
How Not to Read Jayanta Mahapatra: A Tribute via *A Whiteness of Bone*

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ABSTRACT

Jayanta Mahapatra straddled a whole generation of Indian English poetry as a colossus and continues to do so even after his death. He lived a full life and has left behind a legacy that is an antidote to our fevered and anguished cerebrations. Only now we are beginning to discover ways to unravel the magic of his lines, for we don't go to a Mahapatra for topicality and contemporaneity of themes, but for the residual wisdom that defies ratiocination. We go for the strange quiescence that his poetry bequeaths. This paper is a tribute to a poet who—strange as it may sound, given the forbidding opaqueness of his poems—instilled in me the taste for poetry. My poet lives with me...

Here I watch my little craft spread its wings and hear my memory echo across its muteness. All night words of mine drift, nearing meaning but never finding it. (*A Whiteness of Bone* 40)

It is a personal response to the poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra, and I am loath to stake arguments to prove my point. I shall try to illustrate my views with poems from one of his collections *A Whiteness of Bone* (hereafter, WB). The two collections that I hold dear are *The False Start*, and *A Whiteness of Bone*. I distinctly remember buying *The False Start* as a teenager because the title fascinated me, and having looked up its meaning, I had tried to use the fancy phrase in my conversations. However, the credit for introducing me to the deeper harmonies of Mahapatra's poetry goes to my teacher at the University of Allahabad, late Professor Madhusudan Prasad, whose study of Mahapatra's poetry (*The Poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra: Some Critical Considerations*, 2000) was one of the earliest studies of the poet.

All writers of substance, in different measures, create their signature readership, and Jayanta Mahapatra is one of the few contemporary writers about whom it can be said with assured confidence. One doesn't take to him easily, and he on his part is not forthcoming with facetious consolations. Those of us who have doggedly followed Mahapatra from our student days through his eagerly awaited poetry collections, know the value and perils of being a diehard fan.

There are a good number of people who believe that the essential Mahapatra can be culled from his much-anthologised pieces which make a statement or have explicit motifs. No doubt, thematic 'discussability' and 'reliability' are major factors for the popularity of a poet, and regular references to situations and crises which constitute our familiar social, public, and private world and with which we can identify, are the nodes which connect us to a poet. We, at different stages of our academic journey, have analysed poems like 'Hunger' and 'The Grandfather's House', and have been rewarded with grades. However, Jayanta Mahapatra, the

poet tests our patience to its limits; and as we keep returning to his poems, they gradually begin to release their emotional and intellectual contexts. He is not a pulpit poet whose meanings are public. He unapologetically dramatizes his private, lonely wrestle with words and makes us realise that there is no easy truce between words and feelings.

One moment he fondles and caresses the words and phrases and the very next moment, as if caught off-guard, he flings them stoically, withdrawing all affection, leaving them exposed to the rancour of the logical. No wonder, there are implacable variations of mood and colour in his poems. He was an ascetic who loved, as if it was the sole condition of all his being. This asceticism is the lifeblood of his life and philosophy and for me, his charm lies in this buffeting between an all-giving involvement and an equally resolute distancing. His poems are not jigsaw puzzles which settle into a pattern and lose their promise of meaning. The subtle shifts of emphasis and the almost wilful upheavals and reversals of the grain of meaning in the poems closely mimic the tortuous wrenching of a poet's mind to strike a balance between the searing dichotomies of the promise and the poverty of flesh.

It is not the poetry of statement; the kind of engagement with life-truths that Mahapatra's poetry sanctions, does not endorse closure. These are all numerous overtures to truth, and the wisdom they provide is gradational. They are not born of cerebration but come flaming forth from the furnace of experience, and the experience doesn't just stumble upon words or fumble for words; they have an a priori necessity about their being, then and there. To go to Mahapatra's poems for final meanings is to violate their *raison d'être*. They are so many tentative takes at meaning. No conscious workmanship could achieve the sudden quiescent radiance of these Mahapatra lines, all from *A Whiteness of Bone*:

It's we, the ignorant, who keep on seeing miracles. (WB:8)
 Because poetry doesn't have to raise its voice. (WB:9)
 Why wait to be free of history
 when you are now in it? (35)
 To wait for purpose is to be devoid of meaning. (35)
 These feelings I experience today
 have no plans for the future. (48)
 Listening to conscience is no performance. (53)
 The trouble is:
 the dead extend their hands,
 but the children are alarmed
 by the nude ghastly bones. (55)
 Life doesn't give us a day off. (42)
 This is a man who talks of pain
 as though it belonged to him alone
 maybe he has invented it himself and made a virtue of it.
 Maybe he is a poet.

Krishna Rayan quotes Mahapatra from a 1991 Sahitya Akademi seminar, where the poet expatiates on the nature of his work:

It was apparent to me that I was not writing the kind of poems in which meaning was stated clearly, explicitly...in other words, this poetry had no flat statements. What I was perhaps trying to do was to put together images and symbols so that the reader would draw the implicit connections for himself...It could be that this approach to the writing of poetry goes to make the poems mysterious, even obscure... (Rayan 143)

Mahapatra was alive to the charges of obscurity against his poetry, but one reason that explains this kind of 'obscurity' is the fact that the poet wanted them to be like that. It was a poetry of a mature mind which had come to realise the vacuity and banality of "explicit meanings", a mind too full of the dialectic of memory and desire to be lured into the facile

certainities of the poetry of statement. In this context Rayan makes an insightful observation:

Mahapatra's poetry continued over the years to exhibit all the defining characteristics of suggestive writing: the dominance of the figurative to the total exclusion of the literal or referential; the loosening of the signifier-signified bond; the lack of logical coherence despite syntactic regularity; indeterminacies and discontinuities, absences and silences; and the evocation of a non-specific, though real enough, emotional response. (Rayan 144)

Again, as Mahapatra says about his creative process: "Because this alone is what we know: that they, the words, the makers of poetry, will forever remain beyond us" (Mahapatra 2001: 15). It doesn't for a moment mean that Mahapatra is casual about the alchemy of words, in fact it is just the opposite. He teases meanings and relevancies out of his words, and is so heavily invested in experience that words, all too happily, unsheathe themselves for him. It also connects directly to the deep sense of responsibility he prescribes for the poet: "A poet is first of all responsible to his or her conscience, otherwise he or she cannot be called a poet." For Mahapatra, "the other factors necessary to the making of a god poet (the craft or the language) will only come later... as frills in a poem that is already full with feeling... the poem would have already done what it was meant to do; in other words, touch another human being." (2001:17) This takes care of the complaints of the opacity of his poems, for I must testify to the utter bafflement in the face of many of his stanzas. I gradually realised that his poems resisted paraphrasing most precisely at those moments when the core of feelings—feelings attired as words—eludes us. Words comply only when we have come even with the feelings.

Feelings, by definition, are nebulous, capricious, and personal. In Mahapatra's case they are also highly evolved and complex. When addressing public issues Mahapatra, as far as my reading goes, does not strike an activist note. His feelings are deliberately held back from becoming a war cry, and yet when the feeling sinks, it lacerates and mobilises our sympathies. There is no hectoring and cajoling, and the controlled and subdued tenor of his observations makes us willing recruits to the poet's cause. His poems state, without becoming statements.

The essential Mahapatra, for me, is caught up in the web of time, and is searingly conscious of this inexorable human predicament. His poetic journey, in different ways, is the story of his engagement and negotiation with the nature of time as it impinges on our existence, and Niranjana Mohanty has made a detailed and excellent study of Mahapatra's continuous grappling with the enigma of time, fruitfully connecting it to the Hindu concept of time and the abstruse philosophical debates between the Nyaya-Vaisheshika and the Bhatta-Mimamsaka schools regarding the perceptibility of time. In this context, he quotes Mahapatra on the process of poem making:

I never felt that time is linear; so, as you say there are sudden shifts from the present to the past and vice-versa. A poem emerges out of a summation of events in a period of time; and an instant of a poem only trips the feelings at that instant to other instants. Chaos, once again, is at the centre of all existence, of matter both organic and inorganic... As I start the poem with a particular instant of time, I am aware that the instant has ceased to be once I have put the feeling down... And as the poem proceeds, with the series of images helping to build up the matter of the poem, I realise with some measure of emotion, that the time of the poem is no more with me, and this is what has made the poem non-existent. (Mohanty 66-67)

And poetry speaks for the poet: "These feelings I experience today/ have no plans for the future. (WB 48) The poems became non-existent in the fleeting moment of their being made and the poet moves on to make sense of the chaos that is human existence, to salvage some workable order out of its relentless recursiveness, its paradoxical play of ritual familiarity and stark newness. These are the moments when we get a momentary peep into Mahapatra's world, and that is all that remains with us. His self-acknowledged immersion into the works of British

and American poets has left visible recurring marks on his poetry, for who could have missed T. S. Eliot in “the pale malarial light/ where only tired women appear to answer each another, / to the wind's dark pull,” or W. B. Yeats in “meaningless as man's hatred” (62), and “their hearts consumed with purpose” (66).

He writes of deep pain and loss and returns obsessively to these themes, but again he doesn't wallow in pain and despond for long. Despite the palpable pain being etched, the final impression is not that of desolation and gloom. It is rather one of wisdom; of having come through. The reason for this lies in a sense of playfulness that he brings to bear on the most profound human concerns. The helplessness before loss and time's havoc is only temporarily entertained, for hadn't W. B. Yeats said, “Man is in love and loves what vanishes”? As Mahapatra puts it:

Whatever sorrow is, or loss
it lets us pause on the edge of a word
it is stranded like a poem
which has never gone past its voice (33).

Mahapatra's words profess silence, they realise themselves in that silence at the heart of temporal cacophony. In the essay “Large Words, Small Silence”, Mahapatra keeps compulsively returning to the idea of silence, let us take a few samples of his understanding of silence:

One experiences the sense of being pursued, perhaps hunted by the poems one has made. The poems act as surprises, ... bringing the deeper, inner silence of a sentient being into focus. So perhaps the poem, with its words, triggers an inner silence and in the end shakes one (18).

The poet chooses to live in a silent world of his own making, not wanting to share his creations... For such a silence is a fusion of understanding and indulgence, when the intelligence seems to transcend itself, attaining such heights that are above the thinking domain of a normal person. To such a poet who uses his silence as part of his living, it helps to discover and consecrate the events of his life (20).

I can only confirm that one is faced, at one time or other, with the substance of silence. It is a silence which seems to save, to redeem... One must agree though, that only through words will one ever be able to find that silence. But to achieve that silence, a poet has to test every word and emotion to the breaking point (21).

And I would say we are only faced with silence which words have ultimately brought us to: all the words we thought were grand exercises of imagination (22).

The poet has to strain and lumber towards that silence, has to resist the pull of words which tend to violate that silence by their denotative and connotative powers. Mahapatra makes it clear that the poet has to achieve that silence, has to come to terms with oneself, with the noise within. The still centre quivers with an illuminating silence, and words are rendered adventitious. Probe insistingly and deeper into the confident journey of the flesh, and you reach the silent core, the jaded, enduring whiteness of bone.

This silence does not require the slotting of Jayant Mahapatra as an Oriya poet. When we love a poet, we have every right to disagree with him over ideas and issues, and Mahapatra's Oriya identity is one such issue. But the fact remains that Mahapatra is himself responsible for this state of affairs. In various writings and interviews he has underlined his Oriya past, insisting that he is an Oriya writing in English. But, if we collate his statements around this issue, it becomes amply clear that he was merely announcing, time and again, his connectedness to the Oriya past and landscape, owing in the main to the fact that throughout his long life he remained confined (or should we say tied) to Orissa, “the land where I was brought

up and have spent my life” (Satpathy 72). As he says elsewhere with his characteristic emphasis “Orissa still has a strong oral tradition. It has songs that are three hundred years old that are still being sung. All that is there in my psyche. I am a part of that tradition. I can't keep myself away from it” (Satpathy 28).

In a large measure, it was a result of the critical requirement of establishing Mahapatra as the icon of rooted, local, rural, unalienated poetry; working in conscious opposition to the rootless, alienated, metropolitan poetry of the likes of Nissim Ezekiel. This facile distinction does incalculable harm to a proper understanding of Mahapatra's poetry, and I stand in adamant refusal to accept the judgement that, “to understand Mahapatra's poetry would require an understanding or appreciation of his regionalism” (Satpathy 72). I would be the last person to accept—on the evidence of his poems—that a conscious regionalism shaped his poetry. Yes, our daily familiarity with the local sights and scenes may enhance our enjoyment of individual poems, but that is that. Many times, he is coaxed into such confessions by the drift of questions thrown at him. But I insist, on a personal note, that for me his Oriya identity has never been a barrier to my understanding of his poetry, nor has it substantially augmented the impact.

There is enough of India in his avowedly 'Orissa poems', perhaps more than in the so-called pan-India poems of other poets. Beyond that, it must be said with due emphasis that there is no trace of Oriya exceptionalism or chauvinism in Mahapatra. He is avowedly an “Oriya first”, but not consciously or exclusively an Oriya. He feels the pain of Orissa with acute sensitivity and seamlessly connects with the pain and suffering of larger humanity. In sum, we can say that Mahapatra leaves behind a unique and inimitable legacy of refined suggestiveness, mellow sensuousness, and humane soulfulness.

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