

The Poetic Genius of Sudeep Sen: A Critical Perspective

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The work of an artist is appreciated over a period of time; but, there are a few who will attain great height and success at a young age. They, blessed by the muse, are fortunate to appeal to the literati who endorse and value their creative acumen. The present article is a study of one such literary genius, who has altered the people's perspective of looking at poetry. In this article a study is conducted to explore what is the uniqueness of Sudeep Sen's poetry, which fascinated the litterateurs and critics. He is the recipient of the prestigious 'Pleiades' honour, 2004, at the world's oldest poetry festival—the Struga Poetry Evenings, Macedonia — for having made “significant contribution to modern world poetry”. This study is to highlight his creative output and versatility. It is unfortunate that we hardly come across some secondary sources on the enormous work produced by such great poets. This article is a humble attempt to share with the readers of your journal and add, enhance the existing literary cornucopia of Contemporary Writers and Poets.

Sudeep Sen is born on 9th August 1964 in New Delhi, India. After completing his honours degree in English Literature at the University of Delhi, he spent a year as an International scholar at one of the leading liberal arts college in North Carolina and then went to Virginia to complete his masters in Literature. He started of his career in New York working as an editor for a corporate consultancy in Manhattan, then as an assistant editor of a leading literary journal Boulevard. On his return to Delhi worked as a journalist and a documentary film maker. Spent winter of 1992 and 93 as an international poet-in-residence at the Scottish Poetry Library in Edinburg, and later moved to England to write on full time basis.

Sudeep Sen published his first work at the age of eighteen years the compiled collection of his fledging verse entitled *Leaning Against the Lamp Post*. The work displays Sen's exquisite sense of rhyme and rhythm. This can as well be because of the childhood influence on Sen as he hailed from a family which had aristocratic lineage to Raja Raj Ballabh Rai. Quality exposure to music, literature, art etc. at home have greatly shaped Sen's outlook and expression. His fondness for form - the poem as a carefully crafted artifice can be avowed to his reading the works of the likes of Pablo Neruda, John Donne, Ezra Pound, T.S.Eliot etc. He was enthralled by the world of sound, rhythm, word-patterns, ideas, syllabics, music, and language itself.

Sen's dozen books include: *Leaning against the Lamp-Post* (1983), *The Lunar Visitations* (1990), *Kali in Ottava Rima* (1992), *Parallel* (1993), *New York Times* (1993), *South African Woodcut* (1994), *Mount Vesuvius in Eight Frames* (1994), *Dali's Twisted Hands* (1995), *Postmarked India: New & Selected Poems* (1997), *Prayer Flag* (2003), *Distracted Geographies* (2004), *Rain* (2005), *Aria* (2009) which was awarded A K Ramanujan Translation Award, *Letters of Glass* (2010), and others. His forthcoming book is entitled *Blue Nude: Poems & Translations 1977-2012*, which is bestowed with the Jorge Zalamea International Poetry Award. He has also edited several important anthologies, including: *The Harper Collins Book of Modern English Poetry by Indians* (forthcoming), *The Literary Review Indian Poetry* (2009), *Biblio South Asian English Poetry* (2006, a portfolio), *Midnight's Grandchildren: Post-Independence English Poetry from India* (2004), *Index for Censorship [Poems] Songs of Partition* (1998, a portfolio), *Lines Review Twelve Modern Young Indian Poets* (1996), *Wasafiri Contemporary Writing from India, South Asia and The Diaspora* (1995), and others.

The literary genius of Sudeep Sen is recognized and appreciated and his poetry and literary prose have appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement*, *Guardian*, *Observer*, *Independent*, *Financial Times*, *London Magazine*, *Literary Review*, *Harvard Review*, *Telegraph*, *Hindu*, *Outlook*, *India Today*, and broadcast on BBC, CNN-IBN, NDTV & AIR. Sen's recent work appears in *New Writing 15* (Granta), *Language for a New Century* (Norton), *Leela* (HarperCollins), *Oxford New Writing* (Blackwell), and others. His poems, translated into over twenty-five languages, have featured in international anthologies by Penguin, HarperCollins, Bloomsbury, Routledge, Norton, Knopf, Everyman, Random House, Macmillan, and Granta.

A close look at the works produced by him would indicate the versatility of Sen as a poet. He is ever experimenting, innovating not just with the themes but also with the structure of his collections and compilations. Especially in case of Translation, retaining the originality intact is very challenging task, but Sen is successful not only in retaining the beauty of expressions rather glorified it by making it possible to reach to majority of the readers.

“Sen is amongst the finest younger English-language poets in the international literary scene. A distinct voice: carefully modulated and skilled, well measured and crafted”.

- Gregor Robertson on *BBC Radio*

The compilations of poems by Sen are representative of his choice as a poet. His obsession for control, symmetry and order in the selection shows the kind of meticulous detail that only a maturing vision could smooth into poetic song of immense grace and eloquence. His poetry has a string of an artist who is immensely self-conscious effort balanced around the themes of humility and self-importance. The first official book of poems *The Lunar Visitations*, brings to the forefront the growing artistic flair to tackle complex issues of love, death, politics, longings etc. Though he is presently a full time, with full grown career, a resident writer abroad, most of his early life was spent in India. This has a tremendous impact on him which became the ready raw material to go through the poetic mold of Sen. Having come across face-to-face with social realities like poverty, culture, tradition, etc. Sen's work is etched with the remarkable presentations in an intriguing way.

The poems in *The Lunar Visitations*, published in the year 1990, range the powerfully imaginistic 'Valley of the Gods', an intimation on the meaning of morality; death, reason, passion couched in an autobiographical narrative set in Colorado; to the lyrical intimation of love, 'the Lovers and the Moon', to the clearly political and deeply fatalistic 'Calcutta Vignettes', which showcase the brilliance of Sen's passages which symbolize the convergence of the sacred and the profane, art and stark reality:

Far away behind the Park Circus graveyard
where death overrides the dirge, sits a prophet,
his skeletal figure cracking.
He plunges his bony hands
through a bowl of boiled rice,
grain by grain, with a hope
that tomorrow may be brighter than today.
How long will the people here recline and bask
“in thy days of glory past,”
of Dutts, Derozios and Tagores?

In *The Lunar Visitations*, by employing the natural phenomenon of day and night the scheming and styling of dark and light is awe inspiring. The flight of poetic fancy appended and aided by the realistic application brings the rich hues of mystic construct. The canvas of Sen's poetry is vast where he paints the bleak and bizarre. Not surprisingly, therefore, a distinguished historian and literary critic, Angus Calder, has perhaps paid the greatest tribute so far to Sen's artistry: "At 29, he's probably as good as Louis MacNeice was at the same age, and he often reminds me of MacNeice, of `the drunkenness of things, being various."

In this collection of fifty-odd poems, the reader will be struck by the intuitive quality of his writing. The poems in this anthology expound the body's desire to remember struggles against the opposed desire to free itself from all remembrance on every page. The combination of Kali, the Indian deity with the Italian poetic form of Ottava Rima – a highly challenging task was accomplished very well by the poet. Most of the poems deal with themes which are more or less Indian but presented in the intricate form of ottava rime, the heart of western poetic structure and tradition. The voice is transparent, personal and at times cynical grasping the absurdities of the democratic system of Indian life. Another poem is the voice of Kolkatta, the powerfully rendered "Durga Puja" which celebrates the might of the deity in true Indian spirit. The delicately fashioned rhyme scheme and the shifting rhyming couplets draw their essential cadence from the Sanskrit *sloka* structure bestowing the incantatory appeal as if the ritual recitation produces a delightful effect. Though is poetry is made up of images that are tersely presented and placed with a very individualistic sense of significance, it attracts universal attention avowed by the creative genius. The intense sophistication and the spiritual grounding are exemplary of Sen's deep rooted conviction of Indian experience wedded to poetic vision.

"The poet possesses a measure of precision and skill with words which along with an unfettered imagination, allows him to draw on his erudition without giving way to any obtrusive influences. The poems veer from realistic narratives to experiments in surrealism showing the poet's familiarity with craft. He often aims at a lingering effect".

- *The Independent*

Rain is another beautiful, inspiring treasure of a book, published in the year 2005, Sudeep Sen reflects on rain - its passion its politics, its beauty and fury, its ability to douse and arouse. He ultimately explores the various moods that water and fluids inherently unravel. The chapters contain descriptions and pictures entitled air-conditioner, rain; fern frost; monsoon greens; night rain; longing, rain; shower, wake; rain charm, rain, kiss; drizzle, climax; drought, cloud; and others. Sen's writing here is crisp and tightly wrought, the pacing swift and cadenced, and the mood desirous. Commenting about his work *Rain*, Amit Chaudhari in *The Statesman*, 'Best Book of the Year' remarks: 'I read *Rain* with considerable admiration and pleasure. It is a word-perfect collection and its subject matter is both the measure of the rain and the spoken line'.

The poems of Sudeep Sen are unique at least in one way the theme of each poem is exquisitely dealt and the structure is a perfect combination of creation and implementation. Each word encapsulates the vigour of the poetic mind. For example the poem "Bharatnatyam Dancer" in *Postmarked India* symbolizes Sen's rich portrayal of the classical dance form. The abacca...dbdeed...fbfggf...rhyme scheme records and reflects the actual classical dance pattern. The technicalities, structure, indentation, alignment etc. speak of the poet's sense of precision and perfection. It is difficult even to give a passing commentary of each work in an article of about 2000 words, but it is definitely the tip of the iceberg for the readers.

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