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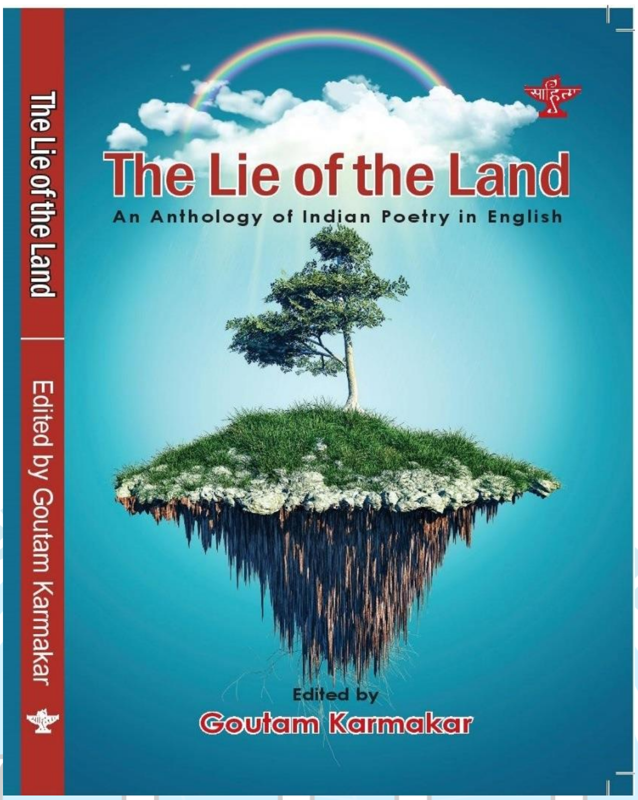
The Lie of the Land: An Anthology of Indian Poetry in English edited by Goutam Karmakar

Reviewed by Sagar Kumar Sharma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Title: ***The Lie of the Land: An Anthology of Indian Poetry in English***
Author/Editor: **Goutam Karmakar**
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Time changes everything, but have you ever thought that many a time it is the time that denies change too? Speaking of which, readers can be reminded of how desperately they 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). And by a happy coincidence, I happened to come across this wonderful anthology of Indian Poetry in English entitled *The Lie of the Land: An Anthology of Indian Poetry in English* edited by Goutam Karmakar. This anthology is an attempt to redefine the contemporary canon of Indian Poetry in English, and this, Karmakar has done, as he writes, by ‘leaving out poets like Nissim Ezekiel, A. K. Ramanujan, R. Parthasarathy, Dom Moraes, Pritish Nandy, Kamala Eunice de Souza, Gauri Deshpande, Shiv K. Kumar, Jayanta Mahapatra, Arun Kolatkar, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, Agha Shahid Ali, Vikram Seth and many more […]” (xxi) whose poems are already in wide circulation. With a total of eighty poets, this anthology is rich in its content and selection.

While reviewing this extremely well-organized anthology, an attempt has been made to read critically the 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 way 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" (*Shoorpanakha*, 2). And in a fit of anger, she says: "The molten lava of my tears/ Will engulf your epic/In flames of devastation" (2). These lines depict the depression we have when one loses the love of life to someone better than that person.

One rarely gets to read anything as subtle as the poems of Adil Jussawalla. Jussawalla's phenomenal poetry collection titled *Missing Person*, published in 1976, was one of its kind. After a long gap of thirty-six years, readers got to read his next collection of poetry *Trying to Say Goodbye*. The poems included in Karmakar's anthology are "English Lesson", "Urdu Lesson", and "A Place" (for Jehangir Sabavala) 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 readers to pause and think time and again before reading the next line. For example, these lines symbolize the concurrent condition of 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" (*English Lesson*, 11).

Another poem *Urdu Lesson* 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" (12) upon the poet who has in his "heart a bitterness that spoke no language" (12). Maintaining a balance between his/her regional language and the English language in general 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, Malayalam,/ Has dropped like a gold wedding band (*My Lost Language*, 30). She 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. (*Goddess Without Arms*, 29)

It is not sure whether true or false but the 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, the 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" (*Living Through The Pain*, 43). 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" (43-44).

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. (*Conversation*, 46)

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. The argument is faithfully build up in the following lines: "What makes one lower?/ Limbs/ What makes one higher?/ Brain" (46). 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" (47). 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" (*Beads and Ballads*, 47).

Another kind of change from 'social being to 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 walls, and where there is so much of silence inside that even 'sleep fears to enter'. No, these are not houses that have been deserted and people live inside them. But the size of the houses and the number of people living there are disproportionate than human existence which becomes negligible and is taken over by the supremacy of the concrete structure. These houses breed anti-socialism, and there is only, as K. V. Dominic notices, silence, Silence, and grave silence. While 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', and 'their dad is drowned in Facebook/Mom buried in WhatsApp" (*Silence! Silence! Grave Silence!!!*, 77). The following lines from Dominic's poem make it clear to us how silence breeds seclusion in itself: "None speaks to none/ No common prayers/ No common dining/ No sharing of ideas (78).

The human body is a fascinating thing in itself. The working of the human body, its complexities, it's complications, and it's the power to appeal are curious. It's also true that it's extremely difficult in the current COVID-19 crisis to handle human body to get rid of disease and infection and other problems. At the same time, how easy it is to dismantle the human body from chin to toe, and 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" (*Post Mortem*, 59). Nature in poetry and poetry in nature have 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 the central figure to the poetry of poets of all ages and from across the globe. Poets like Gieve Patel in his poem "On Killing A Tree" makes an ironical remark on how difficult it is to uproot a tree, and through the poem, he talks of all that the tree withstands to survive: "scorching and chocking/In sun and air,/Browning, hardening,/Twisting, withering" (59). It seems that humans know what they have to do mercilessly:

> The root is to be pulled out-
> Out of the anchoring earth;
> It is to be roped, tied,
> And pulled out-snapped out (58)

Mamang Dai gives us a variety of what all she considers a river as 'a wayward god,' 'an elephant,' 'a lion,' a 'horse,' and 'a peacock'. At one point Dai thinks that 'the river is a woman', 'a country', and 'a name'. She warns us not to 'stay too long by the river' since 'it is a drowning spirit, and a strong armed god' (*The River* 103). Language is associated with identity. A search for one's identity in the vast cosmos is a recurring theme in literature. Many poets have tried to assert their identity through their poetry. Kamala Das once 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. She wants her english to be "an english in small letters" (*Mulligatawny Dreams*, 111) and "an english that shall tire a white man's tongue" (111) just like the standard English twists our tongues and lives. Kandasamy, through a statement of the dream of her kind of English, is telling us about the cultural difference of the east and the west, and the English language designed in the west, for the west, can never bridge. Readers can take these lines as an example: "an english where the magic of black eyes and brown bodies/ replaces the glamour of eyes in dishwater blue shades (111). At the same time, other lines from the same poem denote: "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 (111). 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/ for the silent demand of a night of wordless whispered love…" (111). 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. She says: ['…] happiness is a hollow world for fools to/ Inhabit, where all the dreams eventually die by coming to life" (He Replaces Poetry, 113). There is a kind of cadence that sweeps us in its 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 […]" (*He Replaces Poetry*, 113).

Pain can be glorious even without our efforts to glorify it. It is as glorious as victory and 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 several poems tried to de-glorify subjects that have been unnecessarily over-romanticised by poets of all sorts for so many years. Her long narrative *Sita*, a long poem that has acquired the status of a cult among scholars of gender studies, masculinity studies and feminist critical thinking, tries to demystify the age-old myth of Sita the Sati, the wife of 'Maryada Purushottam'. 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 and feels proud: "I am glorious/Proud/More proud/Much more, tonight" (*My Tranquil City, Tonight*, 123). She is no ordinary woman and the poet 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 peeved an unusual moth. (123)

Here she is mindful of the complexities of her intended danger. But like a warrior, she is ready to be broken or bruised, knowing that defeat is inevitable. Readers can 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" (124). Sahu's stand seems to be clear and matters of heart should 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, and making a home and better 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" (*These Days I Do Only What My Heart Says*, 126). The brooding and lamenting of poets over their losses in life are common occurrences. But winning a place for the self in this cut-throat competitive world driven by maddening frenzy is a delight of its kind and these are not accessible to all. It is Yeatsian, only with the difference that Yeats accepts his position in the society as a 'scarecrow' in his advance age (from "Among School Children"), but Sahu is very much herself since, as she says that 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" (Pickering, xxix). 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 inspite of its fanciful moments-and that perhaps we have nothing else- is a powerful and stark confession within this anthology" (xxix).

Goutam Karmakar has done a tremendous job by bringing together such wonderful poets in his *The Lie of the Land: An Anthology of Indian Poetry in English.* 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, and his painstaking efforts will surely introduce and allow the readers of poetry to visit and revisit the cherished, noteworthy and comtemporary voices in the domain of Indian poetry in English. A fresher approach to reading, prescribing and thinking Indian poetry English is required, and all these have been answered brilliantly through Karmakar's anthology and this kind of anthology, as Anisur Rahman wrote in the foreword, "make way for fresh canonisation of Indian poetry in English" (xix).

BIO-NOTE

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