



# fiction

## A Macedonian Fragment

By Sudeep Sen



Natural Habitat: Sudeep Sen at his office-library in Dhaka.

I  
1. The journey began from the capital city of Skopje heading towards the mountains of Krusevo -- through innumerable towns, villages, vineyards, and tobacco fields. Kosovo was only twenty-four kilometres away from us at one point. Albania only two. War-signs were subtly visible, though only to a dark discerning eye.

The seductive Matisse-blue backdrop of clouds, its deep cobalt and turquoise, swallowed the rocky jagged peaks of semi-barren hill-tops into their soft sumptuous belly.

An open-van just ahead of us on the highway containing grape-picker's bounty was sucked into a tunnel. The tarmac's constant twists and devious drives steered my companion Zoran's delight for curve, speed, and skill.

Poplars, hazels, and elms clothed the innocuous gentle slopes. As we headed away from the city, the car-radio's voice-box faded to a crackle, and then into a perennial monotonous hiss.

All of a sudden a wedding procession appeared -- a stretch limousine wrapped in broad ribbons. It looked so out of place in this landscape. Just like the NATO convoys do, with 'KFOR' imprint tattooed on their deceptive olive -- hot metal melting the lives of the natives against their will.

"Everybody laughed, but you".  
"Yes, we the Macedonians provided a free corridor, and in return you stomped upon us and razed us down".

"It did not matter which direction you drove on. For you all, the cost of human life -- other than your own -- did not matter."

It was a blind-folded mission and thoroughly misdirected.

2. Martovo spread its green-leafed lap and drew us to Pletvar Pass as if seducing us to redefine the very act of love-making.

We had left the village of Rasoman behind, but not without our craving thirst for cantaloupe and spritzer.

Village after village passed by, with its musical catalogue of names, myth, and humour -- Malo Konjari, the small hamlet where they raise horses; Golemo Konjari, the big one. Slavej, the nightingale village; Urbjani, the willow place; Kirv, the crooked underpants; and Prilep, glued to the base of the mountains.

We ascended the uneven cobble-paths to Pletvar. It was only a thousand metres high, but the aggressive wind made one feel that we were much higher up. The Golden Apple sparkled over Prilep like a monarch preening its halo at sunset.

Sting's *Ten Summoner Tales* peeled out its pretentious fables -- frets, slides, and lyrics -- urging us along onward and upward. The castle of Prince Marco provided stark hints of an ambivalent past with its rule of wisdom and soul.

3. A strong whiff of fresh unripe tobacco temporarily swept us towards Prilep. Plucked tobacco leaves left out to dry, strung on sagging parallel

strings framed within raw wooden stults, looked like tapestries garlanded in medieval folklore. There were hundreds of them everywhere, each one with their own narrative.

Red peppers -- vertically threaded to sun-dry -- competed hard, tempting in vain to seduce us with their ripe-deep colour and its perfect oil-glistened skin.

All along, the tarmac of Dimo Street stood guard to protect Beba -- Zoran's wife -- and her childhood past.

4. Prilep's iridescent marble reflected, reminding me of my own childhood visits to Agra, where the Taj Mahal was immortalised by the same sanctity of white and love.

Far ahead, Krusevo nestled on the dark hills, looked like a diamond set amid a sea of wild fallen leaves. Red and white roof-tiles distracted our sight. But we were still in the safety of the Pelagonia Plains.

At Slavej, the road swerved, swerved, and swerved again, until the centre of this nightingale village brought a spin of calm. The only sounds were a leaking spring-tap and the screech of our car-brakes grinding the rural road-dirt.

Almost every house here had its terracotta roof crowned with an intricate matrix of twigs. The storks may have flown away, but their large well-knit nests rest, left behind to preserve memories for their return next season.

As we wind our way up, suspicious grey clouds first brood, then shed their cool-wet-weight on us. Our silver Peugeot needed a serious clean, and the rain did its part to counter our laziness. A lone buffalo bellowed his presence, a formidable bell rocking around his neck, but we did not stop to hear him out.

Finally, cutting across two steep rock-faces was the panoramic elevation of Krusevo, sitting exactly between an umbrella-top of a deciduous tree and the hull of ash-grey clouds.

### II.

5. At Krusevo, at last. In a taverna, swift *zholtas* shots burnt my gullet. I immediately tried to repair the raw scars with water, but it was annoyingly carbonated.

Mousaka appeared unexpectedly from last night's menu as a fifteen-month old infant's fingers minced the meat finer than a machine could do, executing the palette with the beauty of an aria.

Folk music raised its ambient sounds, and spontaneous to the occasion, Zoran sprung to his feet taking my partner, Priti's arms. Oro, the local folk-dance -- three steps forward and one back -- often the simplest steps are most divine to watch.

Andrej, our friend's son, added heaps of chili -- powdering his tongue with the same wild energy as his penchant for daring downhill ski-runs -- lapping up the entire entree with the grace of Oro itself.

Mezze arrived -- snow-covered in feta, with cucumber, tomato, olive,

onion, and oil -- all soaked -- salivating with the intimate juice of taste.

I put on more chili to add further heat. The stealth of red-dust scarred my tongue with pleasure and pain, but I remember only the pleasure.

### III.

6. Night fell gently on Krusevo and with it came the heavy-set chill. I descended down one of the streets -- a long stairway -- uneven blocks of bold granite joined at impossible angles led to the town centre.

All the shops were closed now. Had it not been for the teenagers who gathered in the town square to liven up their weekend, one could mistake the place for a ghost town.

I walked up and down many hill-paths that knit the town together. I came upon several surprising corners, some that were patios of forgotten houses. The new houses did not fit the character of the town however hard they tried with technology's modern techniques.

7. At a clearing between two such buildings, the night-view of Pelagonia Plains opened up. Prilep and the surrounding villages glittered in incandescent light like a vast shifting

swarm of glow-worms.

The sky was clear, and the constellations put up a brave show to compete with the electric stars on the ground. A shooting star from the middle of the night-sky scattered westwards before disappearing in a flash. I held its trajectory in my memory, and then in my hand. I closed my fists and made a wish for peace.

Somehow one tends to start with the smallest and the most recognizable constellations at hand -- my immediate family, my best friends, and then others.

8. At a café bar on a side-walk off the main square, Zoran and I sat on two unclaimed chairs around a small round table. The cold had made everyone huddle indoors, but I couldn't bear the room's smoke and cacophony.

Two large linden trees above us with their canopy of green feathers provided shelter. Its intricate weave expanded into a wide deep dome as if it were a living ceiling-fresco, hiding from us the secrets of the sky behind.

Mist, neon, sodium street-lamps, yellow-green-blue haze, the shadow of the church spire -- it was a magical cocktail.

I ordered brandy, lime, salt, and hot water. The waiter looked perplexed at my intentions, but complied. Zoran was safe with his request -- nothing less than the steamy Lozova Rakija would do, the indigenous liquid-of-fire.

When I complained that the water was only lukewarm, the owner told me that his kettle could only heat up to sixty degrees. Somehow his statement seemed to, for a moment, sum up the country's decaying state, potential that it had failed to live up to. Boiling points pegged halfway down the thermometric scale must surely be a sign of cynicism, helplessness, and sadness.

9. Our chairs were perfectly placed to watch the street-life. Young women in their best traipses along dexterously -- tight clothes, high heels and uneven cobbles providing constant tension of shape, stature, and gait.

The sound from a local disco boomed across the valley even though the folds of the hills tried their utmost to absorb the onslaught.

From a house close by, a beautiful peach-skinned woman strutted out of her front door, her mother sarcastically inquiring behind her.

"When will you be back home -- seven in the morning?"

Walking away without looking back at her, the young woman, entirely nonchalant, reluctantly replied, "Nine, perhaps..."

Many of the town's young men and women were heading to the central square, preening in full flight. The same time-worn courting rituals were enacted out. Some were successful, but most of them were eventually disappointed.

The night's hopeful light at least provided a slim chance, a semblance of an escape. Fantasy is an important ingredient for survival in these dark times.

## A Poet Apart

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at the most oddest and inconvenient time -- when I'm already in bed at four o'clock at night/morning -- especially if it is winter you really do not want to get out from under the duvet and go to the desk and write it down. Sometimes I feel lazy and postpone writing it down until the next day, and very often it has completely gone by then. It is always worth that extra effort to swiftly pen it down and keep it for later.

**ZK: Does contemporary literary theory in any way come between you and your writing of poetry? Do theories influence your outlook?**

SS: I find intelligently argued theory interesting and worth a rigorous read, but a lot of what is churned out does not inspire me at all. In some odd way, I even dislike theory especially when it is presented to a literate public making simple things overly complicated for no apparent reason. If theory has an intellectual positive base, original and rigorous, then I'm keen on it, only then. But it certainly never influences my creative writing at all. In fact, it stays very very far from it.

I'm constantly surprised when I read a review, critique, or an essay on my work, as to how much theory is being used these days, especially in the so-called post-colonial circuit. I am not impressed by writers who put polysyllabic jargon just for effect. Frankly this sort of writing is of no interest to me.

**ZK: But certainly you have theories of your own. Just because you don't adhere to contemporary literary theories, doesn't mean that you don't have a theory of your own? Certainly your responses to different stimuli are not passive.**

SS: You can't be passive when responding to different stimuli, especially if you possess the invisible antennas I had mentioned before -- if you are passive you can't be writing at all. All the writing I have done over the past fifteen years are responses to various stimuli. The published results are in front of you, clearly then one is not passive.

But when it comes to literary and critical theory, of course I'm aware of what is going on around me. But I don't let that tarnish or complicate my writing, because as I have said before they are completely separate categories and disciplines. Art should really exist independently on its own merit. Intelligent analysis and critique is surely exciting, but the two genres and purposes are entirely different.

At the end, what excites me is a piece of original writing that is well-written, thought-provoking, intelligently argued. But ultimately it needs to move me, it needs to create quiet indelible waves that constantly haunts me, changes me in some slight modest way. Otherwise it is simply a cerebral exercise like playing and solving a Rubik's Cube which only has limited pleasures.

## poem

### Poems by Sudeep Sen

#### PRAYER FLAG

Om, Mani Padme Hum  
O, the Jewel in the Lotus  
-- Inscription on a Tibetan prayer flag

#### 1. Manas Sarovar, Mt. Kailash

Frayed, flapping in the high winds --  
prayer flags gently unravel --  
homage to the day's first light.

But today, the dawn is not as bright,  
though heavy, brooding, silver-grey  
like the lake's shimmering glass-top.

No one is here, except for a woman  
staring far away,  
wrapped in her sanctity

of continuous linen -- her own sari  
like a prayer flag --  
though devoid of any colour.

She isn't mourning or crying,  
just gazing fixedly  
into the water's changing glimmer.

as the sky's wet weight  
and the shore's rocky line meet,  
their edges meanderingly

melting into the lake itself.  
I stood far behind her,  
behind everything she saw.

#### 2. Prayer Flags

She was only  
an accidental figure  
in the wide-screen frame.

Unlike her,  
I was looking skywards,  
through the prayer flag's

translucent cotton,  
counting each thread  
of each piece of cloth

that wove private stories,  
whispered only to me.  
Weather-worn, strung across

canted multiple horizons,  
I tried to map  
their own geographies --

each an island,  
each with its own terrain, texture,  
inscription, and scripture.

Found on the highest points  
on land, as close to the sky  
as is possible,

these magic carpets --  
shapes caught on  
an unintentional clothes-line --

were more meaningful to me  
than this vast  
monastic scenery.

How each flag -- each one,  
must have preserved secrets  
that only their owners knew.

How each, a talisman --  
exuded safety and calm --  
shrouding away grief



for the briefest while  
when one forgets everything --  
real, imagined -- and just dreams.

#### 3. Pilgrimage

My own piece of cloth  
that I'd once tied onto this line,  
wasn't visible to me now.

But that did not matter.  
I found strength in this  
procession of private passion,  
in these flags' lack of starch  
or hierarchy.  
Their stories passed down

by one flag to another,  
toggled hand in hand  
through time and age --

just like my pet yellow butterfly  
who infused each flower  
in my garden with the gift of life

without any show or fare. I like  
the transparent quiet here -- I also  
like the wind's occasional sound,  
its severe current tearing through  
the flag's heart -- picking out  
the perfect pitch and melody.

#### 4. Buddha in a Lotus

A memory now, a still -- framed,  
not revealing to the world  
what I had once seen --

the panorama's generosity.  
its wild, stark unreachability.  
How each story

stitched and preserved  
like the jewel in the lotus --  
its crystal-fine edges

caressed by petal's soft skin --  
until,  
everything folds inward --

like a foetus in a womb,  
a toppled misplaced comma,  
my own implanted memory.

And then, they bloom,  
fanning outward --  
each flag, strand, story.

each private grief and pleasure --  
chanting noiselessly  
in the mountain's silent winds.

#### Poetry Evening



Sudeep Sen's first book of Bangla translations -- *A Blank Letter* -- *Ekti Khali Chithi* -- will be launched at a bilingual poetry evening by the Indian High Commissioner, Deb Mukharji. English readings will be rendered by the author himself, and the Bangla readings by Asaduzzaman Noor, Kazi Arif, Progya Laboni, and the translator Aminur Rahman. Samia Zaman will anchor the programme. **Venue:** The Indian High Commission Cultural Centre, 754 Sat Masjid Road (above Star Kabab), Dhanmondi on **Thursday June 1, 2000 at 6:45pm**. All are welcome.