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Anthropocene: A Review

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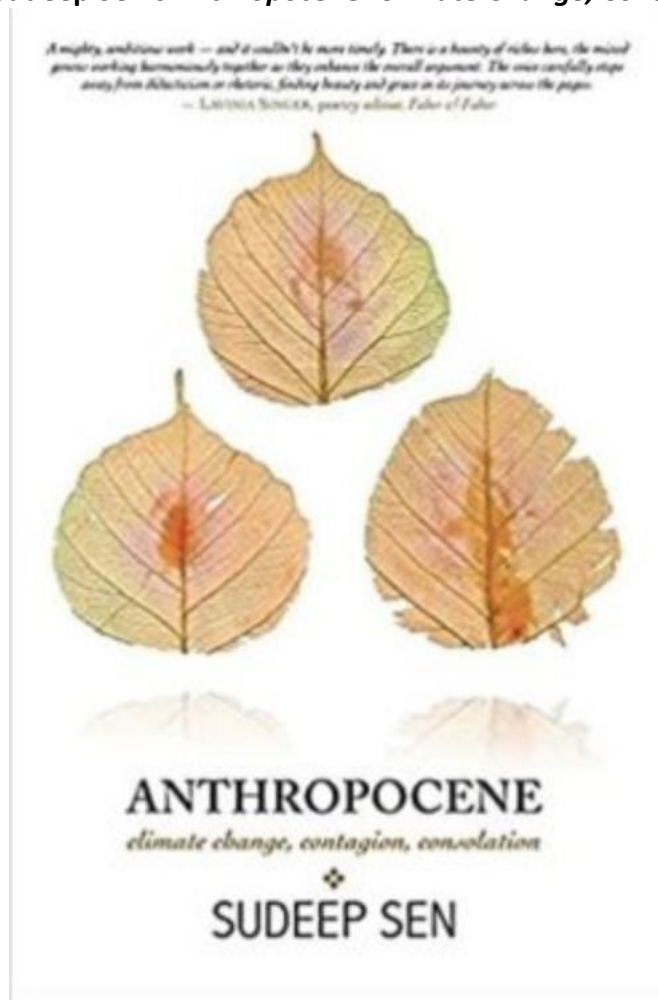
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Literary Review: Sudeep Sen's *Anthropocene: Climate Change, Contagion, Consolation*



In the prologue of his work *Anthropocene: Climate Change, Contagion, Consolation* (2021), Sudeep Sen quotes Japanese film maker and artist, Akira Kurosawa: “The Role of the Artist is Not to Look Away”. Sen, a poet,¹ a photographer, a graphic artist, an editor,² and a journalist has lived in Delhi, New York, London, and Dhaka. He is a well-known writer in India’s literary scenario and has many literary awards to his credit.³

¹ Sen’s poetry collection include *The Lunar Visitations* (1990), *Postmarked India: New and Selected Poems* (1997), *Lines of Desire* (2000), *Distracted Geographies* (2003), *Rain* (2005), and *Aria* (2011).

² He has translated poetry and worked as an editor on many anthologies, including *The HarperCollins Book of English Poetry by Indians* (2012) and *Midnight’s Grandchildren: Post-Independence English Poetry from India* (2004).

³ His prose collection entitled *Postcards from Bangladesh* (2002), won the UPL Excellence Award, *BodyText: Dramatic Monologues in Motion* (2009), and *EroText* (2016), winner of the Global Literary Festival Award for Literary Excellence

Anthropocene: Climate Change, Contagion, Consolation,⁴ as its name suggests, is the fruit of silent contemplation during the Covid confinement when Sen penned his thoughts through prose; captured the varied, every-changing skylscapes of New Delhi with his photographic lens; caught the rhythm of the changing seasons in poetry by listening to the sounds of nature; documented the daylengths through solstices and equinoxes; and used the “time to read, rejuvenate, revive — rekindle love’s labour lost — [and] savour life’s little joys” (“Quarantine” 76).

Each of the nine sections or anthological fragments carry quotations from poets and authors that Sen admires. He dedicates most of his poems to writers, poets, kith and kin. Some of the poems are nods to the works of great authors as in “Handwriting”, a three-stanza Haiku that is dedicated to Michael Ondaatje; “Hope Light Leaks” devoted to Kwame Dawes’s project of Living and Loving with HIV in Jamaica; “The Legacy of Bones” addressed to Adil Jussawalla, an entreaty on relighting the stars to rejuvenate the soul and the aching bones; “Driftwood” as a tribute to the master epic Saint Lucian writer, Derek Walcott; a poetic-artistic alliance with Janet Pierce in “Undercurrents: 20 Lake Haiku”; and an ode to Solitude for Pico Iyer in “Poetics of Solitude, Songs of Silence”. Through various literary devices, in *Anthropocene*, Sen insists on the need to “Hope, heed, heal — our song, in present tense” (“Love in the Time of Corona” 53), as a prayer for our times.

As a child growing up in India, I remember how the Monsoon rain spelled the arrival of long awaited, moisture-laden winds from the Indian Ocean into the subcontinent. The Southwest Monsoon brought rain to the parched, dry lands, thus, enabling farmers to sow their seeds in July, and transformed the parched landscape into green lands. As the crops sprouted, farmers desperately awaited the second downpour, the Northeast Monsoon, that favoured the arrival of insects and cross-pollination. Rain, wet, life-giving rain, that douses heat, inspires and warms the soul is a frequent protagonist in Sen’s poetry. In his earlier work, *Rain*, Sen meditates on the various nuances, moods, and shades of rain; its ability to arouse passion, spell hope, partake in water politics between states and nations; its spell on people as they gazed skyward in the desperate hope of showers of rain, and wondered why the monsoon was invariably late.

It is bone-dry
 I pray for any moisture that might fall from the emaciated skies
 There is a cloud, just a solitary cloud wafting perilously
 But it is too far in the distance for any real hope — for rain.
 (“Drought, Cloud” 22)

The September showers came too late, giving
 ample time for a prolonged drought. But when
 they eventually arrived, they brought with
 them the full fury of an unstoppable monsoon
 — the rain pelting down hard, cracking open

⁴ All future references to *Anthropocene: Climate Change, Contagion, Consolation*, will be abbreviated to *Anthropocene*.

newly laid tarmac, exposing the earth and the elements once again. (“Shower, Wake” 47)

The nine shape-shifting photographs of cloud formations in the Delhi skyline captured by Sen in the inserts of “Atmosphere; Skyscapes” show the passage of time and are captioned with lines of poetry from *Anthropocene*. They show the varying hues and the silhouettes of neem trees in the background. Light leaks and ink spills through the flame-filled clouds of the Delhi skies as the clouds part and gather as stratocumulus hanging low like honeycombs. The ever-changing pageantry reveal the nimbostratus thickening gradually to blot out the golden-amber hues of the sun, thus foretelling the advent of rain. Through the ever-changing, kaleidoscopic setting of Indian dusk, Sen shows the passage of seasons, and records the aerographical changes of our times like

a palette, exposing photographic plates —
 bromide undulations of an untold story —
 a narrative to be matted and mounted —
 a frame freeing open its borders to dream. (“Paper T[r]ails” 157)

In “Paper T[r]ails”, Sen weaves together bits and pieces of tales and stories untold. He imagines an epoch in the future when random, forgotten notes will be discovered by future generations in books or files stacked in old shelves or neglected cabinets. Sen’s postcolonial sleight of hand in *Anthropocene* prompts him to use a pastiche montage comprising of diptychs and triptychs with clues, codes, and hints that challenge the reader to unravel the hidden narrative. Sen alludes to the writer’s power of the pen, his ability to create, preserve and destroy as in the *Trimurthi* or triad of Hindu deities – Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. In a world where one wonders if the skies will continue to cast the same hues or if the sun might soon be obscured from view, Sen’s photographs are a recording of the aerospace of our time. In a possibly altered world of the future, when future generations turn to art and literature to find the reasons for climate change, Sen’s photographs will serve as a mode of remembrance, a photographic palette with cloud hues, shots of digital posterity with a narrative of their own, and a caveat to protect the planet we have inherited.

In “Indian Skies: Cinquain Diptych”, through a couple of five-line stanzas, Sen conveys the need for rain, to quench the Earth. The poem set as a diptych, an ancient writing tablet consisting of hinged leaves with waxed inner sides, makes a comparison of two-different cumulus strata – dusty cumulus and rain-bearing nimbus.

I stare —
 summer’s steaming
 sky layered thick with fine
 dust, quaking in deep heat — where are
 the rains?

The clouds
 appear distant —
 a mirage — hunger for

moisture — that’s the only yearning —
 downpour. (“Indian Skies: Cinquain Diptych” 144)

The 2-4-6-8-2 syllable structure of each line is marked by the simplicity of form and reflects the stark reality of our times conveyed through the sparse use of unrhymed words. Here the postcolonial poetic form revels in its newfound freedom of transparency and disclosure. Likewise, in the split section entitled “Anthropocene: Climate Change”, Sen’s fragmented sentences without verbs, and disjointed spaces, is both a visual and textual expression of man-made disasters.

Climate patterns total disarray — defiantly altered
 weather systems topsy-turvy —
 global warming’s man-made havoc.
 Earthquakes — overground, underground,
 undersea —
 destruction, death, cyclone, flood,
 pestilence, pollution. (“Global Warming,” 30)

Through a juxtaposition of antonyms like ‘overground, underground’, and an enumeration of death-spelling nouns like ‘destruction, death, pestilence, pollution’, Sen considers the complex interplay of ‘Man’ and ‘Nature’ in the use of water, land, energy, and habitat. He rightly says in the poem “Climate Change”, “we stare starkly at the climate change we’ve helped create” (33). Sen contends that the human footprint on the planet is devastating as seen in carbon dioxide emissions, increased global warming, decrease in the pH value of the Earth’s oceans, the depletion of resources and the extinction of species.

While reviewing *Anthropocene: Climate Change, Contagion, Consolation*, it is interesting to refer to Amitav Ghosh’s *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016). In *The Great Derangement*, a work of non-fiction, Ghosh reflects on how long-term ecological crises have been ignored in serious fictional writing. He posits that the extreme nature of today’s climate changes has resulted in making writers immune and resistant to contemporary modes of thinking and imagination. He points out that certain phenomena like destructive storms and meandering rivers do not figure in serious literary fiction but get relegated to other genres like science fiction or fantasy. Like Sudeep Sen in *Anthropocene*, Ghosh in *The Great Derangement*, foretells a scenario of a world where forests like the mangrove Sundarbans would be replaced by seascapes; megalopolises would become uninhabitable. Ghosh imagines future generations trying to find answers in literature and art for the damaged world they had unwittingly inherited. He muses about future generations one day concluding that our present generation was rather deranged and oblivious to the hazards, risks, vulnerabilities, and perils of climate change. Sen’s *Anthropocene* arrives five years late after Ghosh’s premise of our era being the time of ‘The Great Derangement’ with art and literature opting for modes of concealment and suppression. By giving voice to the problems that the world faces today, Sen’s poetry, prose and photography in *Anthropocene* is a response to Amitav Ghosh’s call in *The Great Derangement*. He has shown that writers are no longer hesitant nor reticent to voice ecocritical awareness through new contemporary modes of thinking and imagination.

A prosodic study of syllabic count of the verses in the section entitled ‘Love in the Time of Corona’, reveals Sen to be the Haiku master, where he resorts to the use of the Japanese poetry craft in “Corona Haiku^{5.7.5}”. Japanese since ancient times have used this three-lined, refined, poetry form of five, seven and five syllables to evoke a bank of memories, images, and associations without drowning the poem in plentiful words. Sen’s hybrid Haiku thrives on absolute freedom of expression to outline fourteen consecutive stages that humanity has faced during the pandemic.

Pandemic 1

will we find a more
compassionate world, after
this pandemic’s death?

Pandemic 2

pestilence prevails —
politics pushing aside
science, medicine. (“Corona Haiku^{5.7.5}” 63)

Sen’s Haiku, typical of the Japanese form has no rhyming words; consists of seventeen syllables; is arranged in three lines of 5, 7, and 5 syllables, as highlighted in the title of the poem – “Corona Haiku^{5.7.5}”; resorts to the use of ‘*kiregi*’ or cutting words as in the punctuation marks of a dash and a question mark; locates the metonymic and associate timespan of the Covid epidemic through ‘*kigo*’ or season-words as in ‘pandemic’ and ‘pestilence’. Sen’s Haiku is a form of postcolonial resistance, a mode of creating hybrid language forms that thrive on the liberty of expression, and a manifestation for the need for restorative justice. In another Haiku entitled “Undercurrents: 20 Lake Haiku,” once again Sen’s hybrid-twenty-stanza Haiku is visible in the typeset of the contents list of *Anthropocene*. Instead of indexing the title of the poem, here the beginning lines of each stanza and page numbers figure to highlight the ‘*kigo*’ through the changing sounds of nature, shades and tones of seasons and the diver’s perception of Lake Haiku. The alert reader recognizes the visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile, and gustative references to nature’s quite call during the ever-changing tapestry of seasons.

In the section “Corona Red”, Sen resorts to the narrative mode of a stream of consciousness to depict a multitude of thoughts and emotions that agitate the mind of a Covid patient. Like Icarus who flies too close to the sun, melts wax and drops his feathery wings, Sen’s Corona victim in “Icarus” is tormented by stark visual images of impeding death as the fever burns the body like a scorching sun.

The image of Icarus has been flying around in my head. I cannot get rid of it — I tried lopping off its ill-fated wings, persisted in pushing them close to the sun to burn them off, so that I could erase this myth forever. But myths like imagined truths and cold silence are very hard to shake off — they induce sweat, heat, palpitation, even illness” (“Icarus” 92).

Sen pieces together snatches of incoherent thought that cannot be dispelled by myths nor home-made remedies with ingredients of cut onions, eucalyptus, ginger, black pepper, turmeric, and honey. The title 'Corona Red' is also a reference to the colour code used to ban nationals from Covid infested countries entering the European Union. As countries in the European Union reopened borders, quarantined travellers, moved countries from 'red' to 'amber' and then to 'green', India remained in the Corona Red pandemic category. Sen also points an accusatory finger at social media that favoured the spread of Fake News. He posits that in such a scenario, multiple pandemics proliferate by resorting to the literary tool of parallelism: "politics of profit and power, mistrust and misuse" ("Ghalib in the Time of Crisis" 101). Sen portrays the migrant trend triggered by the pandemic when millions of workers were displaced from cities to villages and vice versa due to unemployment and lack of housing in Covid times. Migrants traversed kilometres on bare feet, coped with poor sanitary conditions, suffered from lack of food and proper footwear. Sen's ecocritical writing seeks to illuminate how displaced communities contend with hostile forces of natural environment and insensitive governments that ignore human attempts of survival in the name of protecting Common Good. Interestingly, the layout of this section on 'Corona Red' resembles the contemporary setting in postcolonial countries that have had to fight against corruption and opaque government policies. Sen's work is typical of postcolonial ecology and resistance where the hybrid literary form becomes a critical protesting tool against red-tape bureaucrat decision makers and campaigns for transparency in political decision making.

In the section "Holocene: Geographies", Sen's poems trace the petrological, geological, political, economic, and material co-ordinates of forests, rivers, bioregions, and species. Sen urges the readers to place themselves in the skin of voyager-protagonists in nature's ever-changing geographical landscape.

Engineered within their histories
of migration, travel — over land, by sea —
coping with life's mechanised emptiness. ("*Disembodied 2: Les Voyageurs*" 129)

He proposes an aesthetics of appreciating the wonders of nature and the ever-changing display of the cosmos. In "Listen to the Stars", he shows how a flashing star, or a meteor can trigger poetic inspiration to imagine a

A philharmonic score - a nebula poem, a long poem,
an epic — its unceasing ocular cadence, haunting —
black hole's cosmic crescendo — an axiomatic trance. ("Listen to the Stars" 146)

Through the literary device of an apostrophe, Sen addresses the stars in the skies, invokes the manifestation of cosmic synergy, and revels in the response from the galaxy of stars. The auditory score styled as an interstellar, long, epic poem, sets fire, and rekindles life into stellar-dead-black holes. The cosmic crescendo in Sen's poetry is a message of consolation and hope in the present-day context of the black hole of the Corona virus: "In this *blackness, lives matter*" ("Hope: Light Leaks" 57). Sen appeals to readers to see light in darkness, by quoting from Martin Luther King, Jr: "Darkness cannot drive out darkness. Only light can do that" (57). Sen wisely points out to

readers that the sun sets, and the moon rises, waxing and waning in periodic, cyclical phases. He reminds readers that there is always light and what matters is the way humanity comprehends restorative justice. In a time of unprecedented sickness and death, *Anthropocene* is thus a requiem to the ordinary and unknown, “a chant in hope, for peace: Om Shantih, Shantih, Shantih” (“Om: A Cerement” 174).

Sen insists that our syntax is dictated by ancient codes. Our speech may be silent, but our thoughts need not be fettered.

Imagination isn't caged in speech —
speech cannot be caged in language. (“Language” 160)

Sen's eco-message in *Anthropocene*, is that we need to appreciate the geographical topography of our land, articulate resistance against materialistic forces, voice dissent against 'red' political decisions and favour the alignment of a 'green' paradigm through an econarrative, be it poetry, prose, or photography. This attempt to unite fictional aesthetics and advocacy is typical of postcolonial ecocriticism that seeks to advocate social and environmental justice in today's postcolonial world.

It is interesting to consider how Sen's “*Poetics of Solitude, Songs of Silence*” in the present-day ambience of self-isolation compares with Salman Rushdie's unassuming little room of literature tucked away in a corner of the large rambling house of world activity where the room is alive with “voices talking about everything in every possible way” (*Imaginary Homelands* 429). Rushdie articulates the dire need to preserve this privileged arena of creative enterprise.

The reason for ensuring that privileged arena is preserved is not that writers want the absolute freedom to say and do whatever they please. It is that we, all of us, readers and writers and citizens and generals and godmen, need that little, unimportant-looking room.... Wherever in the world the little room of literature has been closed, sooner or later the walls have come tumbling down. (Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* 429)

Rushdie includes readers in the enterprise of assuring the survival of the little unassuming room of literature by putting forth the idea that creating a literary masterpiece is not an affair of individual creative genius, but a joint endeavour. By daring to enter into the chamber of creative secrets, the reader awakens stories waiting to be rediscovered. Sen also lays emphasis on the existence of this “precious zone for philosophical and creative thinking, a space for silence and stillness” (“*Poetics of Solitude, Songs of Silence*” 160). Sen revels in this 'white' space of solitude, free of noise, but offering a complete colour spectrum where the “visible and the invisible act as a yin-yang with a calibrated fulcrum providing the mood and texture to tonality's subtle equilibrium” (“*Poetics of Solitude, Songs of Silence*” 160). Sen's work is typical of postcolonial ecology where the literary form becomes a critical engagement with an aesthetics of the earth. Ghosh's literary enterprise with its hidden agenda of social and environmental advocacy is imaginative and serves as a catalyst for social action and exploratory literary analysis into a full-fledged form of engaged cultural critique. Like Rushdie, Sen resists 'stasis', encourages readers to campaign for 'change' by advocating new contemporary modes of thinking and imagination. In *Anthropocene*, Sen mingles various experimental modes of writing like the Japanese Haiku, the narrative mode of the stream of consciousness, diptych and triptych presentations of poetry, art,

and photography. His hybrid, mode of presentation reveals in the knowledge that in a work of literature “...it is the content, the language and the emotional intelligence that ultimately matters” (“Losing the Habit of Speech, Regaining the Habit of Reading” 168).

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