

The Poetics of Intermediality: Exploring Artistic Convergence in Sudeep Sen's Select Poems

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Abstract:

This paper examines the concept of intermediality in the context of Indian English poetry, with a particular focus on the three select poems of Sudeep Sen, namely, “Paper T[r]ails,” “The Bharatanatyam Dancer,” and “The Card Players.” Sen’s poetry deftly merges diverse media forms, offering a rich ground for exploring intermediality. Intermediality is an under-researched yet increasingly relevant area within the context of Indian English poetry; it involves the integration of multiple media forms such as visual, auditory, and textual elements. The study employs a theoretical framework grounded in intermediality, focusing on its three key concepts: transposition, combination, and reference. Through textual analysis, this study proposes that Sen’s works not only employ intermedial elements but also explore the potential of Indian English poetry to engage in multimedial innovations, thereby challenging conventional boundaries of literary expression. In a media-saturated world, Sen’s poetry uses intermediality as a transformative tool, allowing poetry to evolve and expand, contributing to its expressive possibilities. The paper also contributes to the scholarly discourse on intermediality, focusing on its significance in broadening the scope and depth of contemporary Indian English poetry.

Keywords: Intermediality, Indian English poetry, Medial Transposition, Medial Combination, Intermedial References.

Intermediality “covers any kind of relation between different media” (Grishakova and Ryan 3) and can be described as an ambiguous interplay among various media forms, through which the boundaries of artistic forms are not only observed but also challenged and transformed. This creative convergence, conflict, or collaboration of textual, visual, aural, and performative elements forms a composite whole, yielding sets of meaning and enhancing both the interpretative depth and sensorial breadth of a piece of art. Owing to their distinct objectives and approaches, different disciplines perceive the term differently. As Jørgen Bruhn and Beate Schirmacher point out, “intermediality as a phenomenon (defined as the interaction within and between different media types) has always existed because all communication is multimodal and all communication employs different forms of media” (10). Furthermore, terms such as transmediality, multimediality, crossmediality, infra-mediality, remediation, media integration, media fusion, media hybridisation, and media convergence are closely associated with intermedial discourse, contributing to its complexity.

Irina O. Rajewsky, a scholar in the field of intermedial studies, gives a precise conception of the term intermediality by categorising it into three subcategories, namely: medial transposition, medial combination, and intermedial references.

Medial transposition, according to Rajewsky

...has to do with the way in which a media product comes into being, i.e., with the transformation of a given media product (a text, a film, etc.) or of its substratum into another medium. This category is a production-oriented, “genetic” conception of intermediality; the “original” text, film, etc., is the “source” of the newly formed media product, whose formation is based on a media-specific and obligatory intermedial transformation process. (51)

A good example of this is when a novel is adapted into a film; the narration is fitted in such a way as to suit the visual and auditory nature of the film. The transposition in this manner ensures that the new product is suitable for the new medium, at the same time retaining its connection with the original work.

Rajewsky's medial combination includes "opera, film, theatre, performances, illuminated manuscripts, computer or Sound Art installations, comics, and so on, or, to use another terminology, so-called multimedia, mixed media, and intermedia" (51). She adds:

The intermedial quality of this category is determined by the medial constellation constituting a given media product, which is to say the result or the very process of combining at least two conventionally distinct media or medial forms of articulation. These two media or medial forms of articulation are each present in their own materiality and contribute to the constitution and signification of the entire product in their own specific way. (51)

Lastly, intermedial references involve encompassing elements or techniques from one medium to another, "for example references in a literary text to a film through, for instance, the evocation or imitation of certain filmic techniques such as zoom shots, fades, dissolves, and montage editing" (Rajewsky 52). Musicalization of literature, ekphrasis, and transposition of art forms and references from one art form to another all come under the category of intermedial references. By adding more depth and meaning to the media product, intermedial references enhance the overall significance of a piece of art.

The three subcategories of intermediality mentioned above remain underexplored in the context of Indian English poetry, however it is reasonable to argue that Indian English poets, for centuries, have skilfully incorporated elements from traditional music, classical dance, and visual arts. Poets like Rabindra Nath Tagore, A. K. Ramanujan, Nissim Ezekiel, Vikram Seth,

and Dom Moraes can be considered some of the early practitioners of intermediality in the context of Indian English poetry. Tagore by reciting *Gitanjali*, his award-winning poem on the All-India Radio, allowed a synthesis of oral and written traditions of poetry. Ramanujan's poetry often experimented with textual intermediality, incorporating classical Indian music and dance references. The poem "All You Who Sleep Tonight" by Seth was adapted into a musical piece, and Moraes, by toying with cinematic techniques like jump cuts and montages in his poetry, opened up new avenues of depicting dominant media influences in his poetry. Building upon these foundational experiments, contemporary Indian English poets like Tishani Doshi, Ranjit Hoskote, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Priya Sarukkai Chabria, and Sudeep Sen have further advanced intermediality by incorporating diverse artistic and media influences into their poetry, thereby enriching the Indian poetic landscape with innovative dialogues across artistic mediums.

This paper aims to analyse Sudeep Sen's profound engagement with various artistic forms like photography, painting, music, and dance. Sen's integration of various art forms in his poetry makes it an ideal ground for exploring intermediality in Indian English poetry. Sen often collaborates with artists from various other disciplines, underscoring the intermedial nature of his poetry. "Recipient of innumerable literary awards, fellowships, and international accolades, the poetry of Sudeep Sen refuses to be categorized, compartmentalized, or slotted into earlier definitions of what Indian Poetry in English was, or is" (Nair 34). Even though Sen is one of the prominent contemporary poets, his intermedial experimentation often goes unnoticed.

In Sen's interview with Ziaul Karim, Karim asks, "Through your poetry, you constantly refer to other forms of art and their architectural beauty." Sen responds, "Absolutely. It accurately reflects my penchant for various sorts of art-forms, ... But I'm equally interested in

music, film, theatre, live and performance art, and more. If a particular dance or a particular painting, or even a particular piece of dramatic writing moves me, I may write about it directly or obliquely” (Sen 233). This statement underscores Sen’s adeptness at intermediality within Indian English poetry.

As a poet deeply invested in expanding his artistic horizons by incorporating various art forms into his poetry, Sen’s intermedial engagements primarily manifest through intermedial combinations and medial references. To better understand these artistic interactions, three of his poems, “Paper T[r]ails,” “Bharatanatyam Dancer,” and “The Card Players,” are analysed in this study for their distinctive forms and intermedial dimensions. “Paper T[r]ails” exemplifies an intermedial combination of poetry and photography, connecting textual and visual elements to create a layered artistic experience. Similarly, “Bharatanatyam Dancer,” varied in form and diverse in expression, blends poetry with performative and auditory dimensions, establishing a vivid intermedial reference to classical Indian dance and music. Lastly, Sen’s affinity for visual art is evident in many of his works, and this analysis includes “The Card Players”, a poem that notably engages with painting as an intermedial reference, drawing inspiration from Paul Cezanne’s iconic artwork of the same name.

“Paper T[r]ails” is a poem in Sen’s book *Anthropocene: Climate Change, Contagion, Consolation*; this book is itself a combination of genres: essay, poetry, prose, photography, and creative non-fiction. “Paper T[r]ails,” a poem with an intriguing title with a bracket enclosing the letter “r,” is suggestive of the dual nature of the word trails. The word “t[r]ails” in the title might refer to the trails or paths the paper takes, both literally and metaphorically. In the literal sense of the term, paper trails from its origin as wood into its final form as described in the poem. Metaphorically, it is the journey of ideas, stories, and thoughts that are recorded on the

paper. The poem is accompanied by two sets of photographs highlighting the intermedial combination of poetry with photography. In his article “Dimensions of Intermediality and Diversions of Ekphrasis,” Sen writes, “The poem, *Paper T[r]ails*, . . . was born from my engagement with a series of photographs that I had taken—coming together as subsets and subtexts, both due to their provenance and their inherent themes/motifs” (8-9).

The poet himself stated the context of this poem in his book *Anthropocene: Climate Change, Contagion, Consolation* as:

'Paper T[r]ails' is a series of tightly wrought images — set as pastiche montage, sometimes in diptychs and triptychs — charting 'paper tales' through their journey of birth, growth and creativity. With subtle use of natural light and controlled framing, material textures and contours, lines and phrases from the original poem as photographic titles, the black-and-white panorama unravels a narrative that is often hidden to an everyday eye. Empty shelves dream of words they may have contained, the history of their making, the music that lies therein, lover's clues to be chanced upon and uncoded.

In the two set of photographs that accompany the poem, there are ten black and white photos placed close to each other in such a way as to make Sen's readers imagine and trail through the trail that the paper takes in its journey from wood to sheet. By presenting a visual representation of the poet's thoughts, these photographs carry the entire essence of the poem, highlighting the effectiveness of intermedial combination in enhancing the depth and contributing to the overall theme of the poem. In the description that follows the poem, Sen writes, “The writer is a poet, the photographer, a painter, and the viewer, a lover — he is also the creator, preserver and destroyer — alluding to the triadic Hindu myth of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. However, the palette is secular in nature, precise like architecture and arithmetic,

fluid and spontaneous like a song and a story”. Here, the papers or books are not just physical objects but are carriers of dreams, narratives, and histories.

The six photographs in the first set of photos are representative of the first section of the poem. An open book placed against the background of a printed text is suggestive of the layered journey of stories and ideas, and the adjacent image featuring the spectacles further suggests the act of reading, emphasising the notion of how books invite their readers to look deeper and clearer. It reinforces the role of the reader's gaze in bringing the “paper dreams” to life. This spectacle might also suggest how the reader probes into “words of passion, / words of grief; words of love, hate, wisdom”. Thus, it becomes an embodiment of the intimate relationship between human perception and timeless words on the page.

The close-up photograph of stacked raw paper emphasises the line “Paper crafts its papyrus origins”, which captures the natural, organic quality of paper and its transformation from “wood to sheet”. This journey “from tree to table / through clefts, wefts, contours, textures” that transforms it from wood to sheet is tactile and visual in its representation, very much like the series of photographs capturing each stage.

A direct engagement with visual art is made evident with Sens' references to “photographic plates”, “bromide undulations of an untold story”, and a “frame freeing opens its borders to dream”. Through the suggestive use of the processes of photography and framing, these lines demonstrate how visual elements can convey and encapsulate a narrative just as effectively as text. While “bromide undulations” conjure images of photographic development, the concept of a frame “freeing opens its borders to dream” alludes to the limitless possibilities of artistic expression.

“Old-fashioned switches — dormant — / now spark static electricity” is a direct reference to the image of the electric switch in the first set of photographs, symbolising latent

potential, representative of stories, emotions, and ideas that get released when activated. This image in turn hints at the hidden energy stored within words, wanting to be released or brought to life with just a touch.

The poem further examines the notion of intermediality by introducing the persona of Ilhan, who is characterised as a “poet and painter, lover of the sea, light, silverfish, a sculptor of history”. The image in the second set of photographs, of aged, weathered hands, echoes the lines “Ilhan’s weathered hands, its bulbous veins / hold time, and text beautifully phrased”. This image symbolises experiences. Ilhan embodies the fusion of several artistic mediums, fusing sculpture, painting, and poetry. His hands “hold time and text beautifully phrased”, implying the cohesive amalgamation of the text and visual elements.

The rows of chairs in the photograph are suggestive of a space where people gather to listen to a narrative, denoting the concept of “a frame freeing open its borders to dream”, and the stack of books and close-up of book pages directly represent the poem's discussion of “Paper crafts its papyrus origins / journeying from tree to table” and “a tabula rasa waiting / for ink, graphite, or sable-hair touch”.

This mixing of art forms is the fundamental aspect of intermediality, wherein several media forms combine and enhance one another, leading to a mutual coexistence. The poem's intermediality is further exemplified by Sen's use of scientific and technical elements. The convergence of science and art is represented by references to “sine-graph modulations” and “magnetic forces marrying science and arts”. These references not only emphasise the precision and technical proficiency required in both disciplines but also the merging of other sectors to provide an all-encompassing creative experience. The poem concludes with an ongoing dialogue between the text and the reader, underscoring a dynamic artistic process; it is the reflection of the act of reading and the dissemination of text — “notes left surreptitiously /

between pages for someone else to read” and “a stray reader may find the letters— / electric text—unframed and borderless”. This interplay of photography and poetry reflects the essence of intermediality by blurring the boundaries between visual and textual narratives, thereby inviting readers to engage with the poem as both a visual and literary artefact.

Such fluidity of art forms is further explored in Sen’s intermedial experiments with classical dance. An intermedial combination of poetry with dance is present in some of the notable poems of Sen, such as “Bharatanatyam Dancer,” “Mohiniyattam,” “Odisi,” and “Almost a Touch”. For the purpose of this study, the poem “Bharatanatyam Dancer” included in Sen’s poetry collection *Fractals: New and Selected Poems / Translations, 1980-2015* is put to thorough analysis as it captures and conveys the essence of classical dance performance with a language that not only evokes the physical movements but also its rhythms, expressions, and spiritual resonance, creating a unique synergy between poetry and dance. This poem is dedicated to Leela Samson, a leading Bharatanatyam dancer whose artistry and elegance left a lasting impression on the poet. Placed within the historical and cultural context, the poem “Bharatanatyam Dancer” meditates on the transcendent beauty and spiritual depth of classical Indian dance performance.

The poet’s vivid and sensory language evokes the cosmic and geometric grace of the dancer’s movements. The dancer’s gestures, the “abhinaya” (125) of her eyelids, are likened to a divine act, as her kajal-lined eyes and rhythmic footwork create an almost celestial form. Kanjeevaram silk and antique silver adorned by the dancer are equated to a half-revealed treasure, suggesting that pure act withholds a part of its essence, which in turn invites reverence, curiosity, and restraint. The poem also deeply explores the lingering impact of the dance performance; the memory remains vivid even though the arc-lights fade, turning quiet darkness into a theatre of reflection. This visual art performance also connects past and present, linking the poet’s present to his memories of Kalakshetra. This is a shared resonance, a sense of

timelessness connecting the poet and the performer. The poem concludes with an emphasis on the “sacred darkness” (125) that endures, outlasting even the brightness of the dance, thus capturing both the ephemeral beauty and the lasting spiritual resonance of classical Indian dance.

Sen’s “Bharatanatyam Dancer” not only describes but also becomes dance, forming an intermedial bridge between dance and poetry. The poem's language is unique in itself, mirroring the rhythmic movements central to classical Indian dance. The lines “Spaces in the electric air divide themselves / in circular rhythms” (125) mimic the circular flowing patterns of dance. The thoughtful choices of words like “divine,” “circular,” and “rhythms” capture the dancer's graceful movements, sketching a choreography in words. Here, the poet tries to blur the boundaries between written language and physical movement, transforming poetry into a metaphorical dance.

“As your eyelids flit and flirt, and /match the subtle abhinaya in a flutter / of eye-lashes” (125) conveys the subtle expressions in the face of the performer, and the word “abhinaya” here refers to the expressive use of face and eyes to convey emotions without words. This detailed description of eye movements mimics the precise gestures of abhinaya, showcasing how dance communicates in the language of movements and expressions, translating dance's silent eloquence into words. The poetic equivalent of capturing dance in motion is also evident in the lines “pirouettes, frozen / as time-lapse exposures” (125). Dance in the poem is a sacred act embedded within the cultural and spiritual symbolism. “For art in its purest form never reveals all” (125) suggests both poetry and dance share a sense of mystery and reverence, never fully disclosed.

The rhythm and musicality of the poem mirror the accompanying music in Bharatanatyam, especially in lines like “the murmuring shadow of an accompanist’s/ intricate

raga in this theatre of darkness” (125). Dance is supposed to follow the rhythm, beat, and flow of the accompanying music; similarly, the poem's syntax, enjambment, and phrasing mimic the measured, cyclic rhythms of classical music. In his introduction to Sen's *Postmarked India: New and Selected Poems* (1997), Kwame Dawes remarked, “ It is perhaps a poem like the 'Bharatanatyam Dancer' that epitomises so much of what Sen's poetry is about. It also displays his sheer talent for formal invention and execution. The *a b a c c a ... d b d e e d ... f b f g g f...* rhyme scheme maps and mirrors the actual classical dance step-pattern and beat of *ta d bin ta thaye thaye ta ...* Also, the left-hand margin indentations match the same scheme and form.”(33)

The final part of the poem evidently connects the dancer's physical form to the living embodiment of poetry. The dance, being an expression of light and movement, a quality central to both visual and poetic arts, gets emphasised in the lines like “light that merges, reshapes, and ignites, / dancing delicately in the half-light” (125). Thus, the dancer becomes a “clear, / poetic, passionate, and ice-pure” (125) presence, characterising the purity and power that poetry itself strives to achieve.

The poem “Bharatanatyam Dancer” becomes an intermedial bridge between poetry and dance, which mirrors the rhythm, expressions, and spiritual purity and intensity of this form of classical dance within its lines, thereby transforming poetic language into a dynamic art form that moves, speaks, and evokes just like dance. The poem illustrates how poetry and dance, distinct in form, can converge to create a unified and transcendent aesthetic experience.

Extending this ethos of intermediality, Sen beautifully integrates poetry with painting, transcending traditional literary boundaries by merging the verbal with the visual arts. Ekphrasis, or “the verbal representation of the visual representation” (Heffernan 3), is a prominent phenomenon in Sen's poetry. Some examples include his poems like “Blue Nude Skipping Rope,” “Blue Nude I,” “Blue Nude II,” “Blue Nude III,” and “Blue Nude IV,” all of

which reference Matisse's series of cut-out paintings named "Blue Nude." Henri Matisse was a famous French painter whose penchant for modern work of art led him to become one of the leaders of Fauvism Movement. Sen's perspective analysis of Pablo Picasso, a world-famous painter and one of the pioneers of cubism, is presented in the part titled "Picasso Triptych" in the poetry collection *Fractals: New and Selected Poems*. Sen's three other poems in this collection, "The Card Players," "The Skulls," and "The Jacket on the Chair," from the section titled "Dreaming of Cezanne" draw influence from the creations of post-impressionist French artist Paul Cezanne. The intermedial referencing using the technique of ekphrasis carries Sen's poems to the next level.

The poem titled "The Card Players" is taken up for the analysis of Sen's intermedial ekphrasis. Set within a dark, unpredictable world, the poem "The Card Players" is a direct poetic representation of Cezanne's visual canvas. By using the metaphor of a tense, smoky card game, the poet explores the themes of mistrust, despair, and the quest for meaning. Here the act of gambling is represented as a rare moment of risk in an otherwise bleak existence. This temporary escape is placed within a heavy imagery of smoke and cold colours, reeking with an overwhelming stench of futility, where even the small flickers of excitement are overshadowed by a pervasive sense of gloom.

The opening stanza paints the picture of an environment both fragile and heavy with significance. "Brown rough leather" (133) of parchment seals the deal combined with "the wooden/table's crooked legs" (133) that struggles under the combined weight of the setting, and the players intentions are very suggestive. The table becomes the metaphor of the fragility of human endeavours, barely able to support "the gravity of smoke, spirit, and connivance" (133). The two players are in a state of suspicion; with the "stiff cards" (133) they hold "like little rectangular blades" (133). The latent aggression between the players is evident in the line "to cut and bleed our lives away" (133). This line also emphasises the risk and the potential

loss inherent in both the game and life, with a palpable tension of mistrust and competition enveloping the entire atmosphere. By emphasising the sensory details, “tobacco stench / permanently embedded / in the wood of the walls, / the furniture, our clothes / and our hearts” (133), the poet shifts the reader's attention to the lingering effects of past actions and choices, the consequences saturating not just the environment but the inner lives of the players. Despite all this, the poem reveals the paradoxical source of vitality in the gambling itself. “a zone of unsure light” (133) provides solace to the speaker in a world filled with stifling monotony symbolised by “grey, / brown and blue” (133). The repetition of “blue” with its “cold, deep” (133) resonance suggests melancholy and depth, yet also openness and the expansive emotional terrain that the players navigate.

Sen's intermedially rich poem “The Card Players” translates the visual elements in Cezanne's painting of the same name into its verbal form, thereby deepening the psychological and thematic resonance of Cezanne's work of art. Sen's choice of the imagery and palette reflects the very essence of Cezanne's work. The earthly tone, muted colours, and a quiet, introspective depiction of the players engrossed in the card game is very much present in the lines “the brown rough leather / of the parchment” (133) and “We held our fists close / to each other as if in mistrust” (133). The emphasis on muted colours like “grey, / brown, blue” (133) mimics the sombre hues that dominate the entire painting, grounding the poem visually in the painting's aesthetics.

The psychological stillness and tension are two important aspects in Cezanne's painting; the players are immersed in the game but maintain a stoic and almost detached demeanour. The psychological factors depicting the inner lives of the players are captured brilliantly in their poetic version as well. The line “We held our fists close / to each other as if in mistrust” (133) is a direct hint at the tension between the players, mirroring Cezanne's exploration of the unspoken human relationships. “cards in hand / like little rectangular blades / to cut and bleed

our lives away” (133) heightens the stakes, turning the mundane act of the card game into a metaphor of life itself, its fragile nature, and the inevitability of loss. Even the weight of their surroundings, the “furniture,” “walls,” and “hearts,” is both physical and psychological. The poem extends this materiality into an emotional realm.

The painting's silent intensity is captured in the poetic reflection on time, chance, and despair. The lines “The future like the present / was dark and unlit” (133) suggest hopelessness in life, which aligns strongly with the painting’s restrained and contemplative mood. While Cezanne's focus is on a moment of quiet absorption, Sen’s poem expands the narrative, infusing it with the existential weight which in turn adds a layer of complexity, describing the gamble as “a zone of unsure light” (133). This unpredictability becomes a ray of hope amid the monotony of life. Both the painting and the poem transcend the specifics of their immediate subjects and reflect on universal themes, framing the game as a microcosm of human existence. Sen aligns his poetic meditation with Cezanne’s timeless portrayal of universal human interactions.

This poem is an intermedial synergy, where the verbal form does not just replicate the visual but expands and transcends all the boundaries of emotional and existential dimensions. By retaining the mood, textures, and themes of Cezanne’s painting, the poet also introduces his own narrative voice and interpretative depth. Thus, this intermedial ekphrasis highlights the power of visual and verbal media as a means to bridge and enrich artistic expressions.

In conclusion, Sudeep Sen’s poetry emphasises the notion of how intermediality can reshape the contours of Indian English poetry. Sen’s poetry transcends the conventional boundaries by engaging with the intermedial potentials of visual, auditory, and performative elements in the select poems: “Paper T[r]ails,” “Bharatanatyam Dancer,” and “The Card Players,” thereby transforming into a nexus where diverse artistic modalities converge. It is

evident that Sen's intermedial engagements do more than merely juxtapose art forms; they create a dynamic framework for exploration into the nuanced cultural and aesthetic dimensions of Indian identity within a globalised artistic sphere. By incorporating the performative richness of Bharatanatyam, the visual immediacy of photography, and the contemplative depth of painting, Sen not only enriches his reader's experience but also situates his work as a critical site of innovation in contemporary Indian English poetry. In addition to establishing Sen's intermedial poetics as both an artistic choice and a deliberate reimagining of how poetry engages with and represents the world, this study also opens avenues for further research into the effects of media on poetry and intermedial studies, promising to expand the boundaries of literary and artistic scholarship.

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