



1989

# Book review: Jayanta Mahapatra, Temple. Dangaroo Press, 1989. 58 pp

Jan Kemp

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi>

## Recommended Citation

Kemp, Jan, Book review: Jayanta Mahapatra, Temple. Dangaroo Press, 1989. 58 pp, *Kunapipi*, 11(3), 1989.  
Available at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol11/iss3/18>

---

Book review: Jayanta Mahapatra, Temple. Dangaroo Press, 1989. 58 pp

**Abstract**

Using the frame of two news reports from The Times of India (1980) of New Delhi and The Telegraph (1986) of Calcutta, regarding first an old couple who committed suicide because of poverty and loneliness and second, a young girl allegedly gang-raped and murdered, Mahapatra builds his poetic temple to the Indian woman. In a series of poems in four parts, a dream narrative, he mixes the worlds of dream and reality, so that in the end the Indian doctrine of illusion pervades the whole text.

Jayanta Mahapatra, *Temple*. Dangaroo Press, 1989. 58 pp. £4.95.

Using the frame of two news reports from *The Times of India* (1980) of New Delhi and *The Telegraph* (1986) of Calcutta, regarding first an old couple who committed suicide because of poverty and loneliness and second, a young girl allegedly gang-raped and murdered, Mahapatra builds his poetic temple to the Indian woman. In a series of poems in four parts, a dream narrative, he mixes the worlds of dream and reality, so that in the end the Indian doctrine of illusion pervades the whole text.

Mahapatra says, 'For me, *Temple* is a poem held together by an inconceivable silence. Perhaps one finally desires to return to an overwhelming silence. And the poem too, even if the poem is an invention...'

In this invention, perhaps his most ambitious to date, Mahapatra succeeds in moving the reader into a world whose linguistic lyricism only further counterpoints the stark realities of life experienced by Chelammal, the central female voice, who addresses us and sometimes the poet himself.

Hindu mythology states that the ultimate consciousness and the divine force are one and the same. A woman represents this divine force *shakti* and the ultimate consciousness which emerges in times of need. Through this mythologizing Chelammal (the woman partner of the old couple) attains mythic proportions. She is seen '*poised like the mystic hunger of a country*' and her plight becomes India's. As we hear the story of her life, she grows also to represent woman through her various incarnations in Hindu mythology. Mahapatra's temple is built not only with reference to the *shakti* cult but also to the *Putana* myth and Hindu concepts such as *moksha*, *dharma* and *karma*. Notes are provided.

Perhaps it is Mahapatra's ability to see through his imagined Chelammal's mind that touches this poem with so much of a realised, compassionate vision. For, what change has occurred in the Indian woman's plight in the six years between the two news reports? Very little, the poet suggests.

What can a temple do? It enchants with its mystery. There is something in the air of a temple that stills a visitor, so that spiritual nourishment can be found in the midst of human suffering. Infused with the incense of his images of light and darkness, Mahapatra's *Temple* has '*an air*' which includes suffering. Like a real temple this one is '*vivid, to make us conscious of being alive*'.

JAN KEMP