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Writing Hunger: Reading Jayanta Mahapatra's Grandfather Poems in Light of Trauma Literary Theory

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Abstract

One of the most important issues in Jayanta Mahapatra's writings is hunger. Hunger is traumatic to its victims and also to those who have come to have known it. Jayanta Mahapatra's understanding of hunger stems mostly from the crisis that his grandfather experienced when he suffered from acute starvation in the famous Orissan famine of 1868 and embraced Christianity for his survival. To the young Jayanta, the crisis of the grandfather was more a crisis of faith than a crisis of survival. But as he matured he started to understand the truth of the matter and realizes the helplessness of the victim of hunger. Using the yardsticks of trauma-literary theory, the present study treats the problem of traumatic hunger in two poems featuring the grandfather.

Keywords: hunger, traumatic, Orissan famine etc.

The contemporary trauma theory has witnessed the predominance of mainly two models (Balaev 6-8). The classical trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman or Kali Tal have seen trauma as a shock arising primarily from a profound historical event such as the Holocaust. The witness to this event experiences huge shock. He fails to integrate the event to his conscious memory and visits them in hallucinations and nightmares. Such shock, as the trend maintains, is inexpressible. Such event based trauma theory, profoundly influential at some times in its heyday during the 80s and early nineties, was soon challenged by a group of theorists who, without rejecting the parameters of trauma set forth by the classical theorists, do not agree to accept it as the only possible version of trauma. In their interpretations, they extend the boundary of trauma into the day-to-day, apparently insignificant cases of incidents such as sexual abuse, domestic violence, slavery etc which have the equally potential possibility of inciting traumatic experience in the survivors. Such structural trauma-events, as they are called, work insidiously under the social fabric and by their constant and continued hammering of traumatic experiences manage to inflict great scar or wound into the individual or communal psyche.

Critical debates hinge not only on the issue of the extant of trauma; they are divided over how to negotiate trauma. Diminck LaCapra, a renowned trauma historian, draws on Freud to tell us that there are two types of negotiation with trauma---"acting out" and "working through" (141-144). Freud's important observation on the issue of tackling trauma follows two paths---mourning and melancholy. Mourning is a reactive mechanism of the mind in which the loss that generates pain and creates wound is healed by forgetting of the traumatic experience. It is "working through" in the sense of LaCapra. On the other hand, melancholy is a state of the mind in which the traumatized subject is constantly revisited by the experiences in dreams and hallucinations in a process which was famously termed by Freud as repetition compulsion. It is "acting out" in LaCapra's sense. Now both these models of trauma-negotiation are important so far as the relationship between state-power and individual and community is concerned. Jenny Edkins in an excellent article, speaks about responses that wartime-trauma generates. Although Edkins' observation is exclusively on war, her observation is valid equally in a general sense. She drew on George Agamben and Michel Foucault to show that

> The response of the state is to reassert its authority through heroic stories of continuity and origin and narratives of sacrifice. Those who have experienced trauma themselves are often more inclined to want to hold on to the insights that they feel they have gained. They contest the reinstatement of the stories the state wants to tell. Practices of remembrance and commemoration in the aftermath of a war become an important site of contestation and struggle. (132)

It is clear therefore that reconciliation that mourning finally ends in has an ideological import. It is necessary, as per the need of bio-power to be completely healed. But those who do not want to be healed in this way through a reconciliation of grief do so with the argument that this process of healing somehow compromises with the ethical implication of trauma. Forgetting the loss, the victims of trauma and forgiving the perpetrator of trauma is an injustice to the victims and therefore unethical. The ethical consideration of trauma therefore stresses on the necessity of remembering, the "acting out" as LaCapra terms it. But both these methods have serious fault lines within themselves. Therefore one can argue, as LaCapra does, that if we do not think of coming out of trauma, how can we think of a healthy future for ourselves. On the other hand the logic of "acting out" in terms of remembering trauma is also difficult to refute on ethical ground (150-151). So the point of contention always remains so far as the way of dealing with trauma is concerned.

LaCapra has suggested a middle path. Because, remembering trauma induces empathy of the witness to the victim, so empathy should be considered as a serious positive response to trauma. On the other hand, as this empathy has a natural tendency to produce an affective identification with the victim so that neutral assessment trauma becomes impossible to arrive at resulting into a difficulty in deciding the identity of the perpetrator and therefore providing

justice to the victim, this empathy has to be distilled with a critical distance. Therefore to LaCapra, the proper way to read and interpret trauma is to have the process of critical mourning in which both the apparently incompatible ways, "acting out" and "working through" can be accommodated.

But this is a historian's view. Trauma, because of its multidisciplinary affiliation, has been treated in different ways by specialists of different fields. People belonging to medical science and psychology have found in "talking cure" an important method of trauma negotiation. The traumatized subject under hypnosis or such other medical/psychological means is brought back to the place, time and situation of trauma and led to speak out about the incident so that the memory which remains conscious during this period of talking can reintegrate the event to the mind. Representation or articulation of trauma has been hailed as a very important method of healing trauma. People belonging to the world of art use representation or writing of trauma to the end which the classical trauma theory applies. The classical trauma theorists consider trauma as aporetic hence inexpressible in normal linear narrative form. They pick out the modernist writing as the only way to capture the disoriented, disjointed, perforated form of thought that a traumatized subject usually generates. They suspect the so called linear trauma narrative as being too ideologically shaped and therefore far from the truth that lies at the heart of trauma. Taking the goal of truth-searching, these theorists find in linear narrative a "crisis of truth" as Caruth famously termed it(6). But those theorists who have argued for the extension of the domain of trauma and thereby propounded the quotidian crisis of life as being equally and validly traumatic, have also argued for the linear narrative as being equally capable of representing trauma, because narrative, especially literary whether it is linear or disjunctive has the potentiality of representing trauma. Because to these critics, unlike the purist classical theorists, the main important question is not the truth. Effective life, not truthful life, is what they want to find in representation. They are more concerned about how effectively trauma is addressed and whether such address fulfils the ethical expectations. In this sense, linear narrative is accepted as a valid vehicle of traumatic experience.

Now in this plethora of critical stances regarding the definition, the extent, the articulation and the redressal of trauma, it is very difficult, in fact traumatic by itself, to chart out a singular methodology that can accommodate all the stances without compromising their individuality. But the critical history of trauma narratives has one important common point that all the cases of trauma are unique in themselves. It is most apparent in the case of Jayanta Mahapatra. A poet hailing from Cuttack, writing poetry in English(also in Oriya)and having a legendary status in India and abroad, Mahapatra is predominantly a poet who has poured out his traumatic grief into into poetry, short story, autobiography and memoir. With a long life and a unique energy of carrying on writing till date, Mahapatra has written about traumatic experiences which are surprisingly both historical and quotidian. In this paper we will be deliberating on a particular traumatic issue in Mahapatra's writing that has a unique

history. It starts with witnessing hunger of his grandfather (which may be identified in some way with the sort of monolithic trauma) and gradually evolves into a quotidian trauma when the specific individual crisis is linked to the issue of hunger in the larger, general world. The paper here will interpret the issue by using his autobiography *Bhore Motiro Kanaphula*[1] and some of his poems that feature his grandfather and hunger.

Jayanta Mahapatra's autobiography informs us that Orissa encountered a severe famine during 1866. This famine is important particularly to Mahapatra because his grandfather, Chintamani Mahapatra, was a victim of this. Starved in his village, Kendal of Nabapatna, Chintamani walked all along to Cuttack, Jayanta Mahapatra's native town, in search for sustenance. He finally mitigated his hunger at the cost of his conversion to Christianity. The Christian Missionaries in Cuttack gave him food to survive but converted him to their faith.

Jayanta Mahapatra was apprised of this incident in a critical moment of his life. Quite early in his life, Mahapatra had already shown some sign of melancholy as the autobiography records. He was passing though incidents which were sufficiently painful and therefore in 1945 after the Hiroshima event, when he was brooding over the massive destruction the event caused, he was forced to witness another incident that was no less devastating that Hiroshima to rattle his personal world. His father asked him to read a manuscript written by Chintamani. As the autobiography attests, the manuscript is titled as "Sri Chintamoni Mahapatra's History." It was very old with a shattered cover-page and pages inside being brittle, containing the message of the grandfather at the very beginning: "Those who read this, will remember the famine after empathetically considering the case" (40)."

The message is pretty clear. It was about the incident whose personal connotation was sufficient to shatter the young sensitive Mahapatra. The message asks although indirectly a reading of the event and also a remembering of the same. It sounds like an ethical compulsion—reading and remembering. And it also makes no hesitation in asking how it is to be read and remembered. Empathy was what the author expects from the reader and the rememberer. The whole message interpellates Mahapatra into a witness who should read and remember trauma with empathy.

What was Mahapatra's reaction? He informed us quite candidly "I could not imagine that famine can be so destructive. Everything seems to be so unrealistic" (41). When did he realize this or when did he enter what Rothberg terms as traumatic realism? The very next sentence of the narrative hints at this. "I now knew and realized what hunger could do, knew how it had broken down the walls of the grandfather's body. He did not have the sky of his mind and the sky, the relatives and the kith and kin of his childhood days—all were burning in a strange fire" (41). The admission attest to the fact that it was a belated realization, triggered may be by the future hunger-instances that immediately invest the grandfather incident with traumatic connotation. We have to remember that Mahaptara's recounting of the grandfather incident happened in the late years of his life because he wrote his

autobiography in the first decade of the 21st century when he had already written about or referenced to this incident in many places of his poetic articulation. The belated realization of the import of grandfather incident is in line with Freud's conception of trauma as "belated"(Barnaby 24) But scores of poetry that recount this incident were all testimonies to the role that the grandfather had decided for his grandson. The question is how far Mahapatra negotiated with this role.

Our investigation here would be limited to the key grandfather-poems that will inform us how hunger as an event is associated with trauma and the kind of questions it is capable of arousing in Mahapatra. But as we have already stated that the grandfather incident might be the "originary" event to borrow Freud's term to the representation of hunger as a traumatic event, but hunger as an issue is not confined to this episode alone. In fact, there are countless forms of hunger represented by Mahapatra in his poetry that are traumatic by themselves and are probably instrumental to giving the grandfather-incident a traumatic identity. Of course, to capture Mahapatra's sailing across these traumatic incidents of hunger requires a separate study and is therefore beyond the jurisdiction of this paper because we will attempt here an investigation of how Jayanta Mahapatra's representation of hunger has been shaped by the grandfather incident, our focus therefore will not be a general reading of hunger in Mahapatra's poetry.

There are particularly two poems that exclusively deal with the grandfather issue, although there are scores of references to this incident in a large number of Mahapatra's poetry. The recurrence of references does suggest the event's potential as repetition compulsion in Mahapatra's traumatized psyche. Anyway, the two poems that we have mentioned are entitled as "Grandfather" and "The Birthpains of Grief." Grandfather appeared in *The Sewanee Review* (vol. 87, winter 1979) and later on incorporated into the poetry-volume called *Life Signs* (1983). "The Birthpains of Grief" belongs to the volume called *Land* published in 2013. The distance between the two poems, roughly 34 years, is a sufficient evidence of how the issue of grandfather and his hunger has been carried on by the poet. The trauma the event generated therefore remains unhealed for such a long time and questions that it raises in Mahapatra are still valid.

"Grandfather", at its very beginning, refers to the "diary" of Chintamoni that forces him to hear the voice and remember "the forgotten posture." He could very well visualize "the silence of dust that " ate into the laughter of your flesh." To the poet, the weakened body of the grandfather after starvation, "the young tamarind leaves" which proved to be his food for sometimes, the nightmare of the impending death—all led the grandfather to a terrible position in which he ultimately embraced Christianity. Hunger was so powerful that Chintamani did not think about deserting his family and long held religious identity. Mahapatra here wears a poetic tone that stands between accusation and understanding. He asks,

How old are you? Hunted, turned coward and ran,

the real animal in you plunging through your bone.
You left your family behind buried things,
the precious clod that praised the quality of a god.
The imperishable that swung your broken body,
turned it inside out? What did faith matter?
What Hindu world so ancient and true for you to hold?
Uneasily you dreamed toward the centre of your web.

Famine and the hunger caused by it were instrumental to the grandfather's permanent separation from his creed---"the separate life let you survive, while perhaps/ the one you left wept in blur of your heart." Which is important---life or creed, survival or religious affiliation? Can survival or life be purchased or compromised with one's faith? Hunger unsettles such question. The poet maintains that for a long time they accused the grandfather for his preference to survival over religious fidelity. They were expecting a heroic fortitude from him, wanted to see him as victorious over hunger. But the grandfather seemed to have spoiled all this by embracing Christianity putting the descendents into shame and insult and therefore the decedents including Jayanta Mahapatra did not forgive him. But that was a time when Mahapatra did not realize the ferocity of hunger, did not know the compulsion of the grandfather. That is why a gulf stood between the grandfather and his successors which was not bridgeable. Jayanta spoke with his son about this famine which stood between generations as "nameless as stone"—utterly incomprehensible yet very much real.

Jayanta's son did not understand the great grandfather's crisis. The poem ruminates on this

A conscience of years is between us. He is young.
The whirls of glory are breaking down for him before me.
Does he think of the past as a loss we have lived, our own?
Out of silence we look back now at what we do not know.

To Mahapatra, finally the only way to negotiate this trauma is to reconcile with the crisis—

We wish we knew you more.
We wish we knew what it was to be, against dying,

to know the dignity
that had to be earned dangerously,
your last chance that was blindingly terrifying, so unfair.

"The Birthpains of Grief" follows the same questions with more penetrating force. Comparing the grandfather to a gladiator in ancient Rome, "who used to greet Caesar, saying/ "Dedicated to Death, we salute you"." Mahapatra, in this poem once again has raised the question of how one's survival is sometimes earned at the cost of sacrificing fidelity to "a headless goddess" and one's survival. The gulf that he spoke in the poem "Grandfather" is to be bridged and the poet says," I have tried to cross the bridges on my own." To him now it is

most important "to retrieve the sound of your voice/ from the leaves of the pathetic tamarind/ that tore away the delusion of your night." The pathos that was inherent in grandfather's crisis was to be revoked. The poet was suffering from "an unexplainable melancholy" because he now understands the situation of his grandfather. His experience of the pathos of the world which generates an unmitigable helplessness is clearly evident in the lines:

> In my time I've seen
> white pigeons bathing in funeral ashes
> the jasmine tilts its head to loneliness
> I have seen a woman in a shuttered window
> feel her way into a trysting place
> where no lantern gave off light of freedom

The grief at the crisis of grandfather—a very personal crisis inducing a very personal trauma is clearly a very powerful leitmotif in Mahapatra's poetry. Redressal of this trauma is surely thought to be achieved through a representation of trauma that retrieves the memory. But surely such process involves a complex "acting out". It is possible that the grandfather's crisis has made him to learn the trauma of hunger and therefore this realization emits empathy in his mind by which he can empathize with the hunger of the world, the hunger in Somalia, the hunger in Ethiopia, etc. In other way, it may be that the hunger of the world the mature Mahapatra experiences may have infused the hunger of the grandfather with traumatic connotation. Whichever way we may look into this, Mahapatra's negotiation of the trauma of hunger follows the route of empathy that is not only critical but charged with a sense of oneness with the world and its pain. The acting out process here works through this sense of universal brotherhood.

Notes

1. Jayanta Mahapatra's autobiography was written originally in Oriya, translated to Bengali later on as *Bhore Motir Kanpasha*. I have used the translated text and quotations from the text used here are translated to English by me.

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