

BOOK REVIEW

Rain-Soaked Pleasure

Sudeep Sen & Mahmud's collaboratively creative book, Monsoon, directs the reader and viewer to an intimate rain-drenched landscape



PHOTO: MAHMUD

MONSOON
By Sudeep Sen & Mahmud
Bengal Foundation / 128 pages / Hardback
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SAIFUL ISLAM

Look at the cover of the book, *Monsoon*, on a 'de-luged' day directs ones eyes automatically towards the window hoping for rain and more rain. The calligraphed silver lettering of the title on the cover is outlined in thin black, and looks like a curious tendril looming in space, both ominous and fascinating. This positioning of the title against a soft grey background alludes to the enigma of pre-rain anticipation. A large part of the cover seems as transparent as drops of rain, monochrome shapes and shades smeared on a classy matt-finished surface. The cover not only fore-shadows some of the themes of the text, the myth of monsoon, and the story of 'wet/dry/life/death', but also presents a photo-documentary of humanity, men huddled under innumerable black umbrellas, sheltered on a floating dilapidated boat, all so quintessentially Bangladeshi.

Before starting reading *Monsoon*, one should have a cup of steaming tea at hand. Then gently, for a lazy reader, the lines languor like lullabies; but for an alert one, they are sharp-focussed scenes of new insights. The content-page, titled 'Liquid Contents' with the list of tenderly shaped chapter-names, are divided into three parts 'The First Octet', 'The Second Octet', and 'The Only Sestet' together forming the body of a full realised, quietly meaningful, novel prose-poem themselves: rain, maps / languor, wet / rain, rain / fern frost / air-conditioner, rain / heavy metal / monsoon greens / bengal rain / rain charm / raining rain / night rain / longing, rain / shower, wake / rain, desire / want, eager / offering, fluids / morning, rain / rain, kiss / release, rain / drizzle, climax / drought, cloud / knowledge, need'.

As evident, the chapter titles are always two words, sometimes

antithetical (drought, cloud), sometimes alliterative (fern frost), sometimes synonymous (want, eager), sometimes zany (release, rain), sometimes philosophical (rain, maps), sometimes sensuous (rain, kiss), sometimes pointedly languid (languor, wet), and sometimes sudden (shower, wake).

The uniqueness of this book is in its rain-theme. It reads wonderfully from the beginning to the end while unravelling a touching and simple story of a narrator, who always senses with his keen and curious eyes. The tone is influenced by the whimsical nature of wind and rain, touched by the ever-changing pattern of the familiar soil as the grass both grows and rots in the same rain.

The smooth jostle of short and long run-on lines is spontaneous though carefully constructed. Sudeep Sen is a poet, and this is reflected in the selection of precise words. Lines are studded with pauses and rhetorical elements, and the prose is such that it can be recited aloud. For a thoughtful reader it may take hours to read, even though it has a minimalist text-style. The clever positioning of evocative photos draws our eyes to them constantly. During rainy days, the book can be read time and again one can go through the photos and look out of the window to watch the rain. But even in drier or colder seasons, *Monsoon* provides fantastical pleasures.

The first chapter drizzles gently, though the words map a plot, the voice is soothingly familiar, and the words uttered get quietly embedded in our psyche. In the next chapter, the text thickens, and then becomes steady as a torrent. Rain in the Indian sub-continent, especially in Bangladesh, is a bit tricky. Sometimes it starts suddenly and pours incessantly, and at other times it falls in a half-hearted manner.

Even though the writer divides most of his time between London and New Delhi, Sudeep seems to be blessed with an acutely typical Bengali bent of mind. In *Monsoon*

we encounter his inherent and instinctive attitude towards rain, wind, and soil and passion and politics that surround it.

At Sudeep Sen's dwelling in Dhaka, the view of a lush garden from an elevated overhanging glass-porch provides many different pictures of the monsoon rains. The keen observation power of the writer picked the things of beauty

as well as the morose, and added to it his wide experience of travel, knowledge, and creative insight.

The rain soaks trees, landscape, animals, people it floods roads and highways, water logs lowland areas. Rain increases misery for the homeless and the impoverished, teases children out of their houses half-naked, sipping the rain-drops lavishly these are some

of the glimpses provided by Mahmud. His photos portray the vulnerable position of man facing the elements of nature. They also provide a visual complement to the fine imagery and metaphor in Sudeep Sen's writings.

The monsoons in Bangladesh and West Bengal provide balmy slumber, inspires exquisite compositions of music and rhythm, heavenly offerings, often dense with flashes of lightning and percussion. This book provides twenty-two ways of seeing rain in Bengal, each different from the other. Twenty-two lyrics fall in alternative order. Although there are other shapes and sounds accompanying rain, these twenty-two scenarios might have appealed to the author most and thus illustrated in the twenty-two chapters in the book.

The chapter on the Chittagong ship breaker's yard is both objective and poetic, and creates morbid and gloomy image. Even though the gloom hangs over in the first two paragraphs of the chapter 'Heavy Metal', the tone changes from the third paragraph as sarcasm takes over. The grim spectacle of life provided here condenses further. From here, begins the political undertone, and bit by bit it emerges, spreading over the remaining chapters.

In 'Monsoon Green', the words dig deep into one's mind, chop up the ever-growing relationship of the reader and the speaker, mangle it in a new style, and slash the heart with sharp germinating sentences. The darker side of rain is shown, as is the politics of rain. The last chapter of 'The First Octet' focuses on the fury of rain. Photos here appear standstill, perilous, and provocative.

The next chapter draws a narrative cycle never told before, and it is quite a significantly pertinent story: 'Natural irrigation' 'excess' 'slow rot' 'decay' 'birth' 'profusion' a perennial cycle, a diagram emblematising the farming-based economy of Bangladesh.

The following chapter is a two-hundred-and-ninety-eight-word

"ant-march"; twenty-five trochaic hexameter lines with a caesura at the middle of line eighteen. The break seems mysterious, a mouth-like opening in the middle.

The adventurous story in 'Night Rain' is a common one, but uniquely presented. The dialogue with rain and the tension that follows are exquisitely crafted. The frolic and game in the photos balances the words of the speaker that comes out of studied depth and space. From here, the rain in *Monsoon* keeps its touch with the skin and body, textually and photographically. Rain slips through the quiet and invisible cavities in clothes; it caresses the skin, and leaves moisture as 'memory'.

Shower leaves its destructive wake on the earth again, and now the pent-up liquid is even more persistent. The recklessness in nature is quite savage it tears open the earth, as the virgin weeps in loss, but never laments. The natural and spontaneous narration of the opening chapters turns more pointed here, as each chapter offers new problems and becomes more and more witty at the ending they puzzle, outwit and tease. The voice seems to wear a serious bearing from 'Fern Frost', as if the writer wants to allude to the reader about the way s/he should read the text. It takes on the challenging and difficult task of training the reader, and succeeds.

Again, the text becomes personal, sensuous, and even sexual. The book ends with posing a simple scene semi-nude boys enjoying the rain, pointing to the simple and humble eulogy of life, with a quotation from Plato: "Beauty of style and harmony and grace and good rhythm depend on simplicity".

Monsoon is "a beautiful [and] inspiring treasure of a book", and it ought to be a matter of great honour and celebration for the writer that it is endorsed boldly in the beginning by the 1992 Nobel Prize winning poet Derek Walcott: "At the end of this sentence, rain will begin".

The reviewer works for The Daily Star.

EXCERPTS

from MONSOON

SUDEEP SEN

6. HEAVY METAL
Ship-breakers, snake-like in a single-file, slither towards monumental vessels stuck aground in the rain-swept muddy delta. This is Chittagong's heavy-metal graveyard, where abandoned big queens of the high-seas are left to reminisce about their past glamour and glory.



Most of these workers are day-labourers, like a foot-soldier in an ant march, is an emaciated cog in the giant flesh-and-metal machinery most of them untrained in dismantling thick sheets of steel. Their mud-coloured bodies glisten, as their gleaming sweat and the acid-water's viscous reflection in the marsh-pool threaten to boil-over in the sun.

But there is hope for a colony of people earning a temporary meagre livelihood for the virgin-soil to mingle with the poisoned rust of the ships so that both can learn the effect of contamination and hope too for an onlooker for images that propel creativity.

The ships stand, rain-soaked, statuesque in spite of their exposed dismantled skeletons. Bit by bit, they will be further broken down and sold for scrap metal, and many of their fixtures will be sold as display-items in brass and antique shops in the big cities.

Scrap metal never held such fascination and beauty in my eyes before. In spite of this wet panorama's unconventional composition the scene somehow has a haunting quality of expansiveness that defied the obvious imagery of labour, extortion, and death.

7. MONSOON GREENS
Green is the colour most visible to me these days glazed-oil green, light-banana green, olive green, dry green the green myopia of politicians; the green army of warfare, the green undergrowth twisted and weed-like, green and unstable, and no one in sight to prune or train them.

Shades of verdure had caused a blinding effect on my system. Trendy herbalists are wrong instead of a soothing, calming effect, green has a peculiarly vulnerable, nausea-inducing effect on me.

Green bile and vomit, a Frankenstein-fantasia, green-mucous cough spat by tuberculosis patients, green moss and grime in unclean toilets and storm-drain ditches that line the roads beautiful green, awful green, healthy green, wet green, monsoon green.

Monsoon has arrived persistent in intent, green in jealousy. The rain is going to around for a while, only hastening and never dampening the insidious, monochromatic, chameleon-spread of green itself.

Barsa, as the monsoon rains are locally known, has a truly unmatched resonance elegant, weighty, ponderous, raw, but always striking and graceful.

11. NIGHT RAIN
I woke up at 3am with a start. I was shivering and sweating profusely at the same time. The cotton T-shirt I had on was completely drenched. So was the bed-sheet I was lying on.

Outside I could hear the rain hitting the terrace floor with relentless ferocity. Thunder-claps shook the glass panes to near breaking point.

I love the sound of water and rain whatever their mood. It has a certain sense of assurance, a steadiness that isn't always present in the other elements.

I had a spontaneous desire to step out into the rain. I was drenched anyway, so getting the rain's feel on my back would do me no harm. Besides, getting wet in the night rain has its peculiar thrills.

I stepped out my body heat met the rain. The rain-water sizzled off my skin steaming up in curls of white vapour.

All I could see and imagine was a blanket of hoar-frost that enveloped me and the rain. Night rain camouflaged in the steam of body heat.

16. OFFERING, FLUIDS
The kindness of libation, lyric, and blood. Her endless notes left for melittle secrets, graces, trills recorded on blue and purple parchment to be lipped, tasted, devoured only the essence remains, its stickiness, its juice, its memory.

Seamless juxtaposition the brute and the passion, dry of the bone and wet of the sea, coarseness of the page and smooth of the nib's iridium.

I try to trace a line, a very long line the ink blots as this line's linear edge dissolves and frays like capillary threads gone mad, twirling in the deep heat of the tropics threads unravelling, each sinew tense with the want of moisture and the other's flesh.

There are no endings here only beginnings precious incipient translucent drops of sweat perched precariously on her collar-bone, waiting to slide, roll unannounced into the gulleys that yearn to soak in the rain.

Heart-beat shift the shape of globules as they alter their balance and colour, changing their very point of gravity constantly deceiving the other.

I stand, wanting wanting more of the bone's dry edge, the infinite blur of desire, the dream, the wet, the salt, the ink, the rain, and, the underside of her skin.

POETRY

Lament for Ignacio Sanchez Mejias (fragment)

FEDERICO GARCÍA A LORCA

(1)
Cogida and death
At five in the afternoon.
It was exactly five in the afternoon.
A boy brought the white sheet
at five in the afternoon.
A frail of lime ready prepared
at five in the afternoon.
The rest was death; and death alone
at five in the afternoon.
The wind carried away the cotton wool
at five in the afternoon.
And the oxide scattered crystal and nickel
at five in the afternoon.
Now the dove and the leopard wrestle
at five in the afternoon.
And a thigh with a desolate horn
at five in the afternoon.
The pass-string struck up
at five in the afternoon.
Arsenic bells and smoke
at five in the afternoon.
Groups of silence in the corners
at five in the afternoon.
And the bull alone with a high heart!
At five in the afternoon.
When the sweat of snow was coming
at five in the afternoon.
when the bull ring was covered in iodine
at five in the afternoon.
Death laid eggs in the wound
at five in the afternoon.
At five in the afternoon.
Exactly at five o'clock in the afternoon.
A coffin on wheels in his bed
at five in the afternoon.
Bones and flutes resound in his ears
at five in the afternoon.
Now the bull was bellowing through his forehead

at five in the afternoon.
The room was iridescent with agony
at five in the afternoon.
In the distance the gangrene now comes
at five in the afternoon.
Horn of the lily through green groins
at five in the afternoon.
The wounds were burning like suns
at five in the afternoon,
and the crowd was breaking the windows
at five in the afternoon.
At five in the afternoon.
Ah, that fatal five in the afternoon!
It was five by all the clocks!
It was five in the shade of the afternoon!

(2)
The Spilled Blood
I will not see it!
Tell the moon to come
for I do not want to see the blood
of Ignacio on the sand.
I will not see it!
The moon wide open.
Horse of still clouds,
and the grey bull ring of dreams
with willows in the barreras.
I will not see it!
Let my memory kindle!
Warm the jasmines
of such minute whiteness!
I will not see it!
The cow of the ancient world
passed her sad tongue
over a snout of blood
spilled on the sand,
and the bulls of Guisando,
beloved like two centuries
sated with treading the earth.
No.
I do not want to see it!
I will not see it!
Ignacio goes up the tiers
with all his death on his shoulders.

He sought for the dawn
but the dawn was no more.
He seeks for his confident profile
and the dream bewilders him.
He sought for his beautiful body
and encountered his opened blood.
I will not see it!
I do not want to hear it spurt
each time with less strength:
that spurt that illuminates
the tiers of seats, and spills
over the corduroy and the leather
of a thirsty multitude.
Who shouts that I should come near!
Do not ask me to see it!
His eyes did not close
when he saw the horns near,
but the terrible mothers
lifted their heads.
And across the ranches,
an air of secret voices rose,
shouting to celestial bulls,
herdsmen of pale mist.
There was no prince in Seville
who could compare to him,
nor sword like his sword
nor heart so true.
Like a river of lions
was his marvellous strength,
and like a marble toroso
his firm drawn moderation.
The air of Andalusian Rome
gilded his head
where his smile was a spike
of wit and intelligence.
What a great torero in the ring!
What a good peasant in the sierra!
How gentle with the sheaves!
How hard with the spurs!
How tender with the dew!
How dazzling the fiesta!
How tremendous with the final
banderillas of darkness!
But how he sleeps without end.
Now the moss and the grass

open with sure fingers
the flower of his skull.
And now his blood comes out singing;
singing along marshes and meadows,
sliding on frozen horns,
faltered soulless in the mist,
stumbling over a thousand hoofs
like a long, dark, sad tongue,
to form a pool of agony
close to the starry Guadalquivir.
Oh, white wall of Spain!
Oh, black bull of sorrow!
Oh, hard blood of Ignacio!
Oh, nightingale of his veins!
No.
I will not see it!
No chalice can contain it,
no swallows can drink it,
no frost of light can cool it,
nor song nor deluge of white lilies,
no glass can cover it with silver.
No.
I will not see it!

Federico García Lorca was born in Fuente Vaqueros, Granada on the 5th of June, 1898 and died the 19th of August, 1936. His life spanned the years between the Year of Disaster and the Spanish Civil War which ultimately victimized him. Lorca's poetry and plays combine elements of Andalusian folklore with sophisticated and often surrealistic poetic techniques, cut across all social and educational barriers. Works include: *Thus Five Years Pass*, *The Public*, *Dona Rosita*, August 19, 1936; *Falangist soldiers dragged the Spanish poet and playwright Federico García Lorca into a field, shot him and tossed his body into an unmarked grave*. Franco's government tried to obliterate Lorca's memory. His books were prohibited, his name forbidden. One of the first and most famous casualties of the Spanish Civil War, Lorca quickly became an almost mythical figure, a symbol of all the victims of political oppression and fascist tyranny. People began speaking publicly about Lorca again in the late 1940's, and *The House of Bernarda Alba* was the first of his plays to be produced in Spain (1950), since his death and since the end of the war. Though foreign influence helped to loosen the Franco regimes control over Lorca's work, bans were still placed as late as 1971. Due to public outcry however, Lorca's work was produced.

in history

THIS WEEK

August 17
1930: Poet Ted Hughes is born in Mytholmroyd, West Yorkshire. 1932: V. S. Naipaul is born in Trinidad. A House for Mr. Biswas will bring him critical recognition.
August 18
1678: Andrew Marvell, satirist and poet ("To His Coy Mistress"), dies at 57 in London. 1958: Vladimir Nabokov's highly publicized <i>Invitation to a Beheading</i> is published in the United States.
August 19
1936: Federico García Lorca dies.
August 20
1901: In Modica, Italy, the 1959 winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, Salvatore Quasimodo is born. 1904: The Abbey Theatre is founded in Dublin. Grown out of the Irish Literary Theatre, founded in 1899 by William Butler Yeats and Lady Gregory, it will become the first state-subsidized theatre in the English-speaking world in 1924.
August 21
1850: At the Pere Lachaise Cemetery in Paris, Victor Hugo delivers a funeral oration for Honore de Balzac, who has died three days earlier: "Monsieur de Balzac was one of the first among the greatest, one of the highest among the best.... All his books together make one book." 1920: Christopher Robin Milne, the son of A. A. Milne and model for the human hero of his father's Winnie-the-Pooh books, is born in London. 1999: Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Gary Snyder, Michael McClure, Diane di Prima, Joanne Kyger, Michael Rothenberg, David Meltzer, Clark Coolidge, Norman Fischer, Leslie Scalapino, Bill Berkson and Dave Haselwood participate in a Landmark Celebratory reading from Overtime: Selected Poems by Philip Whalen, in the presence of the author.
August 22
1893: Satirical author and poet Dorothy Parker is born in West End, New Jersey. In 1963 she turns 70 and quips: "If I had any decency, I'd be dead. Most of my friends are." 1920: Playwright, poet, and SciFi writer Ray Bradbury (The Martian Chronicles) is born in Waukegan, Illinois. 1922: The most representative and highly regarded poet to give expression to the clipped, antiromantic sensibility prevalent in English verse in the 1950s, Philip Larkin, is born in Coventry, Warwickshire. His reputation will spread with the publication of The Less Deceived, his third volume of verse.
August 23
1799: William Blake writes to Dr. John Trusler: "You say that I want somebody to elucidate my ideas. But you ought to know that what is grand is necessarily obscure to weak men."
Source: Internet