

Hunger by Jayanta Mahapatra: A Dialectical Materialist Critique of Poverty, Prostitution, and Class Struggle

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Abstract

The present article dialectically analyzes Jayanta Mahapatra's *Hunger* from the perspective of dialectical materialism based on Georges Politzer's *Elementary Principles of Philosophy* and O. Yakhot's *Dialectical Materialism* as texts, and particularly in light of materialist analysis of prostitution. The poem's spectral image in which a fisherman offers up his daughter for him to survive is rather more a tragedy of the human more than a cold reflection of class conflict, dislocation, and market commodification of the human body under repressive economic practices. Using Marxist theory, this critique explains how material conditions condition man's behavior, pushing men into actions dictated by their material conditions and not by ethical or moral impulses. The poem vividly depicts the estrangement of daughter and father, a depiction of Marx's theory of estrangement labor. Economic necessity compels the fisherman to sell his daughter, their love a transaction, a vivid representation of how capitalism reduces human beings to commodities. Its consonance with Engels' historical materialistic critique of prostitution, where moral constraints are determined by economic conditions, is glaring. Its disapproval of prostitution, therefore, is a mirror of Engels'. The daughter, out of her volition, is commodified by this poverty economy. Finally, the poem is a rejection of the way human dignity is lost to these exploitative economic models that place in the foreground how survival blackmails one into such actions that keep one suppressed and what is negated are one's moral examinations.

Keywords: Dialectical Materialism, Poverty, Class, Prostitution, Patriarchy, Commodification

Dialectical Materialism is a theoretical philosophy developed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels that explains reality, society, and historical change in terms of the interaction between material conditions and contradiction. It believes that material existence, rather than abstract thought or divine agencies, shapes human consciousness and social formations. Change arises from dialectic forces where contradiction between opposed forces (e.g., proletariat and bourgeoisie) provokes historical progress to new forms of society. Conflict of class is the driving force of change in society as much as economic forces propel law, politics, culture, and ideology. Capitalism, say, impoverishes and disenfranchises men, placing men into economically compelled positions and not due to a moral choice. This perception is widely used in Marxist literary theory to understand works that represent social oppression, economic determinism, and class struggle, for instance, Jayanta Mahapatra's *Hunger*, in which human actions are shaped by survival and poverty, rendering human relationships mere transactions.

Material Conditions and Class Struggle in *Hunger*:

Jayanta Mahapatra (1928-2023) was one of the first Indian English poets to make the most significant contributions to the genre. His own poetry, characteristic in being rich in the geography and social life of his home state of Odisha, began to deal with themes of Indian identity, awareness of culture, and the condition of humankind, usually poverty and social disease. With the honor of being the first Indian English poet to be awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award, Mahapatra's reflective and descriptive poetry made him a globally recognized figure. More than anything else, poems such as "Relationship," "Indian Summer," and "Hunger" made him a strong literary voice in Indian literature, demonstrating that he was capable of combining personal experience and social issues, but remain rooted in his own culture.

This poem believes the behavior of the fisherman and the protagonist is conditioned by their material conditions and not by moral choice, based on Politzer's model. This aligns with Politzer's assertion that "It is not men's consciousness that determines their existence, but on the contrary, their social existence that determines their consciousness" (Poltizer, 130). He further observes that social being defines human consciousness and not the other way around; thus, the selling of his daughter's body by her father is not a personal failure but due to the economic order coercing people to be exploitative. His daughter, being merely one step removed from a survival strategy, demonstrates how capitalism causes

human relation to become commodity bartered goods that must be attained. The non-sentimentalism of the poem is particularly significant, directed toward the material condition that will never be removed, and so people end up commodifying themselves or their dependents if they want to stay alive. O. Yakhot's comprehension of dialectical materialism can also make clear how Hunger structures the contradictions among capitalist institutions. flickering dark his hut opened like a wound. The wind was I, and the days and nights before. (Mahapatra)

The fisherman's daughter is the ideal representation of the most exploited portion of the working class—the one whose body is being commodified in the course of exploitation in poverty. Although initially he is disturbed by the commodified nature of the relationship, he does ultimately participate, illustrating how in a capitalist system individuals naturalize and internalize exploitative structures. His sense of guilt comes from passive entrapment in an economics that legitimates and sustains class-based exploitation.

Prostitution as a Phenomenon of Economic Alienation:

A dialectical materialist analysis of prostitution sees it not as a moral failing but as an inescapable consequence of economic systems. Friedrich Engels, in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, sees prostitution as a creation of private property and class exploitation in which women's bodies are commodified in an economic system that degrades them as workers but commodifies them as objects of exchange.

For hetaerism is as much a social institution as any other; it continues the old sexual freedom – to the advantage of the men. Actually not merely tolerated, but gaily practiced, by the ruling classes particularly, it is condemned in words. But in reality this condemnation never falls on the men concerned, but only on the women; they are despised and outcast, in order that the unconditional supremacy of men over the female sex may be once more proclaimed as a fundamental law of society. (Engels.,p.60)

In *Hunger*, the destiny of the girl is a symbol of this process of exploitation—her body is a tool for survival, not out of choice but necessity. The state does not force the fisherman to exploit his daughter directly. Rather, through its institutions of ideology—religion, tradition, and economic policies—it constructs a material reality where such an exploitation is a necessity. The daughter and the fisherman do not revolt against their fate because dominant ideology has socialized them to believe that this is their sole survival strategy. Its central character himself, though enraged, does not resist, proving the dominant ideology relies on economic determinism in imposing compliance.

Historical Materialism and Commodification of the Human Body:

Historical materialism by Marx asserts economic forms shape social relations. The subject, also belonging to the same privileged group, in *Hunger* consumes the body of the impoverished girl the same way that capital appropriates labor. The triadic class dynamic between the fisherman, his daughter, and the narrator speaks of capitalist society where the subaltern is compelled to sell their nearest source of subsistence—their bodies or their labor at substandard rates—while the dominant class exploits them as commodities or sex workers of desire.

With the rise of the inequality of property – already at the upper stage of barbarism, therefore – wage-labor appears sporadically side by side with slave labor, and at the same time, as its necessary correlate, the professional prostitution of free women side by side with the forced surrender of the slave.... here monogamy, there hetaerism, with its most extreme form, prostitution. (Engels.,p.60)

This validates Marx's theory of commodity fetishism, wherein human beings become exchange commodities in a profit economy that degrades human dignity.

Conclusion:

Based on Politzer and Yakhot's dialectical materialist positions, and those of Engels, this essay argues that *Hunger* is less a matter of desire and morality and more an issue of material conditions but a condemnation of the material conditions under which exploitation becomes a necessary condition of life for the working class. Mahapatra's poem exposes the stark reality of economic determinism and how poverty compels men and women into the very language of dehumanization and alienation. The participation of the protagonist, misfortune of the fisherman, and selling of the girl expose together the way capitalist societies naturalize exploitation during periods of material and ideological restriction. Hence, *Hunger* is a literary response to dialectical materialism which forces readers into the realities of class struggle, exploitation of the human life form, and dehumanizing results of economic forms that are culprits of systematic oppression.

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