands of faith’: A person having a firm belief in religion never loses hope, so in spite of their circumstances, the only thing that sustains the widows is their religious faith and the hope born of it. The reference to dawn is to be noted. It refers to a new beginning in nature and thereby, to a new start in mankind and civilization. The tone of quiet acceptance, with a latent awareness of suffering, perhaps indicates a very Indian sensibility.

‘The frail early light’: the dim light of the dawn is a reference to the title of the poem which must be noted. ‘Leprous’: from leprosy, an infectious disease affecting the skin and nerves and causing deformities. ‘Leprous shells’ here refers to two things – the beggars who are always near the temple asking for money, or the low caste people who are not allowed to enter the temple.

‘A mass of crouched faces without names’: a large number of timid persons standing in a group, having no confidence in themselves and are without any identity in the community, preferably referring to the lepers and widows who are not allowed to move freely in the town.

‘And suddenly breaks out of my hide’: suddenly emerges from beneath my skin.

‘Into the smoky blaze of a sullen solitary pyre’: A pile of wood is used for burning a dead body as part of a funeral rite. The dead body is joyless and alone though being cremated in Holy Land. The sight of this reminds the poet of his mother’s last wish to be cremated here as it is the

gateway to Heaven or the 'Swargadwara' which is the name of that part of the long sea-beach where the funeral pyres go on burning. Since the temple of Lord Jagannath at Puri points to unending rhythm, dying in this place will take one to silence the ultimate desire of a human being which will enable him to attain Nirvana.

'Twisting uncertainly like light on the shifting sands': This is an apt image of the smoke rising from the funeral pyre where the wind from the sea causes the smoke to twist uncertainly. This is an example of Mahapatra's 'transcendental (spiritual) mode' and an example of his attempt to trap elusive meanings. The poetic exploration of this place turns out to be a search for the self. The view thrills the poet and he becomes an integral part of it, observing a morning scene on the sandy sea-beach in the town of Puri.

By means of a series of vivid pictures, the atmosphere of dawn has been created. There is a 'dawn', which is not only physical but also metaphorical, i.e., the 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 caste and made the people believe in the afterlife which is uncertain. Mahapatra also underlines the importance of the temple town of Puri and what it means to the Hindus in India.