

Moonless (Part 2)

RASHIDA SULTANA

TRANSLATED BY SITARA JABEEN AHMED

"Let me finish first," I say. "The first disaster descended on my life when Ahona turned six. I felt so elated when I took her to meet Sajeeb at Alliance Francaise. I whinnied in pure excitement, "Now you see how true my words were for so long. Take a good look at her. How amazingly beautiful she is. That I was never wrong, do you believe now?" I saw a new Sajeeb, statuesque, still. He left in a hurry, saying he had to take his wife to a party.

Next day he informed me on phone, "Since seeing Ahona, I have this extra pressure in my brain. I didn't believe you for so long. This uncanny resemblance with me, how did it happen? The thought is causing me tremendous mental pressure. Mita, please don't feel hurt, but I think we should end our relationship here. Actually, extra-marital affairs can never last long." I hung up without making a sound.

That was my last communication with Sajeeb. Slowly, with the exception of Ahona, I withdrew from all social interaction. After one year of my break up from Sajeeb, my husband died in a car crash. Since then, I remained a silently smiling intent listener in casual visits, parties, friendly gatherings, everywhere.

I kept searching for life in my joy of raising Ahona, for beauty and color in the bougainvillea, tuberoses, grass-flowers and in the camellias and exotic roses that I nurtured in pots. After losing Sajeeb I vowed I would not fall in love with anyone ever again and I never did. Days passed quite normally, with all my chores revolving round Ahona's school, teacher, morning and evening snacks, lunch - everything about her. There were no financial

worries as the rent kept coming from the house Ahona's paternal grandfather left us with.

My misery started with Ahona starting university. She would return from the university, lock herself in her room and spend the rest of the time on her mobile phone. Sometimes she returned very late at night. When I raised a hue and cry over it, she threatened me with leaving home. The same arrogant, cruel eyes of Sajeeb, the same self-assertive posture. Next week, she packed her bags and moved

two or three brisk exchanges.

I never employed any house servant to avoid the need for talking. So, with Ahona gone, I was reduced to the smiling, silent, nodding presence in all social, cultural events. Once in a while, I met one or two old university friends in cafes or restaurants and talked, but only about Sajeeb. This same story I told my friend Faisal at least thirty times - the same story. He would listen patiently and say, "Why don't you get a job, or maybe go abroad to do a course or something."

weekends," I asked.

"Why don't you ask her instead of me?" was his response.

The moment Ahona entered her bedroom, I locked the door from outside and told the boy, "You leave now. Ahona is staying home today."

Then I opened the door and told Ahona, "You're not going out any more, and if you do, you can't come back. I will not be funding your education." Ahona screamed in frenzy, "You're a sick woman and you want to turn me into one. You don't associate with people, you reclusive ghost, you lunatic!" I grabbed her hair, pulling her down to the ground, slapping and kicking freely and clamped down her mouth with my hand. She bit my hand and shrieked, "Insane devil woman!" My blood boiled. I smothered her with a pillow and then tried to strangle her, shouting, "I'll kill you first and then take my life." When her eyes were about to bulge out and tongue lolled, I let go of her, Ahona rushed out of the room and I sat there the whole evening, facing the mahogany wardrobe in a paralytic stupor. When I got up at night, Ahona was gone. Next day, I checked at the university hostel and was told that she had returned to the hall that night but was out. She disconnected the line when I called. Two days later, her friend informed me that she had married her lover and moved to their house in Muggapara. The next day I went to Rokeya Hall again and got confirmed by her roommates that she had really got married and two of her classmates had been her witnesses at the registration. I did not call her after that, she did not either. After a few months I got admission in a research course in Japan

and here I have been for the last six months."

Mahboob says, "I'm still amazed thinking why you chose me to tell your life story at our first meeting."

I say, "Three weeks back I was talking to myself after getting drunk and after that this is the first time I've talked to anyone. Just wanted to talk. My words with Sajeeb, my memories of Irfan and Ahona, all float about in the emptiness of my room and I recapture them only when I'm totally intoxicated and then I'm the actor, director and audience."

"You could have said this to Nizam; why me?"

"I didn't feel like talking to him. After watching you for two hours, I thought you could be spoken to."

"Here's my card. Call me whenever you feel like talking. May I have your card?"

"No. I don't have phone of any kind, land or mobile. If I want, I'll call you from public phone booth."

Mahboob says, "Let's go have dinner together."

I say, "No. I want to go home."

Watching the receding silhouette of Mahboob in the dimming twilight I fling the card in the grass. I will not like talking to him ever again. Then I lie down on the park bench. The spring breeze makes me sleepy. I try to remember Ahona's face. So hazy. Can't remember anything.

Rashida Sultana is a Bengali fiction writer. She has published several short story collections, a novel and a poetry collection. Sitara Jabeen Ahmed lives in America, works as an interpreter. She has written short stories and translated for organizations and individual writers.



out to Rokeya Hall, the university hostel. I understood she was having an affair. But I had no one except for her! Without her, my life would be totally unbearable. I would sit for hours in the lobby of Rokeya Hall. Initially, she used to come home for weekends, and then that stopped too. When I called her on her phone, she hung up after

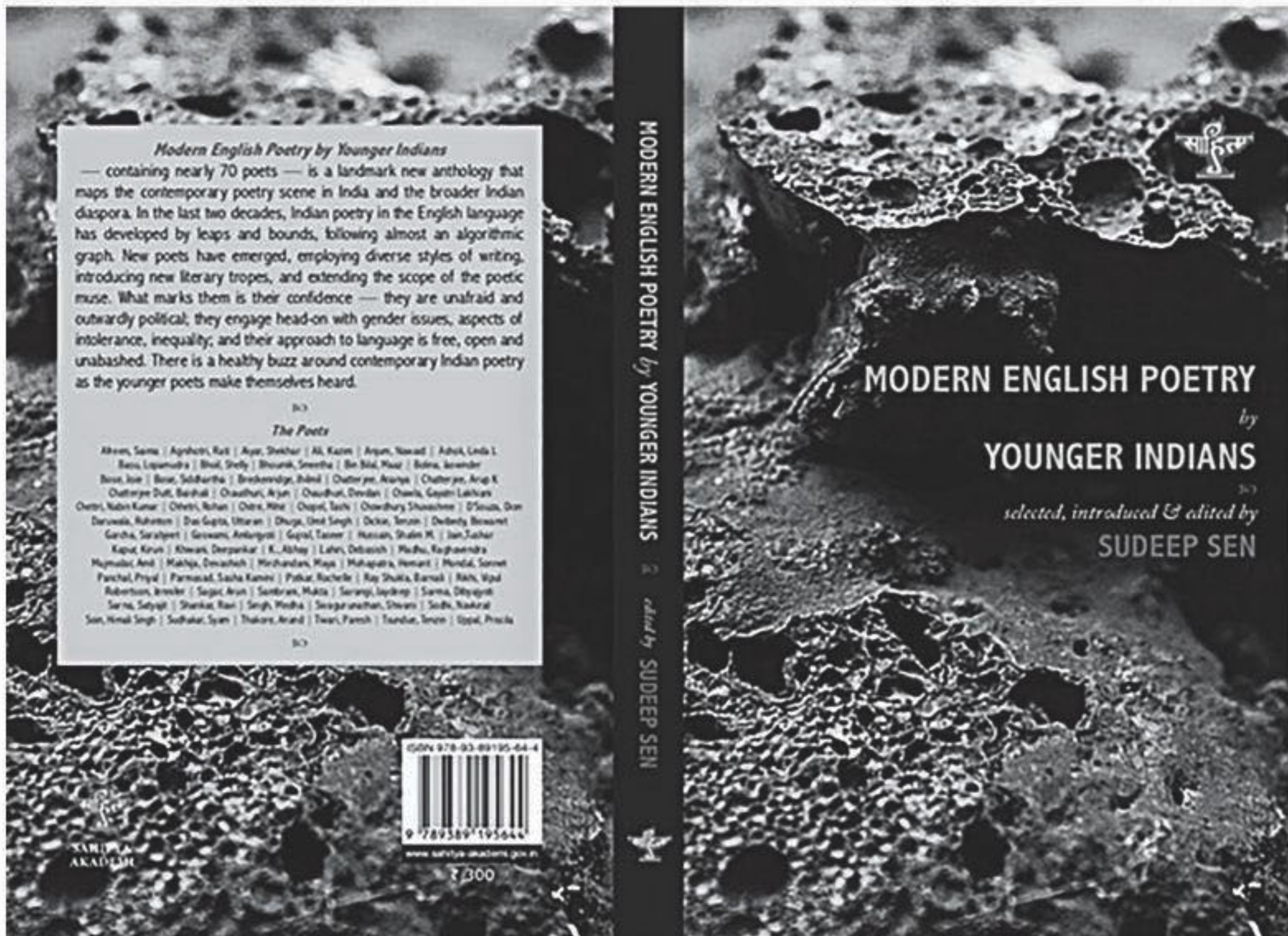
One Thursday evening, Ahona came home with a young man she introduced to me as her boyfriend. I tried questioning him about his parents, family history and whereabouts.

"The whole week Ahona stays away at the university. Why don't you let her come home at least on

Modern English Poetry by Younger Indians A Landmark Anthology

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REVIEWED BY THE STAR LITERATURE AND REVIEWS TEAM



Containing pieces of nearly seventy poets in their 40s, *Modern English Poetry by Younger Indians* (2019) can be called a landmark new anthology that maps contemporary poetry scene in India and the broader Indian diaspora. In some significant ways, this collection also acts as a second volume to *The Harper Collins Book of English Poetry* (2012) edited by the same editor and renowned poet Sudeep Sen. As the Indian poet diplomat Abhay kay observes, "Paired together, these two anthologies comprehensively map the last 70 years of Indian English Poetry with a substantial representation of 150 of the best poets writing today."

It is close to a hundred years since E V Rieu published India in *Song: Eastern Themes in English Verse by British Indian Poets* (Oxford University Press, 1920), and there have been many anthologies from Macmillan, Orient Longman, Oxford, Penguin, Rupa and Harper Collins. And through them one can trace that gradual involvement of the sub-continental poetry. However, in the last two decades Indian poetry has made progression in what Sen calls, "leaps and bounds," following almost an algorithmic graph. He also remarks, "The best of Indian poetry in English now is arguably far superior than the

general fiction that is currently produced by Indians by a long distance." Indeed, new poets have emerged displaying confidence in their literary tropes, diverse writing styles and introducing new literary styles. They have dared to address political turmoil, gender issues, divergent sexualities, and they have employed languages that not only match their subject-matter, but venture into a new world of poetry.

And poetry has founded its way through small presses, often set by the poets themselves. There are more poetry readings organized these days in cities, more book shops springing up—a venture that the poetry scenario in Dhaka also needs to build up. The online pages set up by the poetry community, too, is an inspirational effort that announces a bright future for poetry.

Editor's Note: Sudeep Sen has published a number of award-winning books. He has also edited influential anthologies. His works have appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement*, *Newsweek*, *Guardian*, *Observer*, *Independent*, *Telegraph*, *Financial Times*, *Herald*, *Poetry Review*, *Literary Review*, *Harvard Review*, *Hindu*, *Hindustan Times* among many others.

Shortlist for the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature 2019

The much-anticipated shortlist for the US \$25,000 DSC Prize for South Asian Literature 2019 was announced at a special event, which took place at the London School of Economics & Political Science. The short list comprises new and diverse voices and includes four authors of Indian origin and one author each of Pakistani and Afghan origin. It includes 3 debut novelists including 2 women writers, as well as a work of translation of a novel originally written in Bengali. The increasing globalization of South Asian writing is highlighted by the fact that half the shortlisted authors are based outside the region, and their work brings alive the nuances of South Asian life in the same evocative manner as done by their counterparts living in the region.

The six shortlisted novels contending for the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature 2019 are:

- Amitabha Bagchi: *Half the Night is Gone* (Juggernaut Books, India)
- Jamil Jan Kochai: *99 Nights in Logar* (Bloomsbury Circus, Bloomsbury, India & UK, and Viking, Penguin Random House, USA)
- Madhuri Vijay: *The Far Field* (Grove Press, Grove Atlantic, USA)
- Manoranjan Byapari: *There's Gunpowder in the Air* (Translated from Bengali by Arunava Sinha, Eka, Amazon Westland, India)
- Raj Kamal Jha: *The City and the Sea* (Hamish Hamilton, Penguin Random House, India)
- Sadia Abbas: *The Empty Room* (Zubaan Publishers, India)

DSC Prize 2019 Shortlist

