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The Fall Retold: A Close-Reading of Jayanta Mahapatra's Short Story 'and Under the Casuarinas' in Light of Trauma-Literary Theory

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Abstract

The Fall, as The Bible suggests, is an event that induces trauma for mankind. It starts from eating the fruit of knowledge. Therefore, knowing is fatal. Jayanta Mahapatra's short story "And Under the Casuarinas" has located this issue of Fall within a mundane experience of a couple. The couple fails to keep a stable relationship because the husband has a pre-marital relationship which he does not divulge with his wife. The story situates them one day in a sea-beach which reflects the contours of the ambience of the mythical Garden of Eden. The wife presses for the truth. Her insistence and the intriguing nature of the mystifying surrounding break down all his resistance and he discloses his premarital affair to her. The disclosure has been traumatic for both of them. The husband loses his secret love forever and the wife her trust in her husband. But this traumatic experience is all too fleeting because both of them return to a state of reconciliation after the wife forgives him. The story in the end, echoes the supreme virtue of remaining united before crisis of separation that the Bible has taught Adam and Eve before the Fall. The trauma of the story is structural, from the perspective of trauma-literary theory and lyrical from the perspective of the form. But Mahapatra's special art has lifted the traumatic experience to the mystical and epical.

Key Words:

When Adam, following his wife Eve, ate the fruit of the tree of knowledge, he completed a process which had a far-reaching significance to the history of the Western Christian culture. "Man's first disobedience" (line 1), as Milton would later call it, is also the beginning of human history on earth, at least from the point of view of the Christianized Western culture.

The eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge was forbidden by divine injunction. Despite that, they ate it. The consequence of this was terrible and to understand it better we may best go back to the Genesis-episode of the Old Testament of the Bible.

> Yahweh God took Man and placed him in the garden of Eden….gave an order to Man saying, "You may eat of every tree in the garden, but of the tree of the Knoweledge of Good and Evil, you will not eat, for on the day you eat of it, you will die."…The Serpent said to the woman, "You will not die, but God knows that the day you eat it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods, knowing good and evil.
>
> The woman saw that the fruit was good to eat, and pleasant to the eyes, and ideal for gaining knowledge. She took its fruit and ate it and gave some to her husband who was with her. He ate it. Then their eyes were opened and both of them knew they were naked. So they sewed leaves of a fig together and made themselves loincloths. ((9)

What was the spark beneath such audacious and perilous act of transgression? The Bible found three reasons for eating the fruit. The fruit was "good to eat", meaning, the taste of the fruit was assumed to be delicious so that the temptation to eat was hardly resisted. The fruit was also "pleasant to the eyes", meaning, it was ravishingly beautiful and the attraction of beauty could not be overcome. But the most important reason for eating the fruit was perhaps that it was "ideal for gaining knowledge." The tree is the tree of knowledge—knowledge of good and evil. The urge to know something which is not permitted to know is at the heart of human endeavour. Even though the Bible attributes to Satan some sort of responsibility for human tragedy, it is quite clear that Eve, as the Bible attests, was herself attracted by the taste and beauty of the fruit and that she had an irresistible desire to know. Such desires and drives are the main reasons for her eating the fruit.

Adam ate it because he had no other choice. The creation of Eve was done by God by doing a surgical operation on Adam's rib. After this, Adam declares, "Now this is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh. She shall be called woman because she was taken from man."(*Bible* 9) The Biblical culture never allows Adam to remain free of Eve, to have his own separate and individual choice. Man is not given a separate existence from his wife, "That is why man leaves his father and mother and is attached to his wife, and with her becomes one flesh." (*Bible* 9) According to one interpretation of this practice, despite the Jewish custom required a woman to leave her family in order to enter in her husband's clan, in ancient times the husband was the one who entered into the woman's clan for keeping intact the family milieu in order to establish a new social unity (Bible foot note 9). In Hebrew the idea of one

flesh denotes one single being which the husband and the wife make together. Adam therefore ate the fruit to fortify the providential design of marriage as unity in life.

The eating of the fruit inaugurated the process of divine intervention. As soon as the event took place, God had the immediate cognizance and following His own ordinance, He drove them out of Eden to the world. Milton wrote in *Paradise Lost* that the disobedience "brought death into the world, and all our woe/ With loss of Eden." (lines 3-4) The meaning of the loss of Eden is significant because Eden is not just the site of the apple tree. It is also the site of bliss—the site of perennial joy and happiness. The loss of Eden may be compensated by the acquiring of knowledge, but the bliss that human being has lost perpetually can never be gained back. And it caused serious crisis. Dominick LaCapra, one of the founding figures in the classical trauma theory and trauma-historiography has opined that every new societal paradigm stems from a traumatic rupture that establishes the new culture by replacing the old one. To him, the Judeo-Christian paradigm of the Western world sprang from the myth of the Fall. The Fall of Adam and Eve from Eden stands as the traumatic foundation of Western history. According to him, "In the Old Testament, the fall of Adam and Eve plays this role [of the myth of origin], leaving a legacy of exile, distance from the divine presence, and original sin. In the New Testament, the founding trauma is of course the life and the agonized crucifixion of Christ, on which the devout Christian may be urged to pattern his or her own life (imitation Christi)" (Preface 2014 xii-xiii). Even though knowledge or truth which is the objective of history is gained by such experience, the Fall is a case in which, to borrow the idea from Camus, the journey of man in search for knowledge or truth is just a repetition of trauma without healing. The religious rituals serving as the memory to these traumatic events or experiences never 'work through' the pain; on the contrary they were thought to be perpetuated by such rituals by being consistently and constantly 'acted out.' Such founding trauma generated by the Fall is believed to be alleviated to a certain extent when it is replaced by the Crucifixion—another traumatic event that was, at least form a theological-metaphysical angle, seen as the complementary to the first one. The first trauma is about man's alienation from God and the second about his reunion with Him. It was like a circle that began with a trauma but was brought to closure only by another trauma. The mythical representation of that circular trauma narrative generates a working through of original trauma by an 'acting out' of the secondary trauma. But at the heart of both is the price that the event takes from man in terms of a traumatic experience.

Now trauma, as the etymology of the word suggests, is formed of a Greek term which means 'wound.' Initially identified with a physical scar or injury which causes great disturbance in the whole body, the term entered the vocabulary of psychology, predominantly

because of Freud and his associates during the last decade of the 19th century. Psychologically, trauma denotes a wound that is inflicted to the mind by an overwhelming event. As per the latest trauma-theory, traumatic experience is categorized into two types—historical and structural. The historical trauma is event-based. It is the name of a very serious psychological rupture issuing from a sudden, catastrophic incident. The hugeness and profundity of the event paralyses the mind in such a way that the victim fails to memorize it. The event comes to his mind later through hallucinations and nightmares. The theorization of this trauma has been done by such critics as Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Geoffrey Hartman etc. This view of trauma has been challenged and extended by a recent group of critics who hold that even the day-to-day crisis may induce traumatic impression on the mind. This type of trauma is known as structural trauma and it is theorized by critics like Ruth Leys, Stef Craps, Michael Rothberg etc. This type of trauma is inflicted to the mind by social structure. Rape, harassment, betrayal and such prolonged events as colonization and racial discrimination can present situations which may produce traumatic experience to the individuals and groups. The short story which we are discussing here deals with a traumatic situation which belongs to the type of structural trauma. But the writer reads this event of structural trauma in terms of a mythical traumatic incident. To speak it more clearly, the writer shows how a historical or mythical traumatic incident shapes the form of an event that is structural.

Jayanta Mahapatra, the legendary Indian poet writing in English, was born to a Christian family of Cuttack and brought up in the town's predominantly Hindu ambience. His literary endeavour is marked by a quest for identity. He pursued this quest by relating himself to and examining the myths and historical events of Orissa's past and present. The familial Christian background often leads him to the exploration of the Christian theological and metaphysical issues as his Hindu surrounding makes him brood over the Hindu mythology as well. Beside being a prolific poet, Mahapatra has a volume of short stories written in English. The volume named as The Green Gardener has eighteen stories. The short story which will be the focus of our debate here is entitled as "And Under the Casuarinas".

Jayanta Mahapatra's volume of short stories has received very little critical attention. Reviewed by a few critics the stories are analysed mostly from the stylistic point of view. Gurga Prasad Panda, an Indian reviewer, has found in Mahapatra's stories a "real poet's prose" and praises him because "Mahapatra, in his stories takes us through a terrain of events and experiences which has shaped his persona and hence, one finds almost all stories have autobiographical overtones"(199) According to A. L.McLeod, on the other hand has an utterly negative view of the volume. According to him, "The eighteen stories in the collection are almost all too short to create characters, atmospheres, philosophical points, or suspense"

(214). Praised or dismissed, the reviews and studies on the volume have done one common thing—they have scarcely referred to the story, "And Under the Casuarinas". Besides that, they have found the stories prose and plot wanting. But they fail to realize that Jayanta Mahapatra is not concerned about a well-knit plot in his stories. His concern is to catch a particular character in a critical moment and to analyse the working of the mind. The stories are all replete with traumatic experience and the pattern of trauma narrative never settles into a well-ordered, linear kind of plot. So expecting from Mahapatra a well-ordered plot is to completely ignore the aspect of his strength and his preoccupation.

The story in discussion here hinges on the issue of pre-marital affair and its traumatic impact upon the relationship in marriage. The protagonist had a love-affair with a woman called Lulu before he married another woman. But he has not disclosed it to her in detail. He has kept the event secret within himself—the event of his relationship with Lulu that produces the feelings of both bliss and sadness. Now the story takes him along with his wife and child to a spot on the sea-beach and here the trauma begins.

The sea-beach provides the characters with a highly sensitive ambience. The husband has sat with the wife "sprawled on the sand"(17), indicating a relaxed and meditative mood. "The sea breeze runs against his body like a fever." It is evening and it is "slowly climbing into the air, smelling of unknown places." The sea-waves 'come rushing towards him, arms spread out, then crick down to his feet, defeated." The tall casuarinas, on the beach, with their green fronds, dark and unreal deepen the romantic mood. It is the time that offers possibility of something strange and unprecedented to happen. It is in fact the time when one can accomplish what has been so far left undone.

Now this ambience is connected by the author to the trauma of the Fall. The casuarinas are like the mythical tree of knowledge forming the background of the cosmic drama. The apple, referred to in this part of the story, is the mythical fruit of the forbidden tree whose invocation reminds us about the story's attempt to link itself to the myth of the Fall. The sea is shown as 'a sensuous snake', the mythical Satan who beguiles Eve in the disguise of a snake into eating the apple and paves the way for their exile from the Garden of Eden. Beside the wife has been referred to as a happy woman, quivering, reminding us that the author may be thinking her as Eve-like and her happiness does suggest that she is in a wonderful world like Eden. The text completes its biblical texture by bringing the reference of Eden directly.

But the man knows that the time has come when he has to face the eventuality of the fall form bliss---"Out of Eden eventually." He has sensed that his hidden relationship with Lulu symbolized by the apple is going to be 'blasted'. He is decidedly sad, not just now, but probably from he had started his married life. The wife does not know it but may have sensed

it by finding him wearing a melancholy visage. Therefore she insists, "You don't tell me half of what I said. You never tell me anything." The husband seems to be deaf to these entreaties because he fails to muster enough courage to tell her of 'his secret grief'(18). He might have come with Lulu to this place earlier but now he does not remember this. But as soon as he notices the ambience in detail and as he is constantly pricked by his wife to disclose his past, he remembers it. This is apparent from the fact that the story in the beginning says, "The first time he recalls, he hadn't noticed the casuarinas at all"(17). Then the story speaks of the air, "smelling of unknown places". And few lines later, the story asserts, "And he remembers the first time, under the trees"(18). What he remembers is something to assume. But it is quite clear that his pre-marital affair with Lulu which remains somewhere in his memory comes back to him alive, thanks to the ambience in which he is now. The place is the reminder of the past event forgotten. And this is traumatic because according to Freud, trauma is actually the remembering of things past. That trauma is mostly unrepresentable is evident here when the story speaks that he 'remembers' not specifying the object of remembrance. He is "pulled away from her by the pattern of the earth, the innocent gestures of leaf and sounding breeze" (18). He is in fact remembering of his past love, "his other human love" (19), as the story says.

His wife on the contrary loves him very much. She is very much dependent on him. She says, "You will not know how lonely I was. Before you married me, I mean"(18). She wants to see him happy. "You are all I have, you know," She assures him. She wants to form a stable, communicable relationship with him---"She opens as a seed, trying to put down roots." But she finds a secret grief in his face causing a rift between them, making it impossible to forge a genuine relationship with him. She wants her husband to come out it. She wants him to speak out, even though that may bring a different trouble for her. She repeats, "Tell me what I do not wish to hear. Push me into the age-old well, let me feel the terror again of falling in. Leave me my hurt, your secret grief, your human love."

She too, like her husband, finds the ambience congenial for healing the wound. The darkness of the ambience has "made it easier for her" to cajole him and draw out of him the root of all maladies. He finds 'Her words are warm." It is as if "a glacier of love has begun to move over him, by inches," and he is "covered up" under it. But he is still "unable to say a word." The wife now helps him by providing him a clue, helping him to remember and speak out---"I'd heard there was someone you loved. Was she beautiful? You could have, had you wished, I suppose.." The husband realizes that if he does not disclose the hidden truth now, it will probably wreck her. The immensity of pain in her has made her "a fragile flower." He being the husband has to be "the bowl, holding the fruit, the warm convex body of her fears leaning against him." He considers this moment as "the right one" for the "betrayal'" with his

former beloved. Almost echoing what Adam says before the Fall, he tells himself "When one and one are one, there should be no secrets between one another.... It was their own body." Even though in her insistence, the wife plays the role of Eve, since it was Eve who first ate the fruit, he cannot forsake her. They have to remain united in their journey of life and he has decided.

His decision means his loss of the private world, the Eden he has kept secret so far---"The walls of his private house are tumbling down last of all, the tiles resting upon the warped roof beams"(19). His decision means his loss of Lulu---"A girl steps into the open. Lulu, her great black eyes pleading with him through the mist of her pain, not to push her outside him, not to leave her beyond the final circle which he draws in the dust."

The moment of truth-telling is painful for her. As he goes onto disclose the truth, she becomes "immobile." Her "soft muscles stiffen." The trauma is apparent in her. The husband senses that she is "holding her breath, waiting for the bruises of his words." "The intangible casuarinas stare at her" and it is clear to her that *knowing* the secret of her husband is like a traumatic experience that will haunt her all her life---"Something has been born within her, something which would never die, for the space of her days'

The terrible event happens. "He tells her every bit. The fifty-nine letters he had written crammed with longing and nakedness and his love." The narrator, like Milton, introduces a pathetic fallacy to describe the immediate consequence of this disclosure in terms of a natural calamity—"The earth contracts, cracks in the cruel cold." The fall begins.

The shock that the truth generates is as traumatic as that in Genesis. The shock has made them aware of their fleshly nakedness as it happened to Adam and Eve. The Bible says, "Then [after eating the fruit] their eyes were opened and both of them knew they were naked" (9). The narrator in the story gives us a similar sort of picture.

> "That first time, when he revealed himself, the movement of the bone beneath trusting flesh. *Why do we need to take off our Sunday clothes*? Trying each other out, the unending manoeuvre. And then standing face to face groping in the harsh light, to discover that *they are mere bodies*, their familiar faces missing, no longer there. Thick, grown masses of emotion.

The event has brought a wall in between their relationship. He wants to bring forward some consolatory self-justification—'I've told you all. What you have heard, and what you did not hear. I could have lied, darling, and you would never have known, and cradled all the lies and called this your love"(20). And he is almost repentant—"Forgive me, if you can"

But the wall remains as is evident from the words of the wife---"I wish I hadn't asked you about it." The disclosure, like the eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge, has brought trauma for them. The disclosure has brought then down from Eden—the husband lost

his Lulu, the wife lost her trust in him. The husband too thinks like his wife—probably he could have tried to quench the curiosity of his wife about his past with a lie, because now it appears to be evident, "Where love lies, lies love." The pursuit of the truth is fatal, as the Bible has already demonstrated. Therefore, "A lie could be the life of love. To cauterize, healing wound with wound."

The story ends almost symbolically. Returning to hotel, the wife suddenly feels something crawling on her back. She pleads him to remove it and almost unconsciously he starts undressing her. The full naked body of the wife, now purged of the shock of knowing the truth, stands before him "fluidlike in subdued grief." And he, caressing her, sees her patting him "charitably on the head." The trauma evaporates by the note of forgiveness and with forgiveness comes reconciliation.

All of Jayanta Mahapatra's short stories are brilliant pieces of mood-exploration. Most of them are like extended lyrics. But in this particular story, the trauma of both the husband and wife move beyond their common mournful posture to reach a profound height because of the writer's powerful rendering of this tale under the rubric of a grand foundational traumatic myth. The lyrical short story touches the epic height by the profundity of emotional turmoil.

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