



## A whiteness of bone: Reflection of humans' insensate action and stolid expressions

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### Abstract

Jayant Mahapatra, a poet from the soil of Orissa possesses tremendous energy and a rare poetic gift as he has not yet stopped his poetic activities. His *Random Descent* is a production of 2005 and he is still editing *Chandrabhaga* with a commendable zeal. All the contemporary poets are almost silent with the exception of Shiv K Kumar who is a great critic as well. Jayant Mahapatra stands among the sterile Indian crowd of English language poets who dry up after an average of two volumes. The poetry that Mahapatra wrote during these twenty-five years, if judiciously evaluated, may be called the poetry of wisdom. It does not mean that his former volume do not contain the ripeness of his poetic genius but since time necessarily leaves its impact on the creative mind, it can be taken for granted that the seniority in age is also responsible for the accompanying depth in whatever the poet writes.

**Keywords:** Craftsmanship, poetic mechanism, symbolism, themes, surrealism

### Introduction

Mahapatra, a contemporary of A.K. Ramanujam, Nizzim Ezekeil and R. Parthasarathy stands out distinctly as a great Indian poet, in the domain of contemporary Indo-Anglican poetry. Mahapatra's early poetry is largely poetry of introversion. It deals with such private themes as love, loss, absence, and loneliness. He steered the spirit of modernity not only in subject matter, creative urge and awareness but also in technique and craftsmanship. Using bold and powerful images they dealt with contemporary issues in a realistic manner. In a true sense he knows how to use words, themes as well as poetic craftsmanship and where. T.S. Eliot once spoke of the poets as: *concentrating upon a task which is a task in the same sense as the making of an efficient engine or the turning of a jug or a table.* (Eliot: 114) <sup>[1]</sup> It is indeed something not only remarkable but also commendable that in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Mahapatra published *A Whiteness of Bone* (1992) beside a collection of stories and three books of poem in Oriya. This amply shows the productivity of the poet and his belongingness to art. His wisdom as a man and a poet as well is sufficiently reflected though some of his poems. *A Whiteness of Bone* contains a collection of fifty nine poems, deal with all the recurrent obsession of the persona. This collection presents a wholesome blend of all the concerns, philosophy and his typical treatment of ancient Indian myths. It presents Indian rituals, custom, Indian philosophy, tradition and how today the decaying values affecting the human life. Death, silence, decay, injustice, Despair, suffering, political degradation of leaders and tragedy of the land are major concern of the persona. Mahapatra in *A Whiteness of Bone* portrays tragedies all over the land to show how tragedies have turned a frequent and they have stopped affecting the mass. This collection is widely appreciated for his act of decolonizing the English language and proving his mastery over the use of English as the medium of expression. Mahapatra is, by his attitude, a recluse, a person with no faith

in the real utility of a poem. He has written in a prolific manner but inside his mind, somewhere, lives the idea that all is a futile exercise. Such an idea makes Mahapatra a great man and as such his poetry is also great. It has the heights of sermons, of hymns and of devotional song provided one is able to take on self to toes height of thought. There is a poem *Last night the poem in Life Signs* which says: *But what use is a poem, once the writing's done. Like the sound of a match striking, then over, I know that much.* (*Life Signs*: 34) Mahapatra has also questioned the efficacy of poetry through various lines like -A hundred years hence poems will still be luxuries and -I write my futile poems. He does not hesitate to say that Poetry stumbles and falls. In his another volume *Shadow Space*, poems are often referred to as countermeasures to overcome the feeling of guilt, of impotency at not being able to do anything corrective with his poems when the world is not as it should be: *Indefinable, like life, With the government wrong the thinking wrong, the world wrong But the irony is beautiful...* (*Shadow Space*: 49) Perhaps no Indian English poet has written about the ultimate fate of poetry in the manner Mahapatra has done and this shows the shining features of his genius. These and so many other references to the role of poetry illustrate the mental heights of the poet who, like Siddhartha, before he became Gautam Buddha, found no attachment potent enough to keep him at home. Mahapatra devoted himself to poetry probably with the feeble hope that it shall keep him away from despair but he was too philosophical to have been amused with this toy which he himself managed for his delight although the delight could not last. These things and these sublime thoughts questioning the very validity of poetry go to make Mahapatra a great poet. It is not easy to write like this; it is equal to burning the hut in which a man lives. A lot of moral and intellectual strength is required to illustrate one's personality with such type of poetry as Mahapatra has written. *A Whiteness of Bone* is a precious collection of Mahapatra's

poems, which offer us a further chance to look into the working of his mind, his beliefs and his convictions, which right or wrong, remained firmly with him. The name of the volume itself is symbolic- white symbolizes the simplicity and purity but in depth it relates to man cowardice, his attempt to cover and forget guilt, rather it can be said as an endeavor to cleanse besotted soul. Bones as white reflects man's insensate action and stolid expressions. In this collection also, the references to the role of poetry are no less disturbing. There is a poem titled Light in which Mahapatra tells us about the sad fate of a poem: *Let know the meaning remain behind as a poem, to be questioned like a misdeed or some trophy to be understood.* (A Whiteness of Bone: 20) A scholar who reviewed A Whiteness a Bone has written in defense of the poet and his poetry that a serious poet, Mahapatra has been dividing his time and craft over the past and silence. Weaving a pattern out of a deep melancholy, he comments on the nature and quality of life. The past find itself juxtaposed to the present, and the recurrence of hills, rivers, silence, silent, grass, soul, death is more than a refrain in the poems; they form the core of the anthology. Silence, inadequacy and memory seem to be his preoccupations. Even the dedication is significant in the volume i.e. for Sonali, for silence shared and unshared.

The reviewer point out the silence was never evocative nor so eloquent as in this anthology of Mahapatra. And this is great truth too. The opening poem of the volume Silent in the valley in which the poet introspects-Do I detect a note of melancholy in my voice? He remarks: *Rain grates in the silence. My son walks in through the dim walls a strange map drawn by life. It is as though blind one goes on feeling for night and a lot of space I touch.* (A Whiteness of Bone: 4) The poet may be in doubts but the reader reading the poem in the anthology will find the poet both lonely and melancholy. Melancholies hinder the exercise of a poet but the artist in Mahapatra overcomes this obstacle. In a poem entitled The Stones, its import is justified in such lines as: *Stones, whose eyes have had no expression in them Stones, like governments, who have no honour at all Stones, whose long arms easily batter and kill.* (Random Descent: 47) Meena Alexander explains the relevance of stone in Mahapatra's poetry: *Stone is crucial to Mahapatra's cosmogony. It was there at the beginning. It is the penetrable permanent. He inhabits an earth where monuments of stone crumble and crack, yet survives in the same realm as human beings, the glory of stone glimpsed momentarily by consciousness.* (Meena Alexander: 42) [2].

The thing, which both torments and intrigues, Mahapatra, is the concern for the society. His greatest misery as a poet is that he cannot stop connecting himself with the contemporary world. He is all the time busy in search his identity which has been lost in the turmoil. He deeply realizes that he should be aware of what's going around him viz the poverty, the greed, the unnecessary violence, the cruelty, the injustice, the sexuality. Man's cruelty to man has become the order of the day and Mahapatra laments such a situation in a poem titled Dawn: *Things are only going their way he dawn appears headless again the child has already come to know from who knows whom that peace has gone, never to return.* (A Whiteness of Bone: 62) The poet's moral courage and brio lie in exploiting the day-today situations out of the contemporary

world. The poet is anguished to say that the heritage of our culture has waned over the centuries and it is understood to be at the lowest point because of self-centeredness the leaders of the land. Mahapatra casts aspersions on the failure of the government, which does not provide any succor to the people in their need. The poet's father is the mouthpiece to express the poet's feelings of vexation: *And through the dull suburbs of his death, my old father gropes his way back. yes, he seems to whisper overwhelmed by the defeat in my eyes, hunger and earth made the bones of one's birth.* (A Whiteness of Bone: 4) What a helpless situation about which the poet has so correctly written! The young men who are depressed and dejected resign to their lot. Mahapatra feels aghast at the disgruntled face of his son and his son feels as if the whole world has grown deserted and desolate. Mahapatra makes a meaningful comment when he says that his lost face, white enamel looks down at his feet as if to say only the world is left, and the rain that hangs from the branches. No humanity, love and peace. In his opinion, poetry is an expression of his inner world and problems about the relationship between self and reality. According to him: *A great poem lets us embark on a sort of journey or voyage through symbols and allusions to encompass human condition.* (Literary Criteria: 9) [3].

In Mahapatra personal experience, racial consciousness, myth and history of the land merge together and constitute a pattern of poetry that explores his deep relationship to time, to land and to generations who have passed before him and who will appear after him. The new forms of Indian poetry in English was something of protest marking a significant departure are not only in respect of the subject matter but also in the manner of expression, which involves both the choice of language and the flow of the rhythm – that is being adjusted and attuned to the temper of the new age. Poets like Hopkins, Yeats, Eliot, Auden, Dylan Thomas, perhaps also Allen Tate and Wallace Stevens, have taught our poets the importance of taking their art seriously. *He has realized that easy writing cannot make a good poetry. Neither mere imitation nor wanton angularity, neither frantic incoherence nor fabricated obscurity, can make words live or sing themselves out. The profession of poetry is a consecrated endeavor and an exacting discipline. It is to the credit of the 'new poets' that they are prepared to take their vocation seriously.* (Iyengar: 649) [4] Mahapatra's poetry is responsible to his own conscience and his motherland Orissa bringing about an integration of the inner self and outer reality, proving to be a happy departure in the era of post-colonial Indian English poetry.

There are many poems, which acquaint us with the anger and anguish of Mahapatra with the degeneration of values. Few Indian English poets have shown such a great concern for the state of affairs in the country. Mahapatra also deplores the gruesome violence prevalent in the country, which is etched out in A Sullene Balance, another important poem. Genocidal and homicidal violence has become the order of the day. This depresses the poet. He expresses his wonder why man has not jettisoned his primitive mind of liquidating his fellow men in spite of the scientific and technological progress. The poet expresses his wrath in the following manner: *A sullen wind stalks out even the restful dead in this country like the bleat of a metal detector.* (A Whiteness of Bone: 57) This feature of his poetry has also been marked seriously by Bijay Kumar

Das who is the most profound scholar of the poetry of Mahapatra. Das has remarked that Mahapatra is conscious of keeping the image of the country alive. In the international field, our country should maintain impartiality and objectivity. There is a very remarkable poem included in *A Whiteness of Bone* captioned *Another Love Poem* which brings out the poet's pain to which India has been subjected. The poet hints at India's leanings towards America and Russia and this dubious role landed the country in a soup. The poet remarks: *We have become stiff and cautious with each other as this country is with the US and USSR.* (*A Whiteness of Bone*: 63) He voices his peevishness about the self-centred politics and policies wrongly framed-by the rulers: *Under the nation's politics and marches and old darkness comes floating down into the abyss in a frail, dead man's eyes.* (*A Whiteness of Bone*: 63) The poet is frustrated to see that the country is not in a position to get back the lost glory. Mahapatra feels humiliated at the very sight of the desolate country. It appears to him to be a premonition. The nation, Mahapatra feels, bewails them who have sapped and undermined it. M.K. Naik in one of his contents named *Two Worlds: The Imagery of Jayanta Mahapatra* of the latest book of criticism writes: *An intensive scrutiny of Mahapatra's imagery reveals that his images are drawn from two worlds viz., the exterior world of phenomenal reality and the surrealistic world and the way these two worlds are related is equally significant. The image is for Mahapatra not merely what Wyndham Lewis called, the primary pigment of poetry; it is almost his characteristic way of reacting to experience, ordering it and recording it.* (Naik: 104) <sup>[5]</sup>.

*A Whiteness of Bone*, thus, is a book in which Mahapatra has unhesitatingly expressed his concerns about the dangerous developments in the country chiefly the demoralization of the leaders and the growth of violence that has not been checked. The book illustrates the humanistic outlook of the poet, the some poet who talks with his inner self in a very philosophical manner but Mahapatra is not so reclusive or he does not want to live in an ivory tower; he, shows a keen desire to be concerned with the dismaying problems of his country. It is in this connection that Rabindra K Swain has observed: *A Whiteness of Bone is a collection of such poems that creates a catalogue of catastrophes that have ripped India into shreds emotionally. Some of them are violence, mindless bloodshed in the province of the Punjab, thousands dead due to gas leakage in the in the union Carbide Factory at Bhopal, assassination of Indira Gandhi and the riot in its trail in Delhi and the self-immolation by fire of student protesting against the implementation of caste law.* (Rabindra K Swain: 68) <sup>[6]</sup> *A Whiteness of Bone* shows us the heart and mind of Mahapatra as it actually is sympathetic, sensitive and reflective. It shows us not only the poet but also the man. The collection carries the poet's deep-felt anguish and disappointment on account of the poor state of India once remembered in the world for its glorious past. As a representative poet of India, it appears that Mahapatra's sensitive intellect has been disturbed by the Indian condition, even though he see legend, myth, religion and life cohere in a secular catholicity. Not oblivious of political and social hypocrisy, he sheds his emotions in his work, as Lawrence put it in order to be master of them. To read mahapatra is to come to the conclusion, nothing is

what it seems to be and what it seems to be is nothing, as because the scenes and sites go shifting with the change in situation, idea, thought and reflection and the unconscious mind can always be seen at work. Like other English poets, Mahapatra too considers Orissa as the seed-ground of his flouring art. He admits his indebtedness to the soil himself: *To Orissa, to his land in which my roots lie and his past and in which lies my beginning and my end, where the wind keeps over the grief of the River Daya and the waves of the Bay of Bengal fail to reach out today to the firelight soul of Knonarka, I acknowledge my debt and my relationship.* (Mohanty: 65) <sup>[7]</sup> An excellent poet as Mahapatra is, his poetry is marked by a perceptive note of philosophy and psychology, the combination of which makes it come full circle. This is a difficult but satisfactory comprehension and critics like Bruce King share a similar opinion: *It is poetry of inner spaces, of psychology, of contradiction and renewed feelings of depression, guilt, desire, lust and attention.* (Bruce King: 195) <sup>[8]</sup>.

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