

# Jayanta Mahapatra's Poems on Odisha—Poetry that Embellishes Pain

Sunanda Jena

Lecturer, English, Laxmi Narayan Sahu Mahavidyalaya, Jagatpur, Odisha

## Abstract

Reading or writing poems could be a good way to spend one's time or express one's thoughts and emotions but ultimately poems written by certain individuals might not appeal to many individuals, and lines of poetry could easily be read, enjoyed, and then forgotten. The present paper with the help of a few poems by Jayanta Mahapatra on Odisha would try to argue that poems at most times serve only the writer, who gives vent to his emotions on paper while enjoying the process of writing, and have anything but a momentary impact on the readers.

**Keywords:** artistic, reality, poetical, relief

Historical records corroborate the fact that poetry is one of the oldest art forms that has existed in one form or another for thousands of years. Taking numerous forms and developing through the ages, poetry has proved itself to be the most important, flexible, versatile, and everlasting mode of writing. This genre has managed to provide humans with a multipurpose tool with which they can record their daily activities, narrate stories, teach moral values, inspire and encourage fellow humans, express their personal feelings, and even expose and chastise their oppressors. This creative art form is considered a 'safe,' 'quick' and 'easy' outlet for the writer while for the reader poetry is a 'convenient' and 'therapeutic' means to relax himself/herself. This art form is said to have 'healing qualities' since it has helped mankind in enduring some of the roughest periods and events in history—for example, poems were read to soldiers who fought in wars to help them cope with the trauma and brutalities of war—and its role in the maintenance of a sound mind and body can be deduced from the fact that the Yale University School of Medicine has a committee that includes poetry in its 'required literary reading list.' Apart from soothing the 'constantly' troubled human soul, poetry is even yielded as a weapon for protests and rallies—Maya Angelou's "Caged Bird"—and often acts as a branch of olive—Denise Levertov's "Making Peace"—that promulgates the values of love and peace. Thus, the numerous merits and worthiness of the poetic form in being recognized as the longest surviving genre of writing is well established, however, truth be told poetry is just another form of writing in which the 'author expresses himself' by skillfully arranging the words in a certain manner. The writer endowed with a good vocabulary and a talent for creativity manages to sum up everything that is happening within himself as well as around him in a few words. Such an activity provides eternal satisfaction to the writer and a moment of respite to the readers, but ultimately, they are mere words on paper. While reading a poem might fill humans with joy, inspire them and invoke several feelings within them, their effect ultimately wanes out and does not help anyone in solving their immediate problems, not that they should, but sometimes good poems successfully manage to take the readers away from their dreary existence into a world where they are capable of doing and achieving everything and

living beautiful moments only to bring them back to reality where they realize that it was ‘just a poem’ and that they have to worry about paying the bills, writing assignments, earning money, managing relationships, cooking day and night, protecting oneself, and every other mundane thing that one has to deal with every day, from which there is ‘no’ escape except death. Poetry, the art of pure expression that provides a ‘moment’ of respite and a ‘glimpse’ of hope can sometimes leave the readers more hopeless and defeated than ever before as they describe a world or an experience that one can never have, or they inspire in them a strength and courage that ‘feels’ astonishing but they know will be of no use in the real world since they only work in ‘moments’ and ‘glimpses;’ the same art form can also at many times hide the true picture by substituting it with a more optimistic, beautiful and convincing image that assures the reader that everything is, and can be made beautiful.

The state of Odisha, the battleground for the famous Kalinga war fought by Ashoka the Great, is well known for its rich culture and history. Often recognized as the ‘Land of Temples’ the state with its beautifully crafted temples, assuasive pilgrimage sites, beaches, lakes, and national parks is a wonderful attraction for tourists from India as well as the entire world. An outsider who is visiting the state for the first time would likewise find a hundred other things about Odisha on the internet that make it look like the best place in the world—and in some ways, it is. One of the websites, for instance, praises the state in the following words,

Life is uncomplicated, laid back and it doesn’t take much to **find some hush and quiet here**. As opposed to the hustle and bustle of metropolitan concrete jungles, **Odisha comes as a sigh of relief to the one seeking the peace of mind**. [7]

but there is more to this state than meets the eye, sides that the outsider is not aware of, truths that he might unravel if he possesses a critical mind and an eye for detail. He/she might realize for example the fact that the state is to date suffering from numerous shortcomings that are preventing it from achieving its true potential. The same fact is also true for many other states of India but for the state of Odisha especially, grand adulations and acclamations like ‘heavenly land of temples,’ the land of ‘forbidden myth’ and the abode of Jagannath (Lord of the World) not only draw attention to the state’s magnificent culture and history but also conceal its deplorable condition. The state despite undergoing multiple developments is still doing poorly in the sectors of economic growth, employment, healthcare, and education. According to the 2021 report of NITI Aayog’s National Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), “Odisha is among the top ten states with a significant share of the population living under poverty” (Rout 2021), with ‘poverty’ here referring not just to the deprivation of food but to the simultaneous deprivations in health, education, and standard of living. Barring the big cities of the state like Bhubaneswar, Cuttack, Sambalpur, etc., the rest of Odisha primarily lies in the smaller districts, towns, and villages where one in every two persons is below the poverty line. Thus Odisha might come as a “sigh of relief to the one seeking the peace of mind” and to the ones who only visit the ‘good-tourist’ places, have the best of food, and live in the best of locations for a few days and leave, but for the natives of the state who have seen it in all its colors, it is there ‘sweet home,’ a place and situation that they have got ‘accustomed’ to but not where they ‘seek’ a ‘peace of mind’ let alone experience it. Given the wretched conditions under which the natives live their real lives, what can a wonderful piece of poetry that gracefully describes the mesmerizing

views and temple architecture of such a place or ‘poetically’ narrates its deplorable condition do but shield its pathetic condition and make it more depressing by explicitly outlining its very flaws?

Jayanta Mahapatra (1928), the internationally acclaimed bilingual writer and the first Indian English poet to have received the Kendriya Sahitya Akademi Award in 1981, is the mouthpiece of the art and culture, history, and lifestyle of Odisha. Although his poems focus on numerous aspects ranging from India’s natural landscape to the inner conflicts of an individual, being a writer born and brought up in Odisha the state finds a special and important place in his writings. Mahapatra can indisputably be considered the ‘voice’ of Odisha who for the first time in Indian literary history drew the nation’s attention away from Bengal—repeatedly glorified by numerous renowned Bengali writers in their poems and prose writings—to its adjacent state, which often gets neglected and overshadowed by Bengal’s glory, through his ingeniously crafted poems. Jayanta Mahapatra’s intense love and devotion for his place of birth is clearly articulated in most of his poems that are deeply rooted in the soils of Odisha,

When you talk of culture, I’d naturally go to my Odia culture, to my roots, from what I have imbibed from my parents and friends. I can truthfully say that I continue to be, even at this late age, to be affected by those early approaches of my parents. In a way, haunted. And it is not possible that I break free from those things, whether good or bad. This Odia culture has gone on to build my identity as a person, and then as a poet. [6]

Mahapatra also being a conscious and sensible writer and a keen observer of human nature and the contemporary situations that diminish humanity clearly expresses in some of his poems the fact that his Odisha is suffering and not all beautiful. Thus, one would find the poet oscillating between two extremes where on one hand he tries to portray the rich culture, religion, rituals, traditions, and myths of Odisha while on the other hand he unveils the deplorable condition of his beloved state. However, both these sides of the state expressed in artistic words either ‘hide’ the plight of the natives by glorifying the beauty of the state or they quite bluntly and unapologetically highlight its flaws. His poems might fill oneself with pride for his/her homeland, transport one to a calm and composing beachside, and move one to pity and sadness, but ultimately all these effects wear out and the reader (whether he belongs to Odisha or any part of the world) finds himself back in his real environment, detached and distanced from the poems that talk about beauty or hunger and poverty. Jayanta Mahapatra himself in a letter, laments over the unproductive nature of poetry,

I am uncertain as to what a poem would be, what it must contain, what it must say. But I have learnt to live with discontent because of the realization that poetry has not helped the world to survive, poetry has not helped to ease man’s sufferings. [8]

The poet who is well aware of the spiritual and moral degradation that prevails in his society and who has witnessed the hard realities of his nation and particularly his state tries in vain to depict Odisha as a state that is both alluring and revolting. Jayanta Mahapatra in his answer to the question on his source of inspiration in one of the interviews, uprightly answers,

My main sources of inspiration are my land, my people, my place, what I see, and what social injustices I see, to include political injustice. I would like to write about the hunger. I think Orissa is one of the very, very, very, very poorest states. Very poor. You go inside the villages, and you will see they don't have the place to live in. They don't have a roof over their heads. They don't have one meal a day. They don't have rice to eat. And politicians. During election time they do visit the villages once, and for the next five years, nothing happens. The same poverty. They sell their children to keep their stomachs full. Mothers sell their daughters, fathers sell their daughters. Even today it's happening. Especially in Orissa and the interior of India. [4]

Mahapatra's poem "The Captive Air of Chandipur on Sea" while painting a beautiful and nostalgic picture of the sea-side of Chandipur—a coastal town in Balasore, Odisha—also expresses the woes and miseries of the people of the coastal regions—Chandipur in this case—who depend on the sea for their livelihood and thus have to face the dangers of the sea and the harm that results from it. The poem of twenty-two lines divided equally into two stanzas is composed in blank verse and is replete with images that describe the majestic workings of the sea and the concomitant hardships that it incurs on humans,

Day after day the **drunk sea** at Chandipur  
**spits out the gauze wings of shells** along the beach  
and **rumples the thin air** behind the sands.  
Who can tell of the songs of this sea that go on  
to **baffle and double the space around our lives?**  
Or of **smells paralyzed through the centuries,**  
of deltas hard and white that stretched once  
to lure the feet of women bidding their men goodbye?  
Or of salt and light that **dark and provocative eyes**  
demanded, their **shoulders drooping like lotuses**  
in the noonday sun? (Lines 1-11)

The poet paints a 'sea-scape' through this poem but the imagery used by him here to describe the sea is obnoxious. The sea is personified as someone who is 'drunk,' 'spits out' the shells on the beach, and 'rumples' the surrounding air, contrary to the title of the poem which evokes a compelling image of sea-side. The very first lines of the poem reveal it to be a sick body that spoils all the beautiful things around it. The following lines in a series of rhetorical questions ponder over the strength and mightiness of the sea and the difficulty in narrating the tales of those brave hearts who dared to face its violent tides but their courage was crushed by the sea. The sea causes the women to say their (last) goodbyes to men who enter into the raging sea to feed their families, and the men to constantly work beside the sea irrespective of their deteriorating physical health. Euphonic phrases like "of deltas hard and white" and "Or of salt and light" interspersed in the stanza successfully give a visual image of the sea but their artistic ingenuity is lost amid the description of the pathetic condition of the natives of the coastal town,

However be the seascape, the fishermen have always ventured into the sea unmindful of the rough weather even risking their lives. Those who get lost at sea, how to tell their tales, those who venture into and get

devastated in their misadventure [...] How to tell about the mishaps and tragedies, loss of lives and bad weather ruffing it all? [1]

The poem breaks off at the eleventh line as if to give a brief moment to the readers to think over the questions raised in the first stanza and then a new stanza is introduced asking a different set of rhetorical questions focusing again on the impact of the potent sea on mere mortals,

And what is it now that scatters the tide  
in the shadow of this **proud watercourse**?  
The **ridicule of the dead**?  
Sussurant sails still whisper  
legends on the horizon: who are you,  
occupant of the silent sigh of the conch?  
The ground seems only a memory now, a torn breath,  
and as we wait for the **tide to flood the mudflats**  
the song that reaches our ears is just our own.  
**The cries of fishermen** come drifting through the spray,  
**music of what the world has lost.** (Lines 12-22)

The opening lines of the stanza have a sarcastic tone as they question the pride of the sea that has been the cause of the death of several men for centuries. The ‘susurrant sails’ of the ships and boats still ‘whisper’ the legends of those that were engulfed by the sea and now all that is left are their memories, their ‘cries’ that ‘come drifting through the spray,’ and that are now the ‘music’ of what the world of mortals has lost to the merciless sea. Mahapatra through this poem sketches the beautiful view of the sea-side that “comes as a sigh of relief to the one seeking the peace of mind”—the tourists—and the poet quite skillfully also brings to light the despicable side of the same sea that floods the coastlines destroying hundreds of houses and takes the lives of the natives who look up to the sea for their daily piece of bread. Jayanta Mahapatra being wholly aware of the reality of coastal areas, is conscious of the fact that in Odisha seas despite their scenic beauty have been the most cruel source of devastation—cyclones and floods are the two major natural disasters that hit the coastal state almost every year—and consequently the prevailing poverty in the state. The poem in an artistic manner only delineates a serious problem that is being faced by the coastal regions to date. While the poem is a brilliant effort to bring the readers’ attention to the harsh and gloomy reality of ‘captivating’ seas, it remains a poem that does invoke certain feelings in the readers and even forces them to think about the miseries of the people who earn their livelihood from the sea, but ultimately the readers ‘finish reading’ the poem and move on to the ‘more immediate’ concerns of their daily life. Ironically on one fine day when some of those same readers feel exhausted by their monotonous lives, they plan a trip with their friends and family to the same ‘Chandipur’ to experience a ‘sigh of relief.’ The poem does not create any effect on those natives (if at all the poem is accessible to them) whose sufferings are described in the poem as it only reiterates in complex sentences what they are already going through in their everyday lives.

“Dawn at Puri” is yet another poem by Mahapatra that presents the “morning scene on the sandy sea-beach at Puri” [9] taking the readers to one of the most revered and holiest places in the world, Puri, the

abode of Lord Jagannath. The title of the poem conjures the delightful image of the rising sun at a holy place, however the very opening lines of the poem, just like the ones in the previous poem, present a depressing scenario,

**Endless crow noises**

**A skull in the holy sands**

tilts its empty country towards hunger.

**White-clad widowed Women**

past the centers of their lives

are awaiting to enter the Great Temple.

Their austere eyes

stare like those caught in a net

hanging by the dawn's shining strands of faith. (Lines 1-9)

The evil images like the endless cawing of the crows—considered to be an evil portent of misfortune—and the skulls in the sands,—leftovers of cremated bodies—introduced at the very opening of the poem are reminiscent of death and despair. To this, the poet adds the jarring reality of the “extreme poverty and penury” of the people of the country, especially his state, Odisha for which the image of ‘skulls’ stands as a metaphor. The poet of all the crowds of devotees who visit the temple chooses only the ‘widowed Women’ wearing their symbolic white apparel who are waiting to enter the ‘Great Temple’ to highlight the inhumane traditions and customs of his people. These elderly women have an expression of solemnity in their eyes, Mahapatra here uses a strange simile that compares the despair in the eyes of these women, who have nothing to hold on to in this life except their religious faith, to the eyes of “creatures which have been caught in a net” which alludes to the people who are trapped by age-old, customs, traditions and faith. In the last three stanzas of the poem the distressing images continue as the ‘frail’ morning light on the sands of the beach at Puri “catches **ruined, leprous shells** leaning against one another” (Line 11), which both remind one of the deplorable state of Odisha as well as the feeble condition of the old widowed women. The poet is suddenly brought out of his ruminations by the smoke that emanates from a “sullen solitary pyre” and is reminded of his mother’s last wish to be cremated in the holy ‘Swargadwara’ (Gateway to Heaven)—a long stretch of pious land on the beach at Puri where dead bodies are cremated. The last lines of the poem,

her last wish to be cremated here

**twisting uncertainly** like light

on the **shifting sands** (Lines 16-18)

reveal the unsettled doubts in the poet’s mind regarding the afterlife and the validity of rituals, traditional practices, beliefs, and customs. The poem is neatly structured in six stanzas of three lines each resembling the rising—for the first three stanzas—and falling—last three stanzas—tides of seawater, the structure of the poem is both suggestive as well as illustrative of the general theme and undertone of the poem. The whole poem which concludes in eighteen lines contains numerous literary devices like simile, alliteration,



personification, and metaphor and is replete with a good amount of visual and auditory images. The lines of the poem despite being compact and lacking rhyme clearly articulate the poet's thoughts and emotions. What Mahapatra manages to capture in this poem of eighteen lines is only a microscopic representation of the real problems that the people of Odisha face. From poverty to heinous and rigid social customs that strip a person of his individuality and freedom, the state is still 'caught in the net' of many troubles that it has not been able to overcome to date. While the world is aware of the magnificence and grandeur of the 'Great Temple' that attracts thousands of devotees every year it is not yet aware of the voracious nature of the 'Puri *pandas* (males from the Brahmin caste who are directly engaged in serving the Lord)' who pester the devotees and tourists into paying *dakshina* (offering in the form of money) in the name of the 'Lord' at various places inside and outside the temple premises, it sees the glorious temple but neither the hundreds of beggars that throng the temple area nor the petty thieves that walk, as if camouflaged, along with the tourists. While Mahapatra's stunning effort and artistic capability in composing a poem that underlines the struggles of the people and the state in a few lines cannot be perfunctorily ignored, the very artistic quality of the poem seems torturous as it 'poetically' describes the pitiful condition of humans and the place which is deemed to be one of the most pious and exquisite religious places in the world. The poem does provide the 'fortunate' readers with a glimpse of the poor situation that exists in a holy land but the real pangs of poverty and the atrocious customs are only felt by those who experience them, those for whom such a piece of poetry (even when accessed) is of little significance.

The poem "Dhauri" by Jayanta Mahapatra presents a grim picture of the city of Dhauri located on the banks of river Daya which was the battleground of the famous Kalinga War fought by emperor Ashoka of the Mauryan Empire against the Kalinga Kingdom (present-day Odisha) in 261 B.C. The poem narrates the repercussions of the gruesome war that left the lands of Dhauri and the streams of Daya forever stained with blood,

Afterwards when the wars of Kalinga were over,  
the fallow fields of Dhauri  
hid the blood-spilt butchered bodies.

As the earth burrowed  
into their dead hunger  
with its merciless worms,  
guided the foxes to their **limp genitals**. (Lines 1-7)

The opening two stanzas depict the immediate aftermath of the war that left thousands of slain corpses on the fallow lands of Dhauri, over a period the (personified) earth too gets rid of the decaying bodies through the natural process of decomposition in which it ruthlessly 'burrows' into the rotting flesh of the decomposing bodies to make way for the 'merciless worms' and foxes who feed on the genitals of lifeless, defenseless humans to satiate their 'dead hunger.' The poet's use of the image of "foxes gnawing at the **limp genitals** of the soldiers is a powerful evocation of the limitations of male sexual power" (Dhara), the 'brave' and 'courageous' 'males' who once exhibited their 'manliness' by fighting in battles now lie under the ground helplessly, impotent and powerless, serving as a feast for hungry foxes and worms. The last two stanzas of the poem note the situation in Dhauri after several years of war,

Years later, the evening wind,  
trembling the glazed waters of the River Daya,  
keens in the rock edicts the vain word,  
like the **voiceless cicadas** of night:

The measure of Ashoka's suffering  
does not appear enough.  
The place of his pain peers lamentably  
from among the pains of the dead. (Lines 8-15)

when the wind blowing across the streams of river Daya touches and trembles the 'glazed waters' of river Daya that once overflowed with the blood of thousands of people of Kalinga, it sweeps over and smashes against the 'rock edicts' of Dhauli—the site where Ashoka repented for killing so many people and swore to never fight in battles—creating sounds that resemble the loud laments of the massacred people and their loved ones, however, these sounds are 'voiceless' as they are buried in history, they can be felt and imagined but not heard. In the last stanza, the poet critiques the 'pain' of Ashoka at having killed thousands of people of Kalinga which seems negligible against the pains of those who were brutally massacred and therefore fails to evoke any kind of pity for Ashoka. The insignificance of Ashoka's petty grief is aptly brought out by the poet through the last two lines of the poem which convey that Ashoka's pain finds a minuscule space among the thousands of pains of those killed in war. This poem in fifteen lines traces the misfortune of the people of Odisha to ancient times when a foreign ruler destroyed the peace and harmony of the state and brought misery upon the people of Kalinga. Mahapatra yet again through his artistic ingenuity draws the readers' attention to the plight of the ancestors of Odisha who were slain by the great Emperor Ashoka, the very beauty of the composed lines of the poem stands in stark contrast to the tragic and unfair event it describes. The condition of modern-day Odisha steeped in destitution gets amplified by this poem that narrates the sufferings that its natives had to go through in the past making one wonder if their present time of tribulation is a continuation of that very past. The worth of this poem remains only in its 'poetic diction' but the subject matter of the poem does not appeal to anyone since all the people who were involved in the war are long dead, 'their' sufferings, felt only by 'them,' have long been erased; the only thing that the poem manages to evoke is the memory of a dreadful event. The city of Dhauli with its famous 'Ashokan edicts' attracts tourists from all over the world who are filled with wonder at their sight and for a moment sympathize with the war victims but just like the beautiful poem of Jayanata Mahapatra the 'beauty' of the place makes them dispassionate about the 'real' pain of those who suffered, they admire the poem just as they admire the rock edicts and then move on.

In yet another stupendous effort to pen down his concern for the contemporary social problems of his state, Jayanta Mahapatra composes a heart-rending poem titled "Deaths in Orissa" that bemoans the great misfortune of the natives of Odisha whose hopes are devastated by a natural calamity,

Faces of tree-bark and grief  
hang against God's hand in the world  
that cannot lift itself up to help.  
In the corners of women's eyes



the rainbow breaks against the sunrise.

Nothing but the **paddy's twisted throat**  
exposed on the **crippled bleak earth**,  
nothing but **impotence in lowered eyes**,  
nothing but the tightening of the muscles  
in Bhagyabati's neck which her outcaste mother  
would herself have liked to throttle to death,  
nothing but the cries of shriveled women  
cracking against the bloodied altar of Man,  
nothing but the moment of fear  
when they need a God who can do them some good. (Lines 1-15)

The poet again with a series of well-designed images paints a bleak picture of the helpless humans who are left alone to fight the drastic famine—most probably an allusion to the 1886 famine of Odisha—while God himself has left his 'job' of protecting his fellow children. The state of the famine-stricken land, as well as the desperate condition and inability of the people to deal with the calamity, is clearly brought out by the poet through phrases like 'Faces of tree-bark and grief,' 'paddy's twisted throat,' 'crippled bleak earth,' 'impotence in lowered eyes,' 'tightening of the muscles,' 'bloodied altar of Man,' 'nothing but the moment of fear,' 'cries of shriveled women,' and the extremely distressing image of an 'outcaste mother' strangulating her daughter because of the lack of sufficient resources to feed her. The exasperated speaker suffocated by the memory of such a horrible catastrophe himself enters the poem in the ending stanza,

Oh I am a poet who barks like a dog.  
Open the window, I say, so I can breathe.  
Let not my memory be like a tiger in ambush.  
But there is this dangerously alive body  
and only a baton or knife can tear it apart. (Lines 16-20)

Likening himself to a barking dog and his memory to a 'tiger in ambush' the poet tries to convey that he has been a witness to a lot of horrors and is fully aware of the depraved condition of his people and society, all this knowledge and memories trouble him but they cannot be erased by anyone and therefore he would continue to speak (write) about them, the poet suggests that the only way to stop him from doing so is to kill his '**dangerously** alive body.' This poem as well as an interview given by Mahapatra in which he states that,

Can I forget 'hunger' when my own grandfather almost died of starvation in the terrible famine that struck Odisha (Orissa) in 1866? Can I forget the starving millions who live in the hinterland and subsist on dried mango seeds and tubers they collect from the jungles? [5]

uphold the fact that the poet is not simply 'aware' of the sufferings of his fellow people but 'understands' the gravity of their discomfort and therefore he feels at a loss since he is unable to ease their anguish. Thus the poem (s) becomes a means through which 'he' releases 'his' anger and unhappiness at being unable to

help the people in distress, the poem is the ‘window’ that he opens so that ‘he’ can breathe, and he expresses those emotions in ‘framed’ sentences, elaborate images, distinct words and phrases. The reader of a poem like this who is unaware of the miserable state of Odisha is either unable to understand the content of the poem or reads the poem once, sympathizes with the people going through such a situation, and returns to his own life. To the readers who are already aware of the hopeless condition of the state and are already living it every day this poem does not reveal or suggest something new, it does not give them any ‘sigh of relief’ instead it only taunts them with the ugly truth.

Apart from the history and heritage of Odisha, Mahapatra in many of his poems also chronicles the simple mundane activities of the village folks. For instance in the poem, “Sickles” the poet describes an agricultural setting,

Dust seems in no hurry now, sailing  
the air. A ten-year-old girl  
runs after her home-bound cows  
through the ingenious sunset hour,  
glancing briefly as we pass by  
but gives no sign that she has seen us.

The day’s last light  
surprises us, leaving everyone  
suddenly on an endless, desolate shore.  
And a small **desire to make love then.**  
Women returning home from fields of ripe grain  
carry sickles in their **tired hands.**  
The cut paddies cling to their quiet perches. (Lines 1-13)

The stanzas are graphic, evocative, and rich in imagery. The opening stanzas describe the activities of the village people as the day comes to a close, a little girl guiding the cows back to their home and tired women returning home after spending an entire day on the field cutting ripe grains. The poet along with a few others—indicated by the word ‘us’—like bystanders observe these activities and suddenly find themselves alone at an ‘endless, desolate shore’ as the dusk falls and everybody who had hitherto been working on the fields leaves the place and returns home. The poem ends on a sad note as the speaker contemplates about the trials and tribulations of these village people,

How little I understand myself,  
Among children who are mothers already  
Before the floods come, wetting the reeds on the shore;  
Among women desired, even as we are  
Indifferent to happenings by which they are possessed.

How the sickles shimmer with the reds of sunset  
Hidden in the twilight of their veins (Lines 14-20)

Mahapatra here specifically highlights the plight of females who are married early in their lives and become young mothers, these are the same women who return home carrying a ‘sickle in their tired hands.’ The exhaustive nature of a female’s job both at home and outside is brought out quite distinctly in the poem, the poet admits that he (they) is ‘indifferent’ to the problems that these women face in their daily lives and ‘beautifully’ delineates their sufferings and deteriorating condition through the phrase ‘in the twilight of their veins.’ The writer’s effort is commendable if one is judging the aesthetic quality of the poem and the ingenuity of the poet who simultaneously expresses the beauty of the countryside as well as underlines the plight of the village women through meticulously designed images, words and phrases. The poet’s as well as the poetry’s role is however limited to that—expressing anything, pleasing or not, in carefully crafted language, such a process is however more of a ‘relief’ to the poet himself than the subjects of the poem or even its readers. The placid countryside which has a soothing effect on the bystanders and outsiders and where the speaker feels a ‘small desire to make love then,’ is a place where the villagers live, where they do manual work every day just to put a little bit of food on their plate, a place that is not a ‘sigh of relief’ for them but a place from where they have nowhere to go, they are bound to live in that ‘beautiful’ place where they have to struggle for the rest of their lives, witness their hard work get washed away by natural disasters, face the losses, wait for the authorities sitting at a distant place to come to their help, repair the damages, and endlessly worry about the future of their families. Given the grim picture of village life, the poem comes as an insult that adds to the injury, as it serves no purpose—not even its usual one of giving a moment of respite to the readers—other than being an outlet for the poet’s pent-up emotions and a display of his creative genius. The poem hardly creates any impact on the people who are well-acquainted with the fact that villages are only a ‘safe-haven’ for the city dwellers and as far as the subjects of the poem are concerned, they are least interested in reading a poem that describes ‘their’ own problems in beautiful phrases to experience a ‘sigh of relief.’

Subjects like death, poverty, moral depravity, religion, tradition, discrimination, injustice, history, etc. form the recurring motives of Jayanta Mahapatra’s poetry. Mahapatra’s earnest engagement with these topics showcases his general concern for the state of humanity and his particular interest in the poor state of his birthplace, however, Mahapatra is aware of the discomfiting truth that his poems do not suggest any solutions to so many problems nor do they help in any way in making the world a better place and this becomes the cause of conflict in the ‘poet persona’s conscience.’ In “Last night the poem,” Mahapatra writes,

But what use is a poem, once the writing is done?  
Words looking for what, in the dark of the soul? [8]

questioning the very ‘utility’ and ‘relevance’ of poems and in yet another poem titled “Will a Poem of Mine Be the Only Answer?” the poet admits that he gets a special kind of feeling from his poems although they do not deal with any of the real-life problems. Thus the immediate and the only beneficiary of the art of poetry is the writer himself, the ‘he’ who gets a feeling of ‘relief’ once he lets out his emotions on paper. Those readers distant and ignorant about the place or situation described in poetry either bewail their inability to come out of their mundane existence and be in that beautiful and tranquil space described in the poem or commiserate with the deplorable condition described in the poetry and for those pragmatic readers who are too busy handling their real-life problems poetry only comes as a piece of writing that is

frustrating and tormenting, a form that quite brazenly embellishes the pain of an entire state and country. Jayanta Mahapatra's poems are mostly written in blank verse lacking any specific rhyme scheme or pattern in which the stanzas of the poem are arranged, the poet also pays the least attention to the usage of punctuation marks at appropriate places, however, all his poems are replete with eccentric images, allusions and multiple literary devices that make his poems stand apart, thus the poems becomes more of a 'display' of the poet's talent and creativity and a 'convenient' means of expressing 'his' emotions in words. The futile nature of poetry to either teach or delight is realized especially in Jayanta Mahapatra's poems on Odisha wherein the poet makes a remarkable but nugatory effort to paint the true picture of a beautiful but suffering state, as it fails to either 'teach' or 'delight' the readers. These poems which are purely an expression of the poet's anguish at being unable to do something for his beloved state do not necessarily appeal to any reader who just reads the poems, ends up being either sad or frustrated for a moment but ultimately forgets the poem and gets back to 'his' real life and 'his' own problems, and as far as the subjects of the poems are concerned, they remain aloof to as well as uninterested in such writings as they too are busy dealing with the very problems and living the very pain that Mahapatra so 'poetically' describes in his poems.

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