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Story and Interview

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Story and Interview

Abstract
Kaya, Poet to Poet
Kaya

Her kaya is always dark and damp and cool, even in the summertime. It is during the summer holidays especially, when I have nothing to do, that I go and sit there, cross-legged on the coarse carpet that used to be in our playroom, with the clammy cold of the stone floor coming through, while she eats her lunch. The window is small and high up and outside the hydrangea bushes have grown over it, so it’s shadowy inside. I can only vaguely make her out, sitting there on the bed, her dark arm moving regularly to and fro against the white bib-apron. But I like to watch the way she purses her fingers when she plucks at the mielie meal. At table I am not allowed to do that - eat with my fingers. I also like the smell here of burnt mielie meal, camphor cream and paraffin. It is the smell of Eileen in the morning when she comes in, warm from the sunny kitchen, to open my curtains and give me tea.

We don’t talk much in the house when I’m here and Eileen is eating. She must hurry because she has to be back then at two o’clock every day. She is often in such a hurry that she slurps at her tea and then it slops over her lips and chin. Mother, I know, wouldn’t approve of that. Sometimes I finish her tea for her as she straightens her uniform and washes her hands. Her tea is tastier than the tea she gives us in the mornings, and again at four o’clock, with biscuits. It’s dark and very strong, but sweet, and there’s a lot of it. Her mug is one of those big tin ones.

Of course, I also have to hurry because Mother doesn’t know I’m here and wouldn’t like it if she did. The first time I came she saw me walk back into the house with Eileen and that night Dad said he didn’t want me here again because I would make Eileen late for her afternoon duties. So now I leave the back way, along by the hydrangea bushes, which is the path Eileen takes when she goes out to crotchet with Gladys on the grass verge at the gate on Thursday afternoon.

It is at lunchtime on Thursdays that I especially enjoy being with Eileen, watching her as she gets ready to go out. She stands at her washbasin in her bra and slip and soaps her arms up to the elbow and her legs up to the knee with strong, firm strokes, like the way she used to wash me when I was younger. Then she shines up her legs with
vaseline. The first time I watched her she made me look closely at the border of her slip, which has a thick band of lace decorated with tiny pink satin bows. She was really proud of it. Every Thursday she also washes her hair using Lifebuoy soap. When I asked her if she didn’t mind the hardness of it, she said her kind of hair didn’t need the same gentle care as ours. After washing, she puts on her terylene black skirt, which she saved up for, or the silky one Mother gave her last Christmas, and the shirt she also always wears to church, the brown one with the big orange flowers, easing into the clothes so carefully, as though they might split at the seams if she was too rough.

Eileen and Mother are different. Mother is very careless with her stuff though she tells me to keep my room tidy. And sitting at her big mirror with the bright make-up lights Dad fitted onto either side, she spends ages fiddling with her face, trying one colour, rubbing it out, doing it over again, or smoothing out her wrinkles, as she says. Eileen doesn’t have a mirror at all. Of course, Mother looks very pretty when she’s done. She has many beautiful clothes and is skinny. Eileen is shorter and round. She’s not really fat but, compared to Mother, her arms and legs are big and she has big tits.

I'd only ever seen Mother’s when she was in the bath, and Aunt Sarah’s, who I barged in on once by mistake, and my sister Susan’s, who's growing up now but always hides herself. Theirs are all white and pink and flattened, like small cornflower puddings. Eileen, when she stood there in her bra and slip, had such huge ones I wanted to see them close up. One day I asked but she was very shy, saying I shouldn’t be naughty and that she'd tell on me. The next time I offered her ten cents for a quick look but she said nothing, only turned away. When I tugged at her she pushed me, and muttered under her breath and looked strict when I laughed. But every day I nagged and nagged so that in the end, one day before putting on her Thursday clothes, she stuck her hand in and pulled one out. It looked full like a cow’s udder, and smooth like a cheek, and dark brown, though I thought it would be blacker. But the nipples were dark, dark black. I was standing close to see better and reached up to touch because it was so black-black, a bit like a crushed-up dung-beetle, but not like anything I'd seen before. As I touched she seemed to shiver, though she didn’t move back. And then I looked up at her face, which was turned right over to the side. Her eyes, staring open, and her mouth, puckered tight with something more than anger, made me move away again, quickly.

She wouldn’t look at me after that. But I didn’t want to catch her eye either. For days, when she brought in the food at supper time, she kept her head well down, her chin almost on her chest, till Dad asked why
she was so sullen, was she sick? Though he was stern, she didn’t reply. I was glad for that.

After a while I started going back at lunchtimes. She still lets me drink her tea and watch her wash. But the first time, when she took off her uniform and scrubbed, she kept her back firmly turned. And, though it was weeks later, when one day she bought a new slip, she wouldn’t let me come up close to examine the lace.
Jayanta Mahapatra. Photo: Jan Kemp
Poet to Poet

New Zealand poet Jan Kemp, who teaches English language at the National University of Singapore, talks with Indian poet Jayanta Mahapatra, an invited participant in Singapore Arts Festival Writer's Week, June 1988.

The first son of an Oriya family of three children, Jayanta Mahapatra was brought up a Christian by a lower middle-class father who married upwards a traditional but erratic woman who kept the upper-hand. In childhood Mahapatra had a romantic temperament and ran away from the rural environment of his home at fourteen and sixteen to sleep on the streets of Bombay. His mother's domineering personality and missionary zeal made him long to escape her.

The family lived on the banks of the River Kathjodi in the province of Orissa. Ten yards away from the Mahapatra house was a temple. Jayanta's first memory of his father was his picking up the five or six year old boy during an earthquake and running with him into the shelter of the temple. His father's gentleness remains close to Mahapatra's own religion, which he says is not to hurt others.

In school, he was the youngest in class, clever and a precocious reader. He spent much of his spare time reading the romantic British novelists, and developed a passion for language. English was well taught at his school, The Stewart European School. Born in 1928, Mahapatra was nineteen when India gained her Independence in 1947; all his school years were under the British colonial school administration.

Graduating with an M.Sc. in Physics, at twenty-two he married a woman student from the same course and took up a university post as a lecturer in Physics. He later became a professor and taught for many years. He and his wife Runu have one son. From his students days Mahapatra was a writer, but then it was fiction, not poetry he wrote. He sent his stories away to be published but invariably they came back with rejection slips. It was during the years 1964/65 when he'd given up writing stories and had taken up photography that he wrote his first poem. Immediately there was a positive response from editors and publishers. He has since won many prestigious awards for his work including the coveted Jacob Glastein Memorial Award of Chicago's POETRY magazine in 1975.

Do you find it easy to write poems?
Despite the success I've had with my poems, every new poem is still painful to write. I mean the real poems, the ones that come from living. The real, felt poetry. Each new poem is a struggle for me - will it come out right? And then, when it does, there's always the question, will I write another?

_Do you know why you write?_

It's a need. I need to say what I know and feel. And that is all I can ever truthfully say.

_That ties in with the meaning of your name, doesn't it?_

Yes, I suppose it does. As I mentioned to you earlier, in Sanskrit, _jaya_ means conquering, _anta_ means always.

_So perhaps your continuous conquests are over words, in the struggle to have them say what Jayanta Mahapatra knows and feels is true?_

You could say that.

_Do you experiment much, in your writing?_

My first book, _Close the Sky 10 x 10_, was mainly verbal experiments, not complete poems. I think perhaps the feeling in them got lost under the mire of words. But still, some of the experimentation was useful, in developing a facility with words, a sense of craftsmanship.

_How many books of poems have you published?_

Ten books, the first in 1971 and then the latest single volume _Burden of Waves and Fruit_ in 1986. And then there's the _Selected Poems_, published last year.

_That would include poems from all your other volumes?_

Yes.

_What are you working on now?_

I've just finished a new book _Temple_ - it's a long poem on the theme of the Indian woman.
Who do you read?

These days, I'm not choosy who I read, virtually anything I can get my hands on. Though I do mostly read fiction, I love the South American and Spanish poets, Neruda, Lorca. And the South American novelists, Marquez, Carlos Fuentes. Their sadness and grief appeals to me, probably because their poetry and their novels spring from similar surroundings to my own.

Can poetry help India? Does it help the world?

I don’t think poetry actually helps much. The Indian people spring back to normalcy after calamities and life goes on, poetry or no poetry. Floods are often a constant feature of life near Orissa. I have often taken part in flood relief work, bringing supplies to people who have nothing. And then after three months or so, they right themselves again and carry on. There’s a resilience in the Indian people. Maybe it’s faith. But, I don’t have that faith. I’d like to belong to them, yet I don’t. I want to believe, yet I can’t. The people around me are Hindus; their Hinduism is a way of life. It amazes me how people can believe as much. It enables them to spring back to normalcy after calamity. Though I do know there is a part of me that is enduring.

The part that is the poet?

Maybe.

Do you have any faith in the words then? In poetry itself? For its own sake?

I can’t answer that. It’s very difficult to. I feel I have to write. Writing appeases me. It builds up within me, like an ache, an urge till I have to write, then I’m appeased. But is that enough? I’ve often recently thought I should give up writing and do some social work. Mother Theresa urges us all to do this, to help. But I’m not able to do so much. I wouldn’t be able to sacrifice that much of myself. I’m a coward in that way.

Perhaps poetry does help in another way. Could you see it as a spiritual nourishment that is needed as much as physical nourishment? Perhaps it filters through and gives some of that faith you mentioned, though through a different medium than religion. You’ve heard of Mother Theresa talking of the spiritual impoverishment in the west?
Yes, I have. So perhaps poetry does help. What happens to me, happens to other people. In that way, through a poem we share. Basically I'm alone, a loner, and yet I crave for company. But all poets are alone. Especially when a poem remains still a blank face, when it hasn't yet been brought through to some satisfying conclusion.

Do you have a favourite poem, something you're most pleased with, glad you wrote, proud of even years after?

Yes, the poem *Hunger* and the poem for my grandfather (*Grandfather*). They're okay. Others I don't feel so happy about. There's another one, about death and drought and famine, *Death at Khalahand*. I visited that place.

As you visited Bhopal after the gas disaster with other poets who were then visiting India?

Yes. To see if there was anything we could do. To give support.

What did physics do for you?

Physics taught me a discipline, to observe things, to observe nature; and to know exactly what there is. If you look at a table, you discover there is a certain vibration of molecules that are set up to make that thing a table. Physics teaches you to know what's happening around you. It helps you to see the bond between man and nature. It shows how infinitesimal one is in the world, in this world of universes. How insignificant one is. So, what about poetry in that case? It doesn't do anything.

Well, it could become an excuse for doing nothing!

Yes, and part of me rebels against that.

Isn't it also a law of physics that an obverse case will also be true; that each cell is itself a world, and that we hold universes within ourselves and so the poem too is a complete world, created by us?

Perhaps you're right. And what's most important in creating that world of the poem is its feeling. This is very important for me. To be honest to the feeling you have when writing a poem. This is the pain of writing, because you're so involved with yourself and your own being. That's why meeting other writers, sharing thoughts and experiences at
festivals is so good. It gives you courage. To continue to write. To continue to face that blank page.

And what about music? Do you listen to music?

Yes, both classical Indian and classical Western music. If I want something meditative I'll listen to the sitar or to an Indian vocal recital. Music can entice; it can pick you up to another level of being. You know Tschaikowsky's Pathétique, No. 8, how dragging it is, how sad? It can release your sadness to listen to it, or if I'm depressed, I might listen to Mozart. Mozart lifts you up.

What are you writing about now?

I'm writing about death. Not in the way I used to, the way of death being an ending, death giving moment to life, not in that sad, closing way. I want now to write about death in another way.

Death as another level of being?

Yes, death as a transformation, as another kind of life.

Death as in the traditional Hindu way of seeing it?

Maybe. That way, seen through poetry, maybe. Yes, through the eyes of poetry.

Jayanta Mahapatra's Selected Poems (1987) is published by Oxford University Press, YMCA Library Building, Jai Singh Road, New Delhi 110001, India (Rs35).

Jayanta Mahapatra’s most recent volume, Temple, published by Dangaroo Press, is reviewed in this issue.