

DELVING SUDEEP SEN'S *ANTHROPOCENE*: A DIRGE FOR HUMANITY'S WASTELAND

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Abstract

The Indian English poetry scene, after having been shaped by the novelty and freshness of Nissim Ezekiel's poetry in the sixties, and followed by the gamut of more refreshing voices of poets like Jayant Mahapatra, Dom Moraes, Jussawalla, Kamala Das, Ramanujan et al, in the seventies, has lately witnessed a new sheen of literary idiom commixed with a holistic awareness of society and environment in the post-modern crop of poets namely Sudeep Sen, Vikram Seth, Ranjit Hoskote, Vijay Sheshadri, and Agha Shahid Ali. Rubbed by a multicultural living experience, this newest bandwagon of poets has been fortunate to stretch beyond the Indian subcontinent to experience, and subsequently express their perceptions of world, its inhabitants, its maladies. The native and the foreign coalesce in their experience and quintessential expression propelled by an acute curiosity towards the present and the future

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“Prayer”, says Alain, “is when night descends over thought”. But the mind must meet the night”, reply the mystics and the existentials.”

--- (Camus 65)

The Indian English poetry scene, after having been shaped by the novelty and freshness of Nissim Ezekiel's poetry in the sixties, and followed by the gamut of more refreshing voices of poets like Jayant Mahapatra, Dom Moraes, Jussawalla, Kamala Das, Ramanujan et al, in the seventies, has lately witnessed a new sheen of literary idiom commixed with a holistic awareness of society and environment in the post-modern crop of poets namely Sudeep Sen, Vikram Seth, Ranjit Hoskote, Vijay Sheshadri, and Agha Shahid Ali. Rubbed by a multicultural living experience, this newest bandwagon of poets has been fortunate to stretch beyond the Indian subcontinent to experience, and subsequently express their perceptions of world, its inhabitants, its maladies. The native and the foreign coalesce in their experience and quintessential expression propelled by an acute curiosity towards the present and the future. As Vinay Dharwadekar aptly observes,

For the new poets and storytellers, the individual opportunities, family situations, social practices, economic and political conditions, and cultural institutions that constitute 'everyday reality' are radically different. In the course of the next twenty years they and their counterparts in the Indian languages functioning as both the sites and instruments of a larger process of change, will once more alter our conceptions of what 'India' is and has been, 'of what is past, or passing, or to come.(206)

Sen's critically acclaimed books include *The Lunar Visitations*, *New York Times*, *Dali's Twisted Hands*, *Postmarked India: New and Selected Poems*, *Distracted Geographies*, *Rain*, *Aria*, *Ladakh*, *Fractals: New and Selected Poems*, *Ero Text*, and *Anthropocene: Climate Change, Contagion, Consolation*. A translator and editor, Sen has received numerous prestigious awards and fellowships. His creative oeuvre is a testament to a new emerging poetic consciousness that cannot be branded or categorised and is yet full of its very own distinctness and beauty. Debunking the label Indian Poetry in English, Sen prefers to call it English Poetry by Indians, or Modern Young Indian Poets or English Poetry from India, thereby endorsing the urgency to address poem as a breathing entity endowed with identity of its own sans its muddling geopolitical affiliations. As M. Sivaramkrishna too affirms in *Variety No Hierarchy*, “If the poem works, it does so because it is just that, a poem. It is a poem not due to but in spite of the poet's ethnicity, his/her cultural specifics, his/her ideology” (Nair 15)

In Sen's poetry we witness a panoramic spectrum of styles, structures, and themes

woven with experiences sampled from across countries and cultures with an unalloyed strain of his sense of Indian tradition and heritage breathing through it. We find in his verses the interesting fusion of the local and the global, the historical and the contemporary, the mythical as well the real, and last but definitely not the least, skill and symphony. Both his micro fiction as well his stanzaic formulations evince a deft poetic craftsman at work busy quoting from the past writers while working out his new sensibility in his new coinage. In the poem *Asphyxia*, he interpolates T. S. Eliot (words in italics from *The Wasteland* and, *Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock*),

“the air is dense, murky like stale lentil-
soup ---- like *the yellow fog that rubs its
back
upon the window-panes, / the yellow
smoke that rubs its muzzle muzzling*” (37)

A poetic genius, Sen adroitly talks of myriad issues and handles both local and global concerns and experiences in his poetic expression with effortless and mellifluous ease. Despite being a world citizen, he does not feel culturally or ethnically alienated or uprooted. He seems to have made the most of his cross-cultural experiences and living, rather than feeling trapped in the clichéd diasporic sense of displacement or rootlessness. He explains in an interview,

I think the reason why you don't see any sense of displacement in my writing is because I'm actually a very rooted person. My rootedness comes from my family and the way I was brought up. I am first and foremost a Bengali writer, who just happens to write in another Indian language that is English. So my cultural and intellectual spaces are very much defined by the fact that I come from a thoroughly Bengali milieu. I'm also very fortunate to have grown up in a trilingual situation – I spoke Bengali at home, Hindi on the streets and English at school, not by design but by circumstance (Nair 47)

In *Anthropocene*, Sen sets out in making an efficacious compendium of thoughts and feelings as experienced by a sensitive and deeply perturbed human in face of the gamut of environmental, existential perils. Written in free verse and prose forms like microfiction, reportage, diary entries, the work candidly and pointedly limns a panorama of human-living threatened and also engulfed by man-made calamities like global warming, climate change, Covid pandemic, and endless deforestation in foolish bid to set up concrete jungles for humans. The work bemoans the loss of the pristine Earth, of flora and fauna that has resulted in a literally feverish and devastating living on the planet. Every poem, a prose piece feels like a yet more exigent, compelling and powerful plea for environmental amelioration at the

earliest if we are to live well and leave for posterity too a wholesome and beautiful planet.

While "Yesterday – was brief"(32), the poem *Today* covers the undulating weather experience in a span of mere twenty four hours showing the extreme vagaries of weather in a world wherein climate has been tampered with by humans,

Today there is Unexpected rain
here --- Unseasonal snow
Amid chill-sharp wind In the
northern hills... Puffed up for
warmth, Squirrels gone
Back into hiding --- as we
stare starkly
At the climate change We've
helped create (33)

Nostalgia commixed with lament are well brought out in the poem, *Pollution* wherein Sen like a woebegone nostalgic observer fleshes out the brunt of pollution being acutely borne by the hoary, archetypal life-giving *neem* tree that appears like an emaciated, sickly human figure gasping for breath with its leaves wearing the, season's toxicity

on their exposed skin – wan
arteries choked, marking scant
time.

Ash pollutants from city
power plants,
crop-stubble smoke from
burning fields ---....

Air is thick, heavy, unclean,
unworthy.

Neem, once acted as a filter
for us.
now needs one herself. (36)

In *Asphyxia* too the same strain of pollution playing havoc with humans as well environment is dealt with,

Even leaves on the trees of this *Unreal City*
fold, curl, bleed, and weep, choking –
the air is dense, murky like stale lentil –soup our
breath, our words wheezing
in pulmonary distress...

Sweet Yamuna run softly till I end my

smog --- this insidious dirge, this unripe rot (37)

Incessant deforestation and rapid concretization of environment turning open fields, mountains and greenery into infernos of skyscrapers and smog leading to dehumanization and destruction are aptly rendered in the poem, *Concrete Graves*. Through the poem, Sen attempts a satire, a tirade against the ravenous, mercenary, and reckless frenzy driving the urban lot to 'create' more and more space for itself while marginalizing or rather crushing the environment entailing the flora and fauna. The weakly built buildings, the half-constructed flyovers not just testify to man's unquenchable ambition to be omnipresent but also invite in their insane trail mishaps of a deadly nature.

Arrogance, avarice, real estate
seduction --- more canned
sprays, less fresh air to
breathe. Skeletal skyscrapers,
unfinished flyovers collapse
prematurely burying people --

-
none held responsible Darkly
efficient, untimely – a fast-track to
our planet's detonation (43)

The anthology has a section dedicated to the pandemic menace of Covid, namely *Pandemic : Love in the Time of Corona* containing some really poignant, heart-wrenching poems like *Corona Haiku*, *Obituary*, *Saline Drip*, *Vaccine*, *Speaking in Silence*, *Asthma*, *Black Box* painting the horrendous phase of pandemic in vivid and penetrating expression. Sen reflects in *Anthropocene*,

During the early days of the Covid 19 lockdown, things were changing so fast around us that it was viscerally affecting our society --- the play of politics, the way people thought and reacted, the changing culture of 'working from home' for the privileged and lack of work for the dispossessed, the gruesome images of migrants walking hundreds of kilometres in the unforgiving weather riddled by hunger and pain, the quarantine, the virus – how can all these not affect you psychologically as well (21)

Poems like *Asthma*, *Corona Haiku*, *Saline Drip* bespeak the physiological as well the psychological torment as experienced by Sen himself wherein he talks, "eyes blood-shot in acrid distress ---

dust mite, cat hair, particulates draw toxic tears. My
rib-cage tangled in its brutalist architecture –
my heaving chest tries its best to clear the choke..."(51)

Sen's poetics of pain are reminiscent of the moving passages of sheer suffering and torment as rendered by Daniel Defoe in his work, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, a work that gives a fictionalized yet almost an accurate account of the Bubonic plague as suffered by England in 1665. The account says,

It was indeed a lamentable thing to hear the miserable lamentations of poor dying creatures calling out for ministers to comfort them and pray with them, to counsel them and to direct them...I wish I could repeat the very sound of those groans and of those exclamations that I heard from some poor dying creatures when in the height of their agonies and distress...If I could but tell this part in such moving accents as should alarm the very soul of the reader, I should rejoice that I recorded those things, however short and imperfect (79)

However it's not just the deadly disease, but also the pandemonium brought in in the wake of the pandemic that seems to have left Sen at loss and full of remorse. He is struck by the plight and predicament of the rudderless migrants who, chew dry leaves

Off the streets --- no food, water --- national disgrace
walking the highways hopelessly,
towards fractured dreams, awaiting death (64)

The lack of a proper governmental policy and action to facilitate the migrant workers spur Sen to comment on the larger and more widespread lack of political will and urgency to act humanely in crucial times like these and otherwise. He sounds both critical as well as despondent to the continued politics of marginalization whereby free thought is curtailed fostering a toxic environment of discrimination, intolerance, and suppression of all sorts. The ideal world or social atmosphere as once hailed by Tagore before independence engendering spaces of freedom, fearlessness, equality, reason seems elusive (or jeopardized)after having acquired independence too, as the nation wades through the dark quagmire of establishment- enabled restrictions on free thought, speech, and expression. Intellectuals, poets, writers, creative souls are hushed everywhere and every now and then, lest they expose the failings and atrocities of the government. Sen's reproachful strain is unmistakable,

What convoluted times we live in now – where being inhuman is being human, where free-thinking is dissent, where being democratic is anti-national..everything is subterfuge to continue oppressing the subaltern, everything is about power or the lack thereof...(69)

Sen finds the whole present social topography in a state of mess with the ogre of internet pushing humanity into an impenetrable frenzy of hype and hoopla with real

meaningfulness of life taking a grave backseat. Satirising an insane screen visibility, power-mongering, cutthroat, unscrupulous profiteering as the definition of anyone's ultimate happiness and meaning in today's world, he evinces some faint hope in being somehow able to transcend the junk of living around him, by retreating in a solitude to dream and create. He lashes out at the innumerable pandemics borne out of our superficial and artificial living, and then affirms *Ghalib in the Time of Crisis*, in the section *Contagion*:

Social media, judge-and-jury --- Internet debris,
a permanent scar. Fake news like the
coronavirus replicates at an alarming level.
Multiple pandemics prevail – politics of profit
and power, mistrust and misuse. In these
Seamus Heaney lines, there is hope:

“If we can winter this out, we can summer anywhere.”

Our life on this earth is miniscule, just one brief instant. In the cloistered safety of my study, I dream and create --- unformed, embryonic dreams, waiting to be shaped and crafted (101)

In entirety it is thus palpable that Sen has not only endeavoured through his work an exigent and heartfelt commentary on the pressing environmental issues of climate change and the recent pandemic but has also skilfully engineered a way out to lambast the politics of power, crony capitalism and racism, religion dividing humanity and rendering it deplorable. He states,
the celebration of nature in my poetry and prose has been tempered with warnings of what this irreversible change in climate means for the earth. Amid all the clamour of public rhetoric and widespread distress, this book is a quiet offering. It is a testament to our fervent times where a fascist political din overrides the silence of introspection, where the ravages of climate change scar humanity, where the cleaving schism between the rich and the poor become ever-widening, where racism peaks at an all-time high, where toxicity amongst people proliferates, and fake news abounds (23)

Religious fanaticism hoodwinking minds and souls of people is lampooned by Sen in the calamitous times like that of Corona,
Even when religion's badges are dismantled, its
core universal song for humanity and humanness
remain. It is time to feast, share bread and sing –
or else, it might be too
late to catch the lyrics (97)

The idea of *death* too cannot abandon the incisive and thoughtful bent of Sen's poetic sensibility as he talks intriguingly of *Preparing for a Perfect Death* while surviving the life- robbing pains of the Covid 19 pandemic,

Thereafter, the phase of reflection --- call all
who you wish to one last time,
forgive all those who have wronged you, smile,
hug, and give gratitude...
Of course, one would like it to be
swift and painless, without any show --- an
elegant private ceremony for one,
a dream end, a perfect death (91)

Sen culminates his poetic trajectory of *Anthropocene* with a metaphysical and
holistic *Chant*, trying to sum up perhaps the nothingness of each and everything,
and to halt his labyrinth of thoughts and feelings that attempt to make sense of
continually problematic universe/ living:

blank contains
everything --- everything
contains
nothing --- nothing contains
all. all is one ---
one is many --- many is all
om ma ni padme hum.(173)



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