

# Pandemic Musings

## Anthropocene:climatechange,contagion,consolation

Sudeep Sen. ISBN:978-1-913738-38-9. London. Pippa Rann Books Ltd., 2021

REVIEWED BY FAKRUL ALAM

Sudeep Sen's *Anthropocene* is the third work on the subject by an Indian writer that I have come across in recent years, but it is truly *sui generis*. Sen does not refer to the earliest of these works on the subject that I've read—the eminent historian Dipesh Chakravarty's 2009 seminal essay, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," but Amitav Ghosh is present in Sen's 177-page book from its dust jacket cover endorsement of his work to Sen's penultimate chapter/section titled "Losing the Habit of Speech: Regaining the Habit of Reading," where Ghosh "tops the list" of works on climate change and the way we

dividing lines between fiction, non-fiction and poetry are blurred." His visually distinctive book goes beyond such generic boundaries by including as well *The New York Times* front page lead story news items, photographs composed by others, and his own photographic capture of the contagion that is climate change in his own city New Delhi, plus artwork that he has merged in his book with his verse and prose-paragraphs. In addition, quotations from leading thinkers and creative writers on the issue are interspersed throughout, composing a collage that is visually as well as poetically endearing in

tion of the titular word (if we disregard the "Acknowledgements" and "Contents" pages), Sen moves on to a "Prologue" – subtitled "Meditation"—where he quotes aptly (as always!) the Mexican artist Frida Kahlo saying "I paint flowers as they will not die," thereby affirming the dictum he uses as the title of his inaugural meditations—"The role of the artist is not to look away."

Section 2 of Sen's book is called "Anthropocene: Climate Change" and is about the way weather patterns have altered the world with—to quote some titles and/or words from the poems included in it—"disembodied" and unreal visions, "global warming" and "rising sea-levels," "drought," "pollutions" and asphyxia." In addition, Sudeep Sen provides images of "ice-caps constantly corroding," "blighted brick buildings," unseasonal heat, devastating storms and "endless rain." Nevertheless, the section concludes with a poem titled "rain charm," and mentions life forms struggling but coping somehow with the afflictions climate change is creating all over the world.

Not surprisingly, then, Sen's next section is titled "Pandemic: Love in the Time of Corona." Sen presents poetically in it some consequences of climate change—"toxic tears" and lungs heaving and emitting "slow-grating metallic-crackles." The poet-artist prays, hoping for relief, despite the "ever inflating pandemic list" and a world struggling "with dry heat/of disease and pestilence." Nevertheless, "Covid's curse" must be met calmly and the lockdowns must be occasions for the thinking mind "to pause, reflect, love." True, the poet is reminded of Yeats's apocalyptic musings about "things" falling "apart" and "mere anarchy...loosed upon the world" as Indian television screens show migrants abandoned by unfeeling rulers onto highways. However, the poet-artist will make use of the lockdown to do his bit to "rejuvenate, revive" himself, and

through his works, others. The task is not easy, for as Section 4's title, "Contagion" suggests, we are in the midst of a pandemic constricting human intimacy and inducing feverish thoughts. And yet and yet, as Sen puts it in a prose-poem of this section — "Sometimes even the most brittle seems to find some soft shape for hope". Great poets in particular inspire him for their inspirational verse—Seamus Heaney, for instance, with a line such as "If we winter this one out, we can summer anywhere."

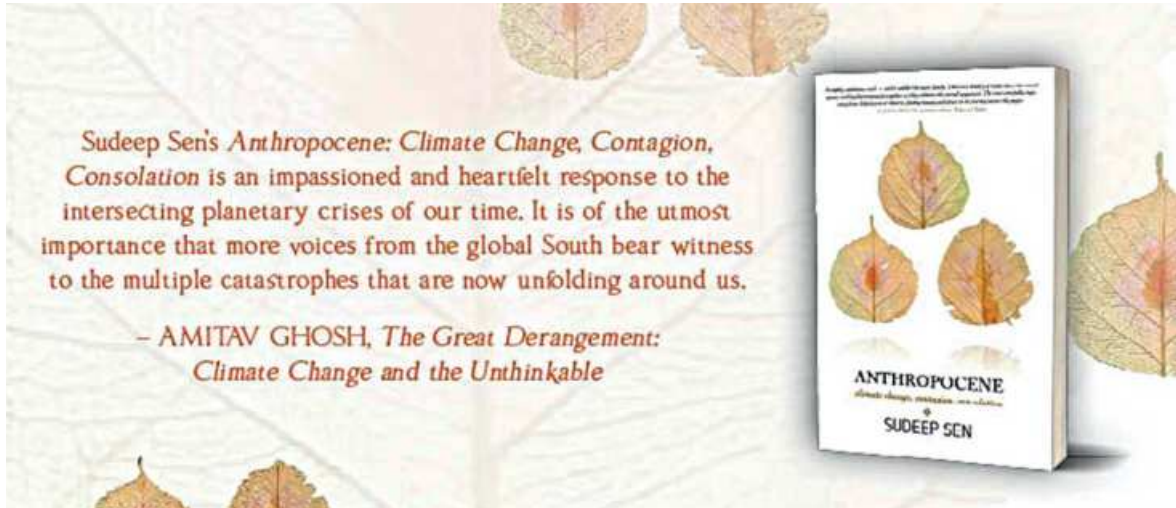
And it is with intimations of relief awaiting this muse-suffused one that Section 5 is titled "Atmosphere: Skyscapes." This section consists entirely of photographs Sen has taken of the sky from his terrace at the same time for a few days and is accompanied by sparse verse, the last of which indicates through its poetry the turning point of his composition Sen has used the skyscapes for—"listen to the stars—far, flung apart—elsewhere, nowhere, everywhere." His meditations may be epochal but are not apocalyptic anymore, being directed at the present more and more positively a well as spatially. The heading of Section 6 thus is—"Holocene: Geographies." Writing in St. Lucia and quoting one of his favorite poets Derek Walcott, Sen concludes his second poem of this part of the book with the line, "At the end of this sentence, rain will begin." Wandering globally, Sen finds solace in nature's geological and geographical miracles, for despite the devastations of the Anthropocene age, they tell him, and as we too find out in this section's finale—"Life's dance continues—with or without us [humans]—only in the understanding of what is/is there freedom from what is."

It is thus that "Consolation: Hope" is offered for readers everywhere through Section 7. The poet now looks specifically at homescapes as well, for some of these are in Indian settings—Humayan's Tomb, the "Burning Ghats of Varanasi," or the

site where Ganga is born. Dreamscapes beacon the poet too; meteors spark as metaphors here, for as the last poem of this section "Ash Smoke" underscores, "something still remains" from the devastations wrought in the age of the Anthropocene to be transformed into meaningfulness. Thus, though we learn from the caption of section 8, "Lock-down: Reading/Writing" the poet is now, literally homebound, his verse, including no doubt the ones in the present volume, flows, "letterforms and words/bloom, come alive". The times may be afflicted in many ways because of climate pollution, but the imagination of the artist must be "unframed and borderless". After all, one's imagination can't be "caged in speech"; "the poetics of solitude" may be invigorating for those who can use the pandemic constricting periods for reading and coming closer and closer to "the language and emotional intelligence that ultimately matters through Prayers" (the sub-title of Section 9 which is the Epilogue is "Prayers"!).

Sudeep Sen's meditations end thus with light bathing us; his imagination is in full flight now and the ending poems are illuminated with the hope that "all is one—/one is many/many is all." What began as waste land musings end with a shower of lyrics assuring us that there are moments of transcendence and light at the end of the gloom and doom induced in our lives initially but overwhelmingly at the onset of the pandemic. His *Anthropocene* offers lyrically and beautifully at the end a sustaining message for an afflicted world. This is a beautiful and uniquely conceived volume. I believe it will be pleasurable and consoling reading for those feeling constricted and afflicted at a time when the corona virus still seems reluctant to depart and for those doing so even afterwards.

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humans are endangering our planet by polluting it in all sorts of ways. Clearly, Ghosh's *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016) has impacted on Sen profoundly. But why is his own work in a class of its own?

One answer is *Anthropocene's* interlaced formal elements. The penultimate chapter is a kind of "recommended reading" list (which Ghosh heads) where, at the end, Sen tells his readers he has a preference for books in which "the strict

a way that has always marked the formal signature of the poet-artist that Sudeep Sen is.

*Anthropocene* thus stands out among the many works in many artistic genres printed or framed on walls in recent years in a world increasingly obsessed about doing something to redress the wrongs done to our planet by rampant humans bent on "progress" at the expense of all else because of its astute aesthetic arrangements. Beginning with a defini-

# On a Long-Awaited Critical Anthology of Bangladeshi Literature in English

Bangladeshi Literature in English: A Critical Anthology. Edited by Mohammad A Quayum and Md. Mahmudul Hasan. Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh. July 2021

REVIEWED BY MASWOOD AKHTER

For anyone with academic or amateurish interest in Bangladeshi writings in English this must be a long-awaited book. The publication of Mohammad A Quayum and Md. Mahmudul Hasan—edited *Bangladeshi Literature in English: A Critical Anthology* (July 2021), possibly the first-ever of its kind, thus came as a welcome piece of news, and I congratulate the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh on publishing it in the midst of the ongoing pandemic, this three-hundred-page useful collection with befitting hardcover and flawless compose.

In the "Editors' Introduction" it is pointed out that the history of Bangladeshi Anglophone Writing is not to be understood as being coeval with the birth of Bangladesh as an independent nation, rather the tradition dates back to the early days of the colonial encounter, in the British Bengal, when *The Travels of Dean Mahomet* (1794) had been published. This can, thus, be regarded 'as one of the oldest and most illustrious English language literary traditions outside the English-speaking world.' The editors do not fail to register contributions of English medium schools, university English departments, English Dailies and their literary pages, literary anthologies occasionally published by newspaper presses—like *The Daily Star Book of Bangladeshi Writing* (2006) or *The New Age Short Stories* (2006)—literary festivals (like the Dhaka Lit Fest) to the growth of this creativity in the post-independence Bangladesh. Contrarily, as they record, the writers have to eternally encounter practical and ideological challenges thwarting their smooth flourish: the still persisting linguisticism of Bangla, and the essentially duplicitous position of the political/intellectual elite in this regard—a point also raised by Kaiser Haq in his interview here with the co-editor Mohammad A Quayum, that although English is widely used in the country and adopted by writers as their creative medium, it still "has no official standing in the culture or the constitution of Bangladesh."

By now Bangladeshi English Literature (hereafter BEL) has been a substantial body of writing traversing different genres and themes, and the present anthology, understandably, cannot be exhaustive or fully representative of the tradition; it rather represents,

in the words of the editors, "some of the best critical material on Bangladeshi literature in English...", balancing it with discussions on the maximum number of new or established writers we could accommodate." Interestingly, majority of the articles in this critical companion including two of the three interviews focus on women writers, and this is precisely because more critical scholarship of acceptable standards is available on their works. The same logic explains why the chapters could include discussions only on fiction and poetry, or why the works of Bangladeshi diasporic writers occupy more than half of the book-space.

One cannot but praise the neat organisation of this collection: fifteen chapters are divided under four separate, aptly titled sections; within the sections, again, chapters are arranged chronologically according to the seniority of the writers covered. The inaugural section, "A Pre-Independence Pioneer" devotes two distinctive chapters to Begum Rokeya that explore some less-trodden areas of Rokeya-criticism: Co-Editor Mahmudul Hasan engages with "Rokeya's encounter with and representation of Europe" while Ayesha Tarannum focusses on Islamic imageries in Rokeya's oeuvre. Hasan's use of the phrase "Muslim Bengal Writes Back" in the title of his chapter is indeed significant.

The next section, "Writings from Bangladesh" contains three chapters: Sabiha Huq discusses how Niaz Zaman's novels offer an insightful network of micronarratives that capture individual women's destinies enmeshed in historical upheavals and national crises while Tahmina Ahmed shows how Kaiser Haq's poems are replete with allusions from diverse cultures and continents. In the final chapter of this section Rifat Mahbub and Anika Saba deals with three 'Partition Stories of East Bengal/East Pakistan' by Syed Waliullah, Abu Rushd, and Ashraf Siddiqui—all collected from Niaz Zaman's anthology, *The Escape and Other Stories*.

The largest section, "Writings from the Diaspora" consists of seven chapters: Adib Khan and Monica Ali receive special attention with two exclusive chapters dedicated to each of them. Stefano Mercanti explores tensions of displacement and belonging and the protago-

nists' restless quest for self-knowledge in Adib Khan's *Homecoming* and *Spiral Road* while Andrew Hock Soon Ng decodes the "politics of deformed body/space" in Khan's *The Storyteller*. In this section Mahmudul Hasan writes on Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* and argues that 'transplanting the south Asian model of domestic seclusion in the diaspora' proves 'a futile patriarchal attempt' as women 'will find ways to interact with the outside world' in this era of technological advancement and omnipresent social media. Susan Stanford Friedman, on the other, reads resonances of two classic narratives of early twentieth century British

discusses how women, through the "politics of active national forgetting," confront a 'masculinist erasure' of their contributions in war and nation-building. The remaining chapter of this section is on Dilruba Z Ara's *Blame* where Sanjib Kr Biswas and Priyanka Tripathi delineates this Swedish-Bangladeshi writer's story to show how 'blame' appears to be a pretext in the garb of which family, society, nation—all try to nullify their respective crime against the biranganas.

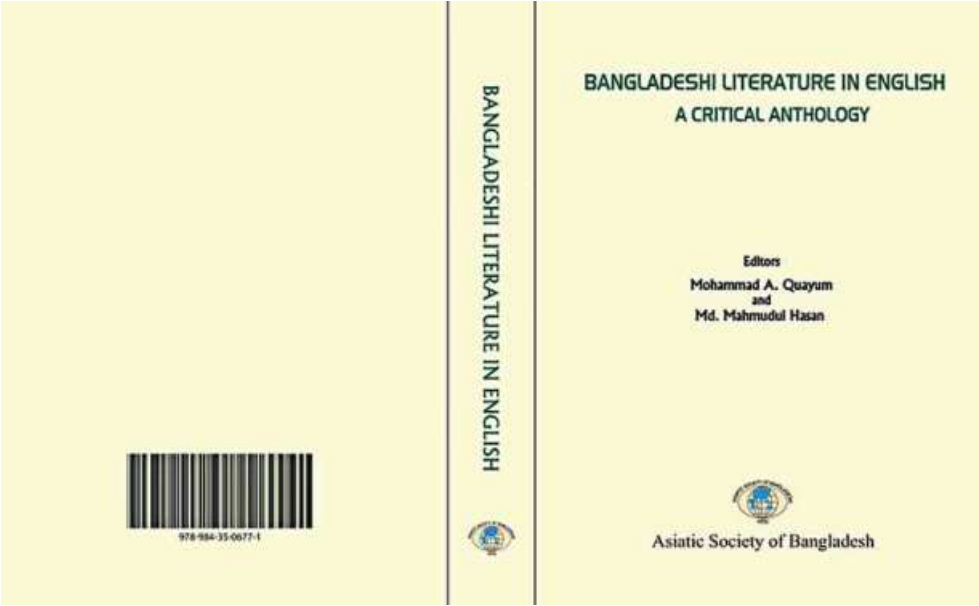
The last section is something special about this compilation showcasing some intriguing/engaging conversations—the first two

aged to accomplish mostly 'from behind the scene.' The phrase in the title of Kaiser Haq's interview, "a highbrow hijra," highlights, albeit playfully, Haq's ambiguity about himself as a writer. About his iconic poem "Ode on the Lungi" Haq reminisces: "the poem took a while to germinate, but once I hit upon the idea of bringing in Walt Whitman, everything fell into place." Sanchita Islam is also a versatile genius—writer, photographer, music composer, painter—who believes, as she tells her interviewer Elisabetta Marino, that art can address mental maladies as well as many other diseases of our time.

There are attempts at historicising a literary tradition, manifest in the editors' meticulous survey of the literary landscape from its inception to its becoming visible and vibrant, as well as in their anxiety for maintaining chronological order for the materials presented in the volume. Attempts are there too for appropriating and foregrounding the discourse of BLE into the broader spectrum of Bangladeshi life, history, and culture in general. It is thus important that the editors consider the appellation "Bangladeshi Literature in English" for their title, along the line of M K Naik's *History of Indian Literature in English* (1990).

While the anthology will surely render a considerable service to BEL it could have been a bit more ambitious in terms of its critical coverage of writers and genres. In fact, the editors themselves express their dissatisfaction at not being able to include chapters on writers like Nirad C. Chaudhuri, Razia Khan Amin and others, and on drama, autobiography, travelogue or other types of prose. A major share of the book is taken up by fiction, and the lone article on poetry does not really measure up to the achievements of the poets, especially the host of younger poets. Despite these limitations, *Bangladeshi Literature in English: A Critical Anthology* remains to be an impressive collection and a rewarding read, and I trust that the volume will be able to inspire creative writers as well as academic practitioners to thrive more enthusiastically in this old yet still evolving literary tradition.

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and Irish modernism—Joyce's *Ulysses* and Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*—in *Brick Lane*, advocating the ambiguity and creative tensions of cosmopolitan multiplicity. Ali appears again, together with Tahmima Anam and Zia Hider Rahman, in the chapter contributed by Fayeza Hasanat. Very interestingly, Hasanat finds parallels between Dickens' and these writers' characters: *Brick Lane's* Chanu turns a "postcolonial Pip" while *The Good Muslim's* Sohail builds his own Satis House on the edifice of religion. There is a separate chapter on Anam's fiction too, where Farzana Akhter

with Dhaka-based acclaimed first generation writers of the post-independence period, and the third with a British-born Bangladeshi artist. The interviews offer insights into their creative journey highlighting the challenges encountered, inspirations behind their works, their achievements, issues that engage them most and also what they intend to write or take on in the future. Jackie Kabir talks with Niaz Zaman and brings out the many-sidedness of her creativity and the unbelievable amount of work—as professor, publisher, writer, editor, translator—that she has man-