

**HUNGER POEMS BY NIRANJAN MOHANTY AND JAYANT
MAHAPATRA: A READING**

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Introduction:

Literature since time immemorial, records contemporary life in its reality. Rather, that should be the basic principle of an author to record his own time using words. Modern literature across the globe forcefully brought the principle of reality/truth, which resulted into making contemporary issues dominant in the poetry and other works of art. This could be seen as a reaction against the idealized and romantic approach of the pre-independence poetry, so far as modern Indian English Poetry is concerned. In an age of dissatisfaction and broken dreams, Indians found themselves cheated at the hands of their own leaders. This anger could be seen throughout the sixties onwards in literature, cinema and more dominantly in modern and Post-modern poetry. 'The angry young man' of the seventies, both in cinema and literature, is the live example of portraying contemporary mind in its reality. Indian English Poetry has always justified its time by providing space and voicing countless contemporary issues in all its ages, since its inception. In the modern period, Indian psyche witnessed a sort of alienation from its surrounding, so did poetry, declaring a break to the tradition. In the post-modern period, poets came back to the tradition and became a part of very old Indian mythical presence. We have poets like Jayant Mahapatra, Niranjana Mohanty and many other contemporary poets giving much importance to the current issues prevalent around. Deaths, corruption, fall in all walks of life with the evils like Hunger and Rapes have been discussed at length by both Mohanty and Mahapatra alike.

About Mohanty and Mahapatra:

Niranjana Mohanty and Jayant Mahapatra are the poets born and brought up in Orissa. Both write poetry in English. Though they write poetry in English, but it is all about

the land they are born in. The culture, history, traditions and everything that persists around finds a place in their creative genesis. Both of them are very much concerned about the pathetic condition of people around them. Droughts, floods and all other natural and man-made disasters are taking toll of lives in Orissa and in India every day. Both the poets have shown inclination towards projecting the issue of hunger in their poetic expression. Hunger has been a grave issue in Orissa. Thousands of people in Orissa and various parts of India die of hunger every year. These poets in the poems, named after the evil, discuss the pathos exhibiting the truth and sensitise the reader with hope. Being contemporary poets, a lot many things could be seen similar in their poetic endeavour with a few exceptions. The post-modern consciousness of Mahapatra exposed all these and many other issues dominant in his society. How both the poets have handled the issues around them into their poetic landscape and followed the principle of contemporaneity is a matter of curiosity. This paper attempts to read and re-read their hunger poems, to understand and analyse the issue and purpose behind honestly.

Hunger Poems of Mahapatra and Mohanty:

Jayant Mahapatra in his poems relates himself with the million mutinies of his motherland in his poetry and imagines purposefully issues of poverty, exploitation, religious orthodoxy, false traditions, culture, hunger (both of loins and belly), suicides, corruption, immorality, faith, deity, rituals, politics, murder and rarely personal and family life in his age. All these are the elements governing life. Mahapatra very artistically handles all these issues to make the reader sense the reality around and ponder over, for change in the desired way. When he speaks through his poems, it appears like things are before our eyes with all its implications. It is not always a result of his linguistic ability as a poet, but his emotional attachment and fond relationship with his fellow human beings. The poet himself being a minor, have been introduced with the dark spots of inequality and alienation. Hence, though he did not experience poverty and hunger in his own life, but could feel the pains on the basis of his own imagined experiences. He continuously exhilarates the dominant issues like suppression, exploitation and inequality of women in Indian society.

Mahapatra tells heart-breaking stories he has experienced as a human being during his stay at Gopalpur, a place in Orissa. This is not the story about a person or a family, but a representative of a clan in our society. They have been fighting a lost battle against poverty and hunger for survival. The poet with a heavy heart puts his emotions in the words, in his famous poem, "Hunger":

It was hard to believe the flesh was heavy on my back.
the fisherman said: will you have her, carelessly,
trailing his nets and his nerves, as though his words
sanctified the purpose with which he faced himself.
I saw his white bone thrash his eyes.
(*The Lie...* 46)

It appears like an imaginary story but, it is a fact visible. You need to look with open eyes and heart around. What it provokes to offer one's own daughter to someone for earning bread twice a day, could be heard and experienced by people without heart. Still, the poet keeps on telling this unfortunate experience to make people aware of these neglected sections of the society. Purpose is to remind those who have forgotten or have misconceptions about the well-being of people in our society. But, the poet very skilfully reminds the reader of the local issues like hunger in his land and with his creative ability makes it universal. About this true document of humanity (*Hunger*), K. Ayyappa Paniker comments, "On the level of art, the local and the universal must meet. This is what we find in Mahapatra's famous poem *Hunger*" (102). The poet in a complete desolate state of mind says:

Hope lay perhaps in burning the house I lived in....
I heard him say; my daughter, she's just turned fifteen....
Feel her. I'll back soon, your bus leaves at nine.
(*ibid*)

This very short poem, written in four stanzas, unwinds the splashy layers of artificiality exposing the severe wounds under. Mahapatra while reiterating his relationship with this poem, authenticates the truth in the poem and around in the words, "I should like to emphasize the experience held in those lines, of the truth that is contained in the poem; a truth that could perhaps overflow the boundaries of the poem because of the language made in the poem" (Mahapatra, *Door...*20).

When the poor fisherman offers him his daughter, the poet replies in heart; to accept his proposal means burning the home he stayed in. Only a man with sensible heart can have these feelings for the poor and unfortunates. If Mahapatra is known as a mouth piece of Orissa; it is because of his relationship he maintains with the issues of his people without break in the presence. While speaking about hunger and misery in the life of his people also searches judiciously for the reasons behind the same. He appears very serious while contemplating upon the grave problems. Like ordinary people, the poet also wishes certain things from his fellow poets by taking various issues of concern for the needy around. But, when takes a note of the poets and

politicians who are busy doing unnecessary things on serious occasions, turns nervous. The way he appeals his fellow poets to discuss these issues through their poetry, marks his social responsibility and strong relationship with his land and people.

Niranjan Mohanty also like Mahapatra in his poetic world of imagination, purposefully places issues of poverty, hunger (both of loin and belly), suicides, corruption, immorality, faith, religious belief, deity, rituals, politics, murder and most prominently personal and family life in our age. All these are the components of life in our age. The post-modern poetry of Mohanty reflected these and many other issues dominant in the society in this hour. Let's enquire how the poet keeps pace with time and with the various issues around him, and incorporates into his poetry and follows the principle of Contemporaneity.

The poet very seriously deals with the issue of hunger and deaths caused due to this evil. Modern Indian Poetry paved a way for expressing unrest in the independent minds of Indians. So does Post-modern poetry taking it to far heights. Mohanty's poetry keeps pace with this mood and meaningfully speaks about the pitiable state of free India. The poet probes into the root cause of this menace and discusses the causes and effects through his selected examples. Of course he too intends to sensitise the reader, so as to reach to the sensations of the people in position. To change the situation, these poets have waged a war against the evil of hunger in their own capacity. His "Hunger" trilogy (I, II, III) in the volume of poems *On Touching You and Other Poems* (1999) enumerates the present Indian society as a victim of hunger. In between, the poet reminds the reader of messages from religious world, about the penalty before and after death. Primarily, the reader assumes that, all he reads in the poem is about Indian society. But, slowly the global nature of hunger appears clear. He symbolizes this hunger of all type through the image of 'Tiger'. He refers to his first visit to the tiger in the 'Alipore zoo'. The poet speaks of its presence in the words:

These days, when the market is ferreted with price-rise,
Corruption, black malice, meaningless efforts
of piling stones on stones; and the streets smelling of garlic
and goats, and the hospitals healing no diseases,
housesunhousing love, eyes shedding blood,
and nowhere the heart is hospitable,
a tiger roams about the thick jungle of my body.
As we step into a new century, perhaps, there'll be

Only hunger, bare, enormous and infinite, galumphing. (43)

The poet here correlates various unethical, immoral practices born out of hunger in the present time. His hunger here is not the hunger of the fisherman and his poor daughter in Mahapatra's "Hunger". But, definitely he is talking about the predecessor of the event Mahapatra is talking. Why poor people of Orissa and any part of our country have to face hunger and act such heinously is been exposed by Mohanty. The poet believes that the present time is the time of loot, corruption of all kinds, black malice and meaningless pretentions. Result is nothing comes out of nothing, the famous feature of post-modern literature. Humans have proved their similarity with a tiger in all respects. His heart perhaps caught into the mesh of two different things finds no peace. He is worried about the future of this society while stepping into new century. Mohanty was right on his imaginary line of danger, when wrote this poem. Men and women in India have been witnessing all these events every other day around. The ferocious hunger appears in full circle in a sinister way questioning the very purpose of life.

"Hunger-III" continues with the manifold nature of the obsessed mind of the poet, due to the persistent hunger in our society. The poem gets shaped in monologist tone. The poet opens up one sided dialogue (discourse) with Nata, an ordinary man. He cites examples of Bauri Behra a ground-nuts seller, Ram Babu an English teacher and many others like them, hungry at core from top to bottom. He finds this hunger taken charge of every mind. The lines convey his ideas through the image of a tiger groaning:

The groans of the tiger hang all around,
and the foot-prints are noticeable
everywhere from the shrunken belly
of a beggar
picking up morsel from the dustbin
to the eyes of a poet
blinking at the sky in search of words. (45)

No one is exempted of this curse says the poet, through these lines. He refers to the crowded cities, where the slums have grown besides the debris of malarial germs. He asks Nata a persona:

Nata! have you ever visited Delhi? Bombay?
Calcutta, where hunger lingers
infinitely, in belly and loin?" (45)

The poet here perhaps, points towards the growth of sex workers in the big

cities in India, as a result of hunger. The poet in the end warns Nata and to the reader also; it's time to watch the changing contours of time and secure the self from the tiger and its infinite hunger. The poem goes deep down in the mind as a meditative voice, contemplating on the ever seen problem in life. It appeals to the readers mind and heart to safeguard his self in an age of pretext and hungers.

Conclusion:

Thus, both Mahapatra and Mohanty through their selected poems speak about the menacing evil of hunger in our society. Mohanty's perspective on hunger is manifold. He points the evil presence of hunger in each and every human mind and soul, whereas Mahapatra deals with the aftermath of the same. Mohanty uses the symbol of tiger suggesting its ferocity and cruelty. Mahapatra describes a father trailing his nets and nerves to satiate his hunger. Mohanty perhaps warns the reader and appeals him to take care of this danger around. In cities, this has grown like anything. Nothing has been left behind from the touch of hunger he suggests. Both the poets have targeted hunger in their respective poems to kill this evil and safeguard humanity in our society is appealing. Mahapatra skilfully uses his characters and widens his humble sky engulfing poor and exploited around.

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