

Sen, Sudeep. *Sudeep Sen: Selected Conversations and Interviews*. Classix, 2020, Pp. 352. INR ₹650 (cloth) / US \$20 (paper) / £15 (paper).

Sudeep Sen: Selected Conversations and Interviews marks a seminal moment in Indian publishing in English, specifically in poetry. It is probably the first time that an Indian publisher has released a book exclusively on the critical dialogues of a contemporary Indian poet. It arrives at a time when representative Indian fiction writers like Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh, and Aravind Adiga dominate the popular literary imagination. Volume one, of the three-volume omnibus, archives an important selection of interviews spanning over thirty years with the internationally acclaimed poet Sudeep Sen. Anchored in scholarly conversations, this book is useful for researchers and academics interested in English literature and cultural studies.

The book is a compilation of twenty-seven interviews conducted by distinguished academics and critics: Ziaul Karim, Akshaya Kumar, Agnes Lam, Doina Ioanid, Catherine Woodward, Dolores Herrero, Nathalie Handal, and others. The title of the book is slightly misleading: one may assume that it is meant only for a niche group of readers familiar with Sen's poetry. The book, however, is not about Sen's poetry but rather how poetry functions for Sen: each of the interviews explores Sen's evolving relationship with language, sound, diction, and aesthetics. The accessible approach of Sen's scholastic references and anecdotes offers a wide spectrum of insights on poetry in general. These materials are effective literary companions to poets, students, and teachers.

It would not be an exaggeration to consider the book as one of the most important contemporary discourses on poetry in India. First of all, the interviews emerge as pieces of literary criticism that do not carry the burden of jargon or "isms." Secondly, the book is a unique opportunity for readers to know Sen the person, who is rarely subjective in his poetry. Next, the book argues that poets' opinions on present socio-political environments are better represented through their poetry than activism. Finally, the book highlights the need to shift the dynamics of reading and appreciation of poetry in India: to value literary conversations on poetry and to perceive Indian poets writing in English as global artists rather than simply as postcolonial or neoliberal writers.

Hard-boiled theorists, in a Barthesian fashion (after Roland Barthes' "The Death of the Author"), could question the textual relevance of the poet's words. However, for poetry aficionados, the book offers a generous entry into the smithy of Sen's mind. For instance, in his interview with journalist

Shivnetri Kushwaha, Sen writes, “Art in its purest form, never reveals all” (277). He highlights the mystical influence of “sound” in his poetry, especially in “Bharatanatyam Dancer.” Much like the late poet Agha Shahid Ali, who merged the Urdu ghazal with the pulse of the English language, Sen applies the rhythms of Indian/Hindustani classical dance to his poetry:

Spaces in the electric air divide themselves
in circular rhythms, as the slender
grace of your arms and bell-tied ankles
describe a geometric topography, real, cosmic,
one that once reverberated continually in
a prescribed courtyard of an ancient temple
in South India. (16)

Sen says, “The poem was inspired by one of our great contemporary dancers, Leela Samson. . . . In fact, the ‘*abacca . . . dbdeed . . . fbfgf . . .*’ rhyme scheme maps/mirrors the actual classical dance step-pattern and beat of ‘*ta dhin ta thaye thaye ta . . .*’ Also the left-hand margin indentations match the same scheme and form” (278; emphasis in original).

In a conversation with Agnes Lam, Sen highlights the differences between prose and poetry: “Poetry has a lot of in-built architecture which prose doesn’t—the lineation, the visual architecture, the rhyme scheme, and the metre” (67). The book arguably offers criticism of poetry in a pleasurable manner. Sen’s deft observations on poetry arise from his literary experiments, his interest in photography, music, dance, sports, interesting meetings with other poets, and the journey from getting his first poem published to the endeavour of crafting the newest one. However, readers might find that navigating such intense interviews, one after another, risks becoming monotonous. At times, the book fails to engage readers visually. Relevant photographs and facsimiles would have been a refreshing addition. Also, limited space is given to the interviewers themselves, who nonetheless add a great deal to the book.

The book is replete with Sen’s humour, irony, intelligence, storytelling skills, frank denials, and confessions. These would be of great help to scholars interested in understanding and documenting the history of Indian poetry in English. In a conversation with Lam, professor at Hong Kong University (Asian Poetry in English), Sen shares his experiences of the early days of publishing in India when creative writing was considered simply a “hobby,” even by editors of prominent literary journals (169). Poets are bound to resonate with Sen’s insistence on how, in India, poetry lacks a formal and academic space.

Sen's emotional details of his young life in the early 1990s make the book a delightful subject of cultural studies. Sen recollects his childhood in a Bengali household, days as a struggling journalist, as well as his marriage, children, and fateful meetings with Nobel Prize laureates Joseph Brodsky and Derek Walcott. Such particulars, when studied carefully, emerge as metaphoric narrations of the nation at the cusp of globalisation: Sen's leap away from middle-class aspirations, cultural struggles in a diasporic life, attempts to cope with the hierarchy of poets, questions about his own literary abilities, and his final move, à la "return of the native," to New Delhi. These twists and turns illustrate the fundamental conflict faced by most poets in India: to practice poetry as a symbol of refined cultural habits but not as a profession.

One of the biggest contributions of the book is in the way it projects Sen not as an artist working in monkish isolation in his ivory tower but as an observant, involved, and cerebral critic of present society and its literary trends. In a conversation with journalist Kanika Rajani, Sen says that social media lends poets not real learning but "a delusion of grandeur" (288). In the interview with Sreemathy Bhat, Sen elucidates the cultural value of poetry and protest in Delhi's "Shaheen Bagh" (328). Sen is unabashed and emphatic.

In his talk with Parminder Singh and Catherine Woodward, Sen affirms that "the best English poetry written by Indians in the contemporary national and international literary arena is perhaps as good or superior to Indian fiction in English as a whole" (304). In times when Indian literature is primarily represented by award-winning films based on popular fiction, Sen's words are a reminder of the fact that "the only Indian Nobel laureate in literature was the poet and polymath, Rabindranath Tagore" (258).

The book displays the literary aspirations of an independent publishing house to contribute to the production and consumption of academic literature on contemporary Indian poetry in English. One can visualise the book on the shelves of major university libraries and as a secondary text for research projects on poetry. The diverse scholarly engagements show how far Indian poetry has reached beyond the boundaries of familiar poets like A. K. Ramanujan and Nissim Ezekiel. It is high time we value contemporary poets like Sen and the literary discourses that offer Indian poetry in English an international critical space.

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