

## THE LIE OF THE LAND: A STUDY IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN POETRY IN ENGLISH

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Sagar Kumar Sharma\*

### ABSTRACT

*Time changes everything, but it occurs to me that, many a times, it is the time that denies change. Speaking of which, I am reminded of how desperately I have been longing for a change in the trends of prescribing, reading, and thinking poetry in India (with poetry, here, is meant Indian Poetry in English). I distinctly remember, during our Masters we used to read all sorts of British poets, beginning with Chaucer to Eliot and beyond, but when I think of Indian Poetry in English, it becomes difficult to remember more than ten names which include poets like Kamala Das, Toru Dutt, R. N. Tagore, Nissim Ezekiel, Jayanta Mahapatra, Shiv K Kumar, Keki N. Daruwalla, etc. It is unfortunate on the part of Indian students that we are not as well versed with IEP as we are with British Poetry. Among other things, this paper seeks to discuss latest developments in Indian Poetry in English, and for this purpose I have taken up one of the latest anthologies of Indian Poetry in English, edited by Goutam Karmakar, *The lie of the land*.*

**Keywords:** IEP, Canonisation, Change, Latest Trends, Mythology.

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### Introduction

In this research paper, an attempt has been made to read critically read select poems from some of the poets included in this anthology. The first selected poet A. J. Thomas is a critically acclaimed poet, translator and writer of plays, fiction and non-fiction. His poem *Shoorpanakha* captures in a very simple yet captivating diction the pangs of Shoorpanakha, sister of Ravana the king of Lanka, a character from Valmiki's epic the *Ramayana*. Shoorpnakha, accepting her ugly physical appearance, with her 'talons', eyes that are like 'two blazing embers', 'hirsute teats', a smile that 'reveals only' her 'fangs', is brooding over Lord Ram's selection of Sita over her. Not unmindful of her ugliness, she declares:

I am Shoorpanakha The sole sister

Of the conqueror of heaven and earth, Yet I fail in front of you, Rama.

And in a fit of anger, the kind we have when we lose the love of our life to someone we know is better than us, she says:

The molten lava of my tears Will engulf your epic

In flames of devastation.

- from "Shoorpnakha"

One rarely gets to read anything which is as subtle as is a poem by Adil Jussawalla. Jussawalla's phenomenal anthology of English writing titled *Missing Person*, published 1976, was one of its kind. After a long gap of thirty-six years, we got to read his next collection of poetry *Trying to Say Goodbye*. The poems included in Karmakar's anthology include "English Lesson", "Urdu Lesson", and "A Place" (for Jehangir Sabavala) all of them taken from the volume *Trying to Say Goodbye*- the collection of poetry that won the 2014 Sahitya Akademi award. His crisp language has a kind of attraction that causes the reader to pause and think, and then think again before reading the next line. Take for example these lines:

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\* PhD Research Scholar (JRF), School of Humanities, Discipline of English, IGNOU, New Delhi, India.

This is a stick of chalk.  
 With it I draw pictures.  
 It can't draw war in India,  
 It can't draw certain pictures.  
 - from "English Lesson".

In yet another poem Urdu Lesson he displays exceptional ease at writing poems by bringing in subjects like the plight of the Urdu poets, conflict with China, and Wilfred Owen's 'view of death' all in one stanza. The very next stanza reflects upon 'fear in Oxford's streets-/a nuclear strike set off by Cuba' as also upon the poet has in his 'heart a bitterness that spoke no language.'

Maintaining a balance between his/her regional language and English language has been a dilemma for most of the Indian poets writing in English. Every poet has felt a sense of guilt for having ignored or maybe sacrificed his/her local language to English. If not this, at least a sense of moral obligation is there. Anna Sujatha Mathai talks of her discomfort at the loss of her language in the following lines:

I search my lost syllables  
 In the green grass of the paddy fields. My lost language, Malyalam,  
 Has dropped like a gold wedding band  
 -from "My Lost Language"

Anna Sujatha Mathai is one of those poets to whom poetry occurred late in life. She has books like *Crucifixions*, *We the Reconciled*, *The Attic of Night*, *Life-On My Side of the Street* and *Mother's Veena* to her credit. In 2018, Mathai was awarded the First Kamala Das Poetry Award. In one of her poems, she talks about how poetry happened to her:

It grew painfully,  
 armless, limbless, somewhat blind,  
 a few stray petals here and there, more like wounds.  
 But day by day, inch-by-inch  
 it gathered grace, arms, limbs, eyes...  
 wholeness.  
 -from "Goddess Without Arms"

It is not sure whether true or false but pain is human's constant companion. Much of memorable poetry emanates from pain because much of our memory is the memory of pain. Pain is born out of unreciprocated love, an untimely death of a dear one, loss of things material and immaterial, separation, humiliation, and sometimes even without a reason. Not sure of the source of his pain, Bibhu Padhi writes:

I do not know from where this pain comes, but just as now it is there, like love or all that hatred means, and a bit  
 like greed, which likes to be everywhere.  
 -from "Living Through The Pain"

Bibhu Padhi, born in Cuttack in Odisha, is one of the celebrated voices in Indian poetry in English. Author of poetry collections like *Going to the Temple*, *A Wound Elsewhere*, *Lines from A Legend*, etc., Dr. Padhi is also a translator par excellence. His poem "Living Through the Pain" is a wonderful account of 'how feeble is man's power, / That if good fortune fall, / Cannot add another hour' (-from "Sweetest Love I Do Not Go" by Johnn Donne). Falling in line with Donne's lamentation over the incapability of humans to avoid pain, Padhi writes:

I take all precautions to avoid it, but  
 it chooses its own minute, as if it knew when I would least expect it, as when  
 I get up from bed after an afternoon sleep.

Change is the only unchanging thing, we often hear people say that, but has it occurred to you that at some point change changes nothing? C L Khatri, the famous editor of *Cyber Literature*, Michael Madhusudan Academy award winner for his poetry collection *Kargil* (2002), and also famous for his various poems in both the languages English as well as Hindi, talks about change and no change in his poems. His poem "Conversation" which is a dialogue between a father and his eight-year-old daughter talks about how hierarchy never changes:

She asked 'who is he?' He is a peon, Jhoolan. Dad, he is older than you.

Why does he pranam you? Peon is a lower employee.

-from "Conversation"

Also, what is noteworthy about this poem is how the innocence of the child is used to problematise the complex issues like women's role in the family and her due. Notice how the argument is build up in the following lines:

What makes one lower? Limbs.

What makes one higher? Brain.

And then this conversation takes on a wonderful twist which leaves the father- with the so-called brain that he believes 'makes one higher'- answerless in front his little girl, with an experience of life only eight years long:

Mummy also works with limbs. Is she your peon?

No. Peon is paid, mummy is not. Oh! She is worse than peon.

Frustrated, with his ability to respond with an answer acceptable within the accepted framework of logic, the father replies- 'Shut up.' Khatri's another poem "Beads and Ballads" talks about how change kills the spirit of an occasion:

Palanquin bearers leisurely measured the distance by singing folk songs.

The bridal car hushes up the distance as if in panic with fast music and what's app.

Another kind of change from 'social being too antisocial' is taking place slowly and steadily in houses that are 'mansion like', where everyone has a room of one's own, where there are so many walls that the house itself gets lost in its own walls, where there is so much of silence inside that even 'sleep fears to enter'. No, these are not houses that have been deserted. People live inside them. But the size of the houses and the number of people living in them are disproportionate that human existence becomes negligible and is taken over by the supremacy of the concrete structure. In these houses, where breeds anti socialism, there is, as K. V. Dominic would say, "Silence! Silence!! Grave Silence!!!" Grandparents are busy reading religious scriptures-as if they will have to write an article in the exam to be conducted in their afterlife-poor grandchildren are busy dealing with their 'never ending homework', 'their dad is drowned in Facebook/Mom buried in WhatsApp.' Following lines from Dominic's poem make it clear to us how silence breeds seclusion in self:

None speaks to none No common prayers No common dining No sharing of ideas

-from "Silence! Silence!! Grave Silence!!!"

Human body is a fascinating thing in itself. The working of human body, its complexities, its complications, its power to appeal, entice, disgust, all are curious. It is also curious how difficult it is, if chance may come- and which it has in the current COVID-19 crisis, to handle human body, to get rid of disease and infection and what not? And at the same time how easy it is to dismantle human body from chin to toe, part by part. Gieve Patel has displayed exceptional guts by speaking of human bodies, most objectively, with a frankness that is a rarity. He writes:

It is startling to see how swiftly A man may be sliced

From chin to prick

-from "Post Mortem"

Like in the short yet breath taking poem "What is it between" he writes, 'What is it between/A woman's legs draws destruction', he asks the body how it manages to handle the assaults targeted at it by it's owner as he thinks in the following lines:

Your area of five By one is not Room enough for The fists, the blows

-from "How Do You Withstand, Body"

Nature and poetry are eternal lovers. Nature in poetry and poetry in nature has always been there. Whether it be the ecofeminists like Nandini Sahu, Mamang Dai and others from the east or the romantics like Keats, Shelley, Byron and others from the west, nature has been central to the poetry of poets of all ages and from across the globe. From Keats whose 'heart aches and a drowsy numbness pains' his 'soul, as though of hemlock' he 'has drunk' by listening to the song of the nightingale to Andrew Marvell who is sorry to see names of lovers embarked on the trunks of trees; from Shelley who first challenges the 'West wind wild' that he will outclass it since he is in his prime and later surrenders to it

saying 'Oh, lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud! I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!' to Byron who portrays the Sea as both the preserver and the destroyer of the human civilisation, the western canon of poetry is replete with nature. Likewise, we have poets like Gieve Patel who in his poem "On Killing A Tree" makes an ironical remark on how difficult it is to uproot a tree, and through it he talks of all that the tree withstands to survive: 'scorching and chocking/ In sun and air, / Browning, hardening, / Twisting, withering' and then when humans try hard and follow the steps:

The root is to be pulled out- Out of the anchoring earth; It is to be roped, tied,  
And pulled out-snapped out [,]  
-from "On Killing a Tree"

the tree is 'done'. Mamang Dai gives us a variety of what all she considers a river: 'a wayward god,' 'an elephant,' 'a lion,' a 'horse,' 'a peacock'. At one point Dai thinks 'the river is a woman', 'a country', 'a name'. She warns us not to 'stay too long by the river' since 'it is a drowning spirit, a strong-armed god'.

Language is identity. A search for one's identity in the vast cosmos is a recurring theme in literature. Many poets have tried to assert themselves- their identity- through their poetry. Like Kamala Das said, 'I am Indian, very brown, born in Malabar, I speak three languages, write in two, dream in one' (-from "Introduction"), Meena Kandasamy, the author of *Touch* (2006) and *Ms. Militancy* (2010)- her two famous poetry collections- talks about her dream of her brand of English language. Her English she wants to be 'an english in small letters', and 'an english that shall tire a white man's tongue' just like the standard English did twist our tongues our lives. Kandasamy, through a statement of her dream of her kind of english is in fact telling us about the cultural difference of the east and the west that the English language designed in the west, for the west, can never bridge. Take for example the lines:

An english where the magic of black eyes and brown bodies replaces the glamour of eyes in dishwater blue shades

-from "Mulligatawny Dreams"  
And yet other lines from the same poem:  
an english that doesn't belittle black men or women  
an english of tasting with five fingers  
an english of talking love with eyes alone

And unlike the English culture wherein men meet their women on special nights with expensive gifts and bottles of wine, Kandasamy wants men 'to take home to their coy wives flower-garlands of jasmine'. Another wonderful poem by Meena Kandasamy, *He Replaces Poetry*, talks about a woman, who has lost herself in her lover so completely that even her most prized possession- poetry- now 'refuses entry into' her 'mirrored life that is bequeathed to him'. The poet's ideas are once so mundane and so philosophical that it becomes difficult to decipher between the worldly and the sublime. Notice this line, '...happiness is a hollow world for fools to/ Inhabit, where all the dreams eventually die by coming to life.' There is a kind of cadence that sweeps us in it's current. Even pain becomes desirable:

Love has smothered me to a gay inertia and I long for a little Hurt and pain that will let me scream and I wait for offending Words to row me into worlds where I shall cry wildly for whole Nights like the lament of lonely, old and greying seas...

-from "He Replaces Poetry"

Pain can be glorious even without us glorifying it. It is as glorious as is victory and as also is defeat. It is a part and parcel of life and being that it needs to be felt, assimilated and articulated, but with the due decency that it deserves. Pain becomes humane in the hands of the poet Nandini Sahu. Prof. Sahu, one of the leading voices in contemporary poetry in English, a defining figure in the field of Folklore and Culture Studies, has, through a number of poems, tried to de-glorify subjects that have been unnecessarily over-romanticised by poets of all sorts for so many years. Not all love stories end happily but the lover in Sahu's poem is bold enough to hold herself. Even in her defeat she is glorious:

I am glorious.  
Proud.  
More proud.  
Much more, tonight.  
-from "My Tranquil City, tonight"

She is no ordinary woman, and I assume so cannot be her beloved for whom she says:  
To love you is like going to  
the battlefield.

One comes broken, bruised from the battle, for sure.

Still I feel like a lepidopterist, who has gloriously peevied an unusual moth.

-from "My Tranquil City, tonight"

Here she is mindful of the complexities of her intended but is, like a warrior, ready to be broken or bruised, knowing that defeat is inevitable. But is he really that complex a man? Or is it her that makes him attain that stature. Notice how tactfully the poet first elevates her beloved in the above stanza and then contrast it with these lines:

I made you so tall, I needed to, in order to live life;

and thus, you always act

as if I owe you a thing or two.

Sahu's stand seems clear, matters of heart be better dealt by heart because when 'you think too much' you 'believe too little' and then, she says, you 'love even less.'

Steering her way through the oddities of life, making the room for herself, actually an entire house, or better in fact a world of her own, the poet is in that state where she asserts herself in the most vehement of possible ways:

These days I am reaching a stage

when I can dictate terms and life doesn't have much of a choice.

-from "These Days I Do Only What My Heart Says"

Poets brooding and lamenting over their losses in life is a common occurrence, but winning a place for the self in this cut throat competitive world driven by maddening frenzy is a delight of its own kind not accessible to all. It is Yeatsian, only with the difference that Yeats accepts his position in the society as a 'scarecrow' in his advanced age (from "Among School Children"), but this poet is very much herself since, as she says, now she does 'only what' her 'heart says'.

In the opening section of Goutam Karmakar's ambitious anthology titled *The Lie Of The Land*, Dustin Pickering writes about Nandini Sahu, 'Sahu presents the reader with the ultimate despair- not knowing if life could be better, not knowing if there is another life ahead. We simply take what is given.' Bringing to our attention the confidence with which Sahu accepts the shortcomings of life

Pickering writes, 'Her admission that life has tremendous shortcomings and is full of longing and despair in spite of its fanciful moments-and that perhaps we have nothing else- is a powerful and stark confession within this anthology.'

Goutam Karmakar has done a tremendous job by bringing together such wonderful poets in his anthology on Indian poetry in English, *The Lie of the Land*. All the poems from the different poets are hand-picked and chosen with great consciousness. Karmakar has put his heart and soul into this anthology. I conclude this, my research paper, on a note that a fresher approach to reading, prescribing and thinking Indian poetry in English that was much required, has been answered, partially, through Karmakar's anthology. Important changes in the way of reading, writing, and perceiving poetry are in motion. Indian Poetry in English is growing fast and well in the hands of the esteemed poets discussed in this paper, and even other Indian poets who are doing wonderful work.

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