

Dr. Jaydeep Sarangi

**NEW MARKERS OF INDIAN ENGLISH POETRY: A
STUDY OF CHOOSING A PLACE BY BIBHU PADHI
AND TOUCH BY MEENA KANDASAMY**

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Bibhu Padhi's sixth volume of poems, *Choosing A Place* crackles with joy in living and loving; joy in the vivid and animated, weird complicated poetics that is ordinary life. It is an endeavour of showcasing the rare gems of poems that encompass varied facets of human life. We see in these forty four intellectually engaging and emotionally nodding poems a questioning mind under a tenuous surface and symbolic reverberations. Reading this volume of poems is an engagement which reaches out to the heart of the human condition and the greater mysteries of life, albeit in an understated way. The poetic contents in this volume are powerful in poetic description and potential in a greater extent of psychic form.

The poems of this volume have a sublime inward impulse. The inner sphere overlaps the outer on the speculative and the fuzzy. The voice in each poem in *Choosing A Place* is confidently surreal, lunging out imaginatively to the world that juxtaposes the strong presence and the willing leap of absences. The fleeting nature of time always chants a sweeping sense of absence. An absence continues to haunt the poet since childhood. Padhi's lexicon seems to echo from life itself, from the pauses of loss, sleep and death. 'An Explanation of Absence' endears us to the ecstatic aspects of our existence and redeems us from pain and penury of the lived experience. We pause our breath and listen:

“One tries hard so that something
happens, the dependencies avoided,
so that the heart might know
where exactly it faulted and lost (.)”
(‘An Explanation of Absence’)

The veritable splendour of these poetic lines become like a pool that gives back our image on the threshold of an experience.

Ruins are the trace of something that has vanished and chained to its own past. The ruin gives absence, so to speak, a material dwelling: a rock-solid and skeleton site that embodies an enigmatic sense that the world is also porous, volatile, uncanny, insubstantial and non-negotiable. 'Rites for the Dead' is an elusive poem in this fascinating casket that tells us the secrets of an aching soul and traces the poet's engagement with the all-summativ experience, death:

“ I wait for that auspicious hour
when I would start my journey

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to the holy city in the North,
with the urns with six bones.”

Apart from the poet’s invention of the reason to write poetry, the poet’s choice and willingness to perpetuate this volition are equally significant. A creative writer’s honesty can create no splash of doubt or suspicion about his honesty of articulation. The subtle, elusive and beguilingly simple poems of Padhi pose a promise between the outer world and the self; a poetry of states of mind and feeling. Poems of Padhi hypnotise our mind and soul and take us back to a time when everybody was a poet by heart, greeting the morning sun in hymns and other sacred offerings near the sacred grove:

“The small things
keep happening.”(‘Announcement: Early Morning’)

His crafty poems are full of pathos and he takes us on a pleasure-ride into the dark embrace of eternal silence where he seeks a place in the lyric order of things and his pen moves towards the necessary lines:

“Night lamps wait in fear of
losing their sight.”(‘At a Different Time’)

For Bibhu Padhi, poetry is a powerful song that erupts suddenly and brings us back our lost innocence and wholeness to a wounded spirit in the midst of howling time:

“Somewhere, a clock patiently waits
to announce the exact time of departure.”(‘At a Different Time’)

In *Choosing A Place* Padhi has a poem on rain, ‘The Year’s First Rain’.

Here ‘rain’ is a poetic symbol of swift passage of time. It is rain which enlivens memories:

“We remained within, forgot

The passing of each rainy moment.”(‘The Year’s First Rain’)

Padhi associates ‘rain’ image with his dream daughter and then it becomes the symbol of love and compassion. “The sky is covered with / clouds of every kind, with / the rains about to fall” (*Games That Heart Must Play*, 78)

Padhi is an iconoclastic observer of the pleasant and the painful situations of life in Orissa or India, with a sensibility moulded by a “reckless innocence”.

When we read Bibhu Padhi’s *Choosing A Place* we are whisked from one poem to the other, and dazzled by all the experiences in between—spontaneous and meditative. Padhi’s is an open textured free verse with a casual tonality that speaks of the elementary and profound concern of man. In the sheer magic of rhythm and music and in the beauty of coalescing visual and auditory sensations, poems in this collection are real treat.

Indian English Dalit literature is subversive, or structurally alternative to the models prescribed by traditional Hindu aesthetics precisely because they are literatures of sociological oppression and economical exploitation. Dalit literature is essentially a shock to the senses. It is an assault to anthropomorphic practice of castism in India. A sound piece of Dalit literature is that which is militant in texture and aggressively blunt in meaning. It challenges codified language (because it has so far been used and manipulated only by the dominant, discriminating powers), it challenges assumptions, it challenges age-old world-views. Its temporal and political designation does not give justice to the artist whose intentions may subsequently be ignored. It is an aesthetics of pain, and a prolong longing; a powerful aesthetics of resistance. For Meena Kandasamy, the young Tamil poetess, poetry is about empirical truth and productive experience and she writes and reflects from where she is. Meena Kandasamy is deliberately frank, candid and honest in her Self-exploration. Her poetry shows a landmark in her female journey from victimization to consciousness. The essence of her poems is struggle about her own Self. As the self, female self, in her takes different roles, the ultimate self in her cries out honestly which, in fact turns out to be a collective cry. It is a cry for freedom. Generally the term 'Dalit' includes: Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs). The term SC was first used by the British Government in the Government of India Act, 1935. Sociologically speaking SCs suffered the stigma of Untouchability and were considered Ati-Sudras or Avarna in the Hindu caste-structure. However, all ex-untouchables do not find a place in this 'schedule' and all castes under the 'scheduled' did not experience 'untouchability' to an equal degree in the recent or distant past. For Meena Kandasamy, the young Tamil poetess, poetry is about truth and experience and she writes and reflects from where she is. Meena has given voice to women making them mentally prepared for emancipation and identity. *Touch*, a collection of eighty four poems, contains a fitting 'Foreword' by Kamala Das where the feminist poetess acknowledges the 'superiority' of Meena Kandasamy's 'poetic vision'. Meena follows the tradition of Gwendolyn Brooks, Sylvia Plath and Langston Hughes a 'fabric rare and strange'. Women's fixed role as caregivers was ideologically determined by their biological capacity to bear children and that was through a fixed set of codes represented by 'categorizers' as Kamala Das has expressed in her poem, 'An Introduction'. Meena Kandasamy regards her poetic corpus as a process of coming to terms with her identity and consciousness: her "womanness, Tamilness and low/ outcasteness", labels that she wears with pride. Meena has honed her sociological awareness of what it means to be a woman in a caste-ridden social groupism in Tamil Nadu (a Southern state in India). Her poetic self gasps in darkness to search for her emotional root proclaiming it as, sap is her heritage. Sap is liquid in a plant that carries food to all its parts. It is a source of vitality for the poetess to voyage within. Her confessional mode is not as radical as we find in Mamang Dai, Archana Sahani and Kamala Das. She explores wide range of subjective possibilities and relates them to her own identity and sociological formulation. Therefore, her poetry that arises not out of mere profound reading and knowledge, but out of active engagement. *Touch* is rich with varied dexterity that explore the states of mind and genuine feminine sentiments. Her poetic mode ranges from the meditative to sensuous where

the metaphysical subtlety of arrivals and departures get confused. A feature that impresses and ultimately convinces the readers is the poet's readiness to allow conflicting voices to be heard from all contending perspectives. Her poems pose a tension that reaches out to the reader, arousing in one a sense of need that will not be satisfied. There is always a haunting note of despondency mark in Meena's poetic lines. We may refer to her poem, 'Immanuel': "Now, if there be any mourning Let it be for our heroes Yet to die, fighting..." Meena's poetic lines seem to echo from life itself, from the pauses of loss and vacuity in her sociological repression in a class-stratified Tamil society. Meena deeply penetrates the inner pores of the feminine psyche and brings out the strength and power of life. Sanjukta Dasguta, a Bengali poetess, notes: "I am sangam and shakti Power of fire, water, air and earth(.)" ('Identity', Sanjukta Dasguta) Meena's poems record the age-old class difference in India. Her poem, 'Becoming a Brahmin' records the sad plight of the underdogs of traditional society: "Step 1: Take a beautiful Sudra girl Step 2: Make her marry a Brahmin... Step 6 :Display the end product. It is a Brahmin." The poetess is a radical reformer of society; an iconoclast who thinks a social change is at the door. Resistance to the established set of rules has to be achieved by pulling 'a trigger' or hurling 'a bomb'. Meena searches for independent and heroic woman, whose self-realisation is not in conflict with her caring for other. Her quest for group and individual identity is not the spiritual; it is a human journey for a changed society. Debates over dalit studies in India have intensified studies of anti-colonial resistance in general which has been augmented and contested by a broad range of studies. Through Meena's conscious poetic lines, Dalits are hitting back in coloniser's tongue. Poems in *Touch* represent the indigenous lifestyle, resist colonial acts of authority and oppression through their textual transmission. In her shunning of traditional aesthetic form, Meena Kandasamy has created a new language for the expression of sociological contradictions. Despite disagreement over the aesthetic qualities and consistency of Meena's body of poetry, we agree that she is an important poetical figure whose bold and honest voice has re-energized Indian poetry in English. Her poetic corpus is redolent of Indian culture i.e. references, folklore, imagery, proverbs and idioms drawn from their local ethnic culture.

Notes and References

Bibhu Padhi, *Choosing A Place* New Delhi: Authorspress, 2009.

Meena Kandasamy, *Touch*, Mumbai :Peacock Books, 2007.