



WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



Sudeep Sen
by Sara Bowman

Sudeep Sen: An Interview

Ziaul Karim

'Art in its purest form never reveals all,' writes Sudeep Sen, as evident in the unfathomable depth and beauty of a 'Bharatanatyam Dancer'. This inspired line from his poem serves as a fascinating commentary on his poetry.

Sen essentially loves to express himself in a clear, crisp, logical fashion, while building his ideas line-by-line and stanza-by-stanza. The belief that ambiguity is at the core of poetic beauty is not true for Sudeep Sen. His poetic beauty works at a very different level.

However he may conceive a poem, the final result is always a well-knit fabric. If you try unravelling the threads of the fabric itself, it will gently reveal subtle layers, which otherwise go unnoticed to an everyday eye. It is worth comparing his poems to a treasure-chest – one that appears simple, concrete, and well-constructed but, upon opening, starts to 'slow-release' its many secrets, splendours, and gifts. The voice in his poems is soft, gentle, though persuasive – one which murmurs and hums its mantra into our ear, a mantra that is, to quote the end of the same poem, 'poetic, passionate, and ice-pure'. This poem, dedicated to India's foremost 'Bharatanatyam Dancer' – Leela Samson – is quoted below in full:

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. As your eyelids flit and flirt, and
match the subtle abhinaya in a flutter
of eye-lashes, the pupils create an
unusual focus, sight only ciliary muscles
blessed and cloaked in celestial kaajal

could possibly enact.

The raw brightness of kanjeevaram silk, of
your breath, and the nobility of antique silver
adorns you and your dance, reminding us of
the treasure chest that is only
half-exposed, disclosed just enough, barely –
for art in its purest form never reveals all.

Even after the arc lights have long faded,
the audience, now invisible, have stayed over.
Here, I can still see your pirouettes, frozen
as time-lapse exposures, feel
the murmuring shadow of an accompanist's
intricate raga in this theatre of darkness,

a darkness where oblique memories of my
quiet Kalakshetra days filter,
matching your very own of another time,
where darkness itself is sleeping light,
light that merges, reshapes, and ignites,
dancing delicately in the half-light.

But it is this sacred darkness that endures,
melting light with desire, desire that simmers
and sparks the radiance of your
quiet femininity, as the female dancer
now illuminates everything visible: clear,
poetic, passionate, and ice-pure.

It might be interesting for readers interested in form to note that the line-end rhyme-scheme – a b a c c a ... d b d e e d ... f b f g g f ... – maps and mirrors the actual classical dance step-pattern and beat – ta dhin ta thaye thaye ta. Also, the left-hand margin indentations match the same scheme and form.

Ziaul Karim: If I were to try and locate the central theme of your poetry – or by extension your *weltanschauung* – I think I would cite the line 'I love the luxury of secrets' that is quoted as an epigraph at the beginning of *Postmarked India: New & Selected Poems*, published by HarperCollins.

Sudeep Sen: I suspect part of the reason why I was attracted to that particular line was because of what it implies – the fact that imaginative spaces occupy a zone of secrecy that is limitless, expansive, and full of mystery. It is a space that allows for creative unfurling of ideas

and energies because so much of that area is unknown, untapped, uncharted, waiting to be realised, experienced and learnt. I am not sure that the epigraph entirely sums up everything I write about in my poems, or the essence of the book itself, but certainly it is true for a certain aspect of my writing.

ZK: You have a penchant for digging deep into life's experiences, or at least the Sudeep Sen as he appears to me as a poet loves to discover the intricate mysteries of living. You are essentially a poet whose voice is understated. Even though you are politically conscious and aware, you are not overtly political. Are you a cerebral poet?

SS: I try very hard not to sound too political or overly cerebral. In fact, when I revise poetry, these are aspects that become very important to me as I don't want to sound either overly politicised, leaning one way or the other, or consciously cerebral. I think that the whole point of a poem is lost if you cannot appeal to a wide cross-section of sensitive readers.

Different readers with different backgrounds bring with them a unique personal sensibility by which they understand and appreciate a piece of art, and all of them have a perfectly valid point of view. I imagine my audience as anybody who is literate and culturally inclined in the widest sense of the words – he could be a banker, teacher, sports person, model, ice-cream seller, or working in the garment industry. I definitely do not write specifically for the English departments of universities, or students of English literature.

I write because I enjoy writing, because I enjoy language, because I enjoy how words sound when they are strung together in an interesting manner. If one consciously tries to insert sexy, politically correct terminology or jargon, references which largely an English literature student (or an academic/critic) understands, then I think I would be terribly limiting myself. I would feel claustrophobic if I just dwell in the inward world of academic discourse. My interests are serious and at the same time much wider – sports, popular culture, alternative music and drama, underground literature, and so on.

There is a lot of politics, comment, perhaps even a pinch of intellectualisation in my poems – how can one avoid what is around you in a daily sense? However, what I try to do is not make them obvious. And that can be quite hard because having written the poem/s, subverting the obvious is a serious challenge. Being understated and quiet is much more interesting to me than the other way around.

Often one reads poetry that sound like statements, as if the only aim of poetry is to give expression to a set of ideas or agendas. In myopic terms, this kind of writing does not interest me as this could be done by a political speechwriter or ad-agency copywriter. To me, if you have an interesting thought, then how can you write about it without being obvious or blatant? There lies the challenge for me. So, it is a question of writing in a nuanced and textured way, with multiple levels, with various layers, all overlapping and distinct at the same time, as well as being lucid.

ZK: Are you obliquely referring to Coleridge's maxim 'poetry is the best words in their best order', or is that subconscious when you write? From an architectural point of view, it seems Louis MacNeice has heavily influenced you.

SS: The architecture of a poem is very important to me, partly because of my own inherent interest in architecture itself. Had I not read English literature, I would have been an architect now. In fact, it was very close choosing between the profession of being an architect and teaching literature and film.

To me, a poem should not only be linguistically challenging, but how it appears visually is an important factor to me as well. There are two kinds of structures – one, of course, is the use of rhyme and various rhyme-schemes, and the other is visual rhymes. And then, depending on how important structure is to that particular poem, it can have a considerably significant impact.

For instance, in the poem ‘New York Times,’ I invented a rhyme-scheme – abxba cdxdc efxfe ... and so on ... the middle line, i.e., the third x line, in fact is the mirror-line which reflects the first and second lines with the fourth and fifth lines of each stanza. The other reason I used the five-line stanza-format in the poem is because the city of New York itself has five boroughs: Manhattan, Queens, Brooklyn, Bronx, etc. The other thing about this poem is if you turn the poem 90 degrees on its central axis, then a different kind of mirror-line mimics the shape of the island of Manhattan itself and its reflection on the surrounding waters. Here is the poem quoted in full:

Every morning

I scurry through the streets of New York, turn around the
avenue, past the red and white awning of the Jewish deli,
walk out with a bagel or croissant or spilled coffee,
disappearing underground, speeding

in a subway of mute faces, barely eaten the bite,
barely unfolded *The Times*, barely awake. Before
I realise it’s lunch-time, then
late evening, being herded home with the flow
of humankind,

up and down elevators, escalators, staircases, and
ramps. I am back on the streets again, late night,
though early enough to glance
at next morning’s paper. In this city, I
count the passage of time only by weekends

linked by five-day flashes I don’t
even remember. In this city where walking means
running, driving means speeding, there seem to exist
many days in one, an ironic and oblique

efficiency. But somewhere, somehow, time takes its toll —

overburdened, overutilised —

as the tunnels seeping under the river's belly slowly cave
in, the girders lose their tension like old dentures,
and the underground rattles with the passing of every train.

After all, how long can one stretch time?

Illusions can lengthen, credit rating strengthens,
even Manhattan elongates with every land-fill,
but not time, it takes its own sweet time —
the way it always has and always will —
not a second more, not a second less.

Another poem, a book-length sequence, *Mount Vesuvius in Eight Frames* (subsequently broadcast on BBC Radio as a verse-play, and premiered in London as a stage-play by Border Crossings directed by Michael Walling) is based on a series of eight etchings of a British artist, Peter Standen. The entire poem is set in rhymed couplets, reflecting the presence of two principal characters – man /woman, lover/other, life/death, and the other essential dualities. But they do not appear as obvious rhymes (like the translucent choral refrains in the poem) – they are wrap-around rhymes as opposed to end-stopped rhymes. The four stanzas in each section reflect the four seasons, the four sides of a frame, the four corners of a visual space. I also use alternating line-indentation for each couplet and stanza with the idea that the entire poem works on a cyclical principle. So, if you join all the stanzas together using the left-justified margin as a reference plane, they in fact fit in a perfect dove-tail joint.

The poem 'Single Malt' is one grammatical line, without any full-stops, mimicking the way when whiskey, poured gently into a crystal glass, caresses its sides and subsequently the tongue's palette. Therefore the slim verticality of this poem's structure:

The single malt
explodes

from its husk,
swirling

in the cranium
of its own

shell,
flooding

the mind
with images

that alternately
switches

shutter speed
and lens,

distilling
sight,

that whisks
away

from the mundane,
what is

absolute
and essential,

and leaves out
what is not.

However, in the end, typography and structure of a poem are just as vital as the inner spirit and content of any poem.

ZK: Right from the beginning of your career, your poems are brilliant examples of great control as regards rhythm and syntax, which is a testimony to your own interest in poetry as a craft. Later you went through creative writing programmes at American universities. Did your interest in the architectural aspect of poetry inspire you to go for a master's degree in creative writing?

SS: Thank you, those are very kind words. The creative writing classes I took in the United States were much later. I first started writing during my boyhood in Delhi. In India in those days, creative writing was only deemed as a hobby, albeit a laudable one. Nobody took it seriously, certainly not in a career or an academic sense. So, by the time I went to America and took my first creative writing class, I already had a typical South Asian bias against the teaching of creative writing itself. I thought, How can anybody teach you how to write poetry? You either had it in you or not, or so I was led to believe until then.

But what I did learn when I was enrolled in these workshops were aspects of craft, prosody, stylistics, and technique. It is very important to know and learn these things, and I cannot overemphasize their importance. We also read sheaves and sheaves of contemporary poetry, which is very exciting for me. A lot of the bad name to modern poetry has come about

because people think that they can just write a sentence, break it up, and then rearrange it in a column-format. It may be poetry for some people, but for most it is not. These amateur poetasters do not necessarily have the skill, technique, or the inclination to actually write in formal stanzaic patterns. When I say formal, I do not necessarily mean that it has to be always rhymed; there is blank verse, free verse, concrete poetry, other kinds of structures involved. I think creative writing classes are useful both if you are particularly interested in the aspects of prosody, as well as it teaches you to think seriously and critically about contemporary writing itself.

ZK: In the postcolonial literary scene, poets and novelists writing in English from the non-English-speaking world do suffer, in most cases, from a sense of displacement; this is a strong phenomenon in the writings from the South Asian diaspora. You are remarkably free from such feelings of being uprooted. One discovers that in the pages of your various books, you move smoothly between one home and another.

SS: I think the reason why you don't see any sense of displacement in my writing is because I'm actually a very rooted person. My rootedness comes from my family and the way I was brought up. I'm first and foremost a Bengali writer who just happens to write in another Indian language that is English. So, my cultural and intellectual spaces are very much defined by the fact that I come from a thoroughly Bengali milieu.

I am also fortunate to have grown up in a trilingual situation – I spoke Bengali at home, Hindi on the streets, and English at school, not by design but by circumstance. So, this wonderful tripartite situation was such that I could slip in and out of several mother tongues and languages. At the same time it certainly made it linguistically richer, and we as South Asians are very lucky because of that.

I also come from a typically liberal, educated, middle-class Bengali family who have always been an immense source of strength for me. So, that kind jargon-ridden 'postcolonial' displacement you are talking about is very alien as a concept to me, and even more difficult for a person with my background to rationally understand.

The other aspect of this is that I grew up in the capital city of Delhi, which is a very cosmopolitan place; it has a curious mix of the First and Third World atmospheres, depending on where or what you are engaged in at any given moment. So wherever I have travelled subsequently, be it a cosmopolitan place or a rural one, I was in some manner or the other somewhat familiar with that new place from before; at least I was never in a state of cultural shock, however remote.

We, in India, have been exposed to the Western culture, along with our very own, from our early childhood, so neither of them is unfamiliar to us. So, when one is actually inhabiting these so-called Western (and Eastern spaces), they are places one feels equally at home. In fact I quite enjoy being in both worlds. I love the taste of *singara*, *sandesh*, *kabab*, and *phuchka*; and at the same time I love blue cheese, smoked salmon, wine, and single malt. I do not personally see any conflict in these two worlds; rather, I feel lucky and infinitely richer in experience, since my taste buds as well as my intellectual and emotional terrain can accommodate all of that happily and simultaneously.

ZK: Is it, then, your transnational self that writes

I / am going home once again from another
home, escaping the weave of reality into another
one, one that gently reminds and stalls
to confirm: my body is the step-son of my soul?

SS: The poem 'Flying Home' partly reflects the transnational quality I have been talking about. Many writers and artists nowadays are in this sort of situation. When I'm going from one home to another in a plane, which in itself is such a peculiar kind of controlled space, it is a sort of perennially transitional home, a home that is elastic; it all depends on how you visualize space and how you demarcate geography. To me, that in itself is an interesting concept, one that allows for an expansive canvas. So, I suspect there is something inherent in me that makes it very difficult for me to feel displaced. Here, let the poem speak for itself:

I meticulously stitch time through the embroidered sky,
through its unpredictable lumps and hollows. I

am going home once again from another
home, escaping the weave of reality into another

one, one that gently reminds and stalls
to confirm: my body is the step-son of my soul.

But what talk of soul and skin
in this day and age, such ephemeral things

that cross-weaves blood and breath
into clotted zones of true escape.

What talk of flight time and flying
when real flights of fancy are crying

to stay buoyant unpredictably in mid-air
amid pain, peace, and belief: just like thin air

sketches, where another home is built
in free space vacuum, as another patchwork quilt

is quietly wrapped around, gently, in memoriam.

ZK: Poetry and dance are constant sources for your poetic inspiration. Through your poetry you constantly refer to other forms of art and its architectural beauty – for example, in the poem quoted earlier, ‘Bharatanatyam Dancer’.

SS: Absolutely. It accurately reflects my penchant for various sorts of art-forms, in this particular case, the South Indian classical dance. But I’m equally interested in music, film, theatre, live and performance art, and more. If a particular dance or a particular painting, or even a particular piece of dramatic writing moves me, I may write about it directly or obliquely. And ‘Bharatanatyam Dancer’ is a clear case in point.

An aspect of the poem that may interest you is the architectural and topographical mapping of its poetic structure. I invented another rhyme-scheme for this poem that reflects the actual dance-step pattern on stage that is in consonance with the *bols* and *tals*, in this case – *ta dhin ta thaye thaye ta ... abacca dedffd ...* – the actual rhyme-scheme of the poem itself. That of course is only one thing. The more important thing is that I was completely moved and entranced by the performance, skill, and beauty of the dancer herself, Leela Samson, so I had to write the poem. It was almost written for me by her, I didn’t have a choice. The whole process was quite magical, really.

As is perhaps evident, I do enjoy writing about other art-forms that have inspired or moved me in some way or another. In fact, my new collection of poems I am currently working on is called *Blue Nude*. The title poem is a sequence that has been inspired by Henri Matisse’s cobalt-blue cut-out figures by the same name. Then there are other poems in that book that were inspired by photographs, drama, film, and other media. So one can say that the central unifying theme of this book-in-progress comes from my pleasure and response to the genre of creative arts itself.

ZK: By the time *Postmarked India* was published by HarperCollins, you had already polished and crafted your own poetic voice. You were awarded the prestigious Hawthornden Fellowship in the UK and nominated for the Pushcart Prize in the USA, which bears testimony to that fact. But somehow I detect that Louis MacNeice’s influence still seemed to linger on.

SS: I am not entirely sure whether I agree with that last comment; in fact, I don’t. Various critics have said various things. I believe, in this case, you are referring to the poet and literary critic Angus Calder, who compared me with Louis MacNeice in *The Scotsman*. It was an interesting comparison, but Calder perhaps was referring to the ‘variousness’ in my writing, its range and latitude. I never thought that I was ever inspired by him or wrote like him.

Similarly, other people have written that they have found influences/similarities of T.S. Eliot, Joseph Conrad, Hugh MacDiarmid, and W.H. Auden in my poems. This could all be temporarily very flattering, but at the end it is completely up to the reader or the critic as to how and what they feel about a particular piece of my writing. I don’t think I have at all been influenced by any one of them, even though I admire their writing enormously.

No one poet has directly influenced me, and this is evident in the kinds of poetry I like, which tends to be rather varied and eclectic. I adore the poetry of Jibanananda Das, Kazi Nazrul Islam, Milton, Donne, Wordsworth, the French symbolists like Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Mallarmé,

Verlaine; Rilke, Neruda, Paz, Walcott, Heaney. It is too varied to list them all. Also the ticker-tape is so dissimilar and expansive that I can't think of any one or two who could have possibly influenced me.

Again, if I have to find one source or fountainhead of influence, it would actually be Bengali culture that has affected me ultimately, directly and indirectly. For instance, my interest and sense of rhythm and rhyme comes from my very early childhood through my mother and grandmother. They used to recite stories or sing lullabies to me, and I regularly heard them chant their prayers with a typical Bengali rounded lilt. All these were very inherent rhythms which quietly slipped into my psychological system by a curious process of osmosis. So, these perhaps are my influences, very localised and genetic, completely spontaneous. However, the received and learned knowledge as well as the exposure they subsequently lent, what I was talking about earlier, is a very different sort of thing altogether.

ZK: Your voice as a poet is very subdued. And your poems are soliloquies?

SS: I would just replace the word 'subdued' by the word 'understated', which is perhaps more apt. I find that there is a lot of power in understated writing. If you write in a dramatic fashion, then you are just advertising the superficial, and often there seems to be nothing very much beyond that.

To me, writing ought to be a quiet kind of a thing where the reader can read and then take in its effect in a slow-release fashion, much like time-lapse photography. It is this sort of style I am personally attracted to. It is so much more effective, because once you influence a person gently over time, then the effect is a lot more permanent and effective, rather than someone who is impressive one minute and altogether forgettable the next minute, like certain fashions or trends, or even like a loud noise which soon disappears. A slow, well-paced murmur, or an elongated baritone of a hum, actually stays in the sensibility of a human being a lot longer and is perhaps more meaningful.

ZK: Does emotion compel you to write? Or do you wait for the right mood to inspire you?

SS: I think it is a combination of both. Being a writer is like being a strange kind of a beast. Writers tend to have invisible antennas on top of their head that pick up radar-signals, odd-things while you are looking at ordinary scenes, snatches of other conversations, a glimpse of something somewhere, so the ordinary everyday scenario acts as a rich well-spring of ideas for me. Even as I speak to you, I might be simultaneously processing an entirely different idea or thought that might have just struck me; it is a complex parallel process. These, of course, may be just fragments, or overheard figments, voices, or images. If it is something strong and compelling, I generally try and make an effort to write it down. I don't necessarily carry a notebook, so it could be on the back of a bill, or on the palm of my hand. If I am in a restaurant I would write it down on a piece of napkin, or find an excuse to get some toilet paper to scribble on.

So when I sit down to write, I have all these ideas and phrases in front of me. Sitting down and writing requires discipline because writing doesn't just come from the middle of nowhere; that is just the inspiration, perhaps. But having had the inspiration you need time to

put it all together and build the piece brick by brick. I sit down with poetry two or three hours every day, and it is not necessarily that I write a new poem every time, very often I don't, but I could be revising poems that I have written before, or maybe reviewing a book of poetry, or simply just reading and enjoying a book of poetry. It's my own quiet way of staying with poetry.

It is quite important to write things down when they first strike, because often I find that if I don't do that and try to remember it later, it might altogether leave me, go away, or vanish. Sometimes, of course, it might happen at the oddest and most 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 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 postcolonial circuit. I am not impressed by writers who write 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 writings 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.

In 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 haunt me or change 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.

ZK: You have a strong liking for fluid – its intricate flow and glide. There are plenty of references to milk, wine, blood, juices of passion in your poems such as 'Single Malt,' quoted earlier, in the long poems 'Line Breaks' and 'Mount Vesuvius in Eight Frames,' [and most recently in *Rain*], for example. It seems you want to achieve some kind of linguistic fluidity in your poems.

SS: The concept of fluidity itself is, I think, quite interesting. In a sense it is a cross-over phase, or point of intersection, between the liquid and solid states. So, we are talking about an in-between state, a state that has its own definite rhythm, flow, deliberateness, and so on. It also is a state which typifies the unobvious. The clarity of liquid is very clear, and the concreteness of solid is equally concrete.

But the fluid state is almost like a penumbra, which is the title of a poem I have written. It is a space that allows you to do a lot because it is infinitely multilayered – it is much more textured, as much depends on the viscosity and density of the fluid itself. It is certainly a worthwhile, languorous, languid space to control and be creative with it.

ZK: This brings me to your superbly written, inspiring treasure of a book, *Rain* [first issued as *Monsoon*]. This is at the same time beautiful poetry, prose poetry, and fiction, one that is balletic and precise, poetic and minimalist, stylised and wise, combining the virtual and visual – coalescing to convey the intensely special magic of monsoon rains as felt in the Indian subcontinent. This bold celebration reminds me of the words of the 1992 winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, Derek Walcott: 'At the end of this sentence, rain will begin.'

SS: *Rain [Monsoon]* is a reflection on rain – its passion and politics, its beauty and fury, its ability to 'douse and arouse'. I ultimately explore the various moods that water and fluids inherently unravel.

It is a sequence of twenty-two tightly wrought pieces set in three sections – the first octet, the second octet, and a single sestet. When it was first published as a limited edition in Dhaka by an arts foundation there in 2002, it was accompanied by wonderful pictures by a young Bangladeshi photographer, and the entire book was a duotone production. The new four-colour avatar with *Monsoon* reborn as *Rain* is published by Gallerie & Mapin in India and Grantha in USA. This book contains artwork by twenty leading contemporary Indian artists, such as Paritosh Sen, Paresh Maity, Jehangir Sabavala, Gulammohammed Sheikh, Jatin Das, Gieve Patel, and many others.

The evocative art that accompanies my writing in this book isn't meant to illustrate the text, but simply to act as an aesthetic counterpoint, leitmotiv, and antithesis – thus creating a fine tension and balance between words and images.

ZK: *Rain* is 'Book One' of a quintet of books using the pocket-sized hard-bound high quality art-book format. Tell us about the others that are due out in the near future.

SS: Next in line is titled *Dreaming of Cezanne*, with accompanying watercolours by a New York-based playwright and artist, Anne Fleming. This book is a combination of prose poetry, meditative prose, and pure poetry that is landscaped entirely at the Hawthornden Castle in Scotland where I was awarded a fellowship and spent a month.

Using the same format, the third in the series is titled *Wo/Man*, a book of erotic poems with drawings by the celebrated Turkish poet and artist Ilhan Berk. The fourth book is called *Ladakh*, which has poems landscaped in the stark and vivid terrain of Ladakh itself as well as parts of Ireland. This book is accompanied by fine artwork by the Irish/Scottish artist Janet Pierce.

ZK: Your taste as a poet is very broad, open, and wide-voiced. You are a poet who cannot be conveniently pigeonholed.

SS: Is that a good thing or a bad thing, i.e. the fact that you can't put me in a pigeonhole?

ZK: As a reader, I have enjoyed the varied landscapes that you portray, the stream of emotions, and themes that you give expression to. The good thing about all this is that Sudeep Sen is not a prisoner of a specific style, or a set of images, or even an agenda.

SS: Well, I suspect you have answered your question yourself, which is precisely why I was trying to ask you the question back. I'm glad that one can't pigeonhole me, because my interests, my themes, my forms, my rhythms are very varied indeed.

I still think in spite of having written a fair bit for the past fifteen years or so, I am still in the continual process of growing and learning new things. Every time I work on a new book, I realise that there is so much more to learn, and so much more to explore.

When it comes to writing itself, it is always a progression – you start from point A, to point B, and onwards. One of the most interesting grammatical punctuation for me is actually the ellipse, the three dots [...], which simply says – as such, nothing ends. It makes one's way of looking at things as well as one's own writing organic. I feel it is a good thing because otherwise if you work in a very myopic kind of a way, then you are only narrowing your scope further and further. Whereas simply being open to growth, you have the entire canvas and open palette to choose from. And that is very useful and at the same time unconstraining.

ZK: Your early interest in the external architecture of poetry – i.e., the overt, formal construction of poetry – over the years has grown and graduated into an internal, much quieter, perhaps spiritual, and sparer organisation of poetry.

SS: You have put that quite well in fact. In my early poems, the architecture of the poem itself was visually much more apparent. Whereas, over time, I have been able to be much more subtle in my writing. It is essentially because of a greater experience, both in life and writing itself. You learn how to use craft and words, and hopefully you get better and better to a point that you can in fact hide very complex formal constructs in a poem to an uninitiated eye, one that is only apparent if you dig deep into the skin and tissue of the poem.

Of course, there is also a shift in sensibility, in the sense that I was much younger then. Life's circumstances change, and with that your sensibility changes and grows. I think these aspects are also reflected in my later poems.

ZK: Your poems are visually rich, but they do not just end there. You have been influenced at the same time by ancient Prakrit poetry, Japanese haiku, Chinese poetry, Imagist, and Metaphysical poetry. But you don't just try to stir your reader with only images. Your frames and conceits cast a deceptively soothing spell, one that goes beyond the physical as well as metaphysical reality.

SS: Certainly that tends to be very true. There is an immense visual quality in my poetry, partly influenced by the fact that I worked for many years as a filmmaker. Besides, I do have more than a part-time interest in photography. As I mentioned before, architecture was an important area of interest of mine, a field I might have actually pursued as a career, but circumstances took a different turn. But I still am interested in visual and graphic art, and in the whole nature of light, photography, and fibre-optics. So, all that somewhere along the line must permeate and stain my poems.

However, that's only one aspect of the poetry – only the stretched canvas, only the surface of the parchment where the colours you see are brightly dabbed on. Once you go beyond that level, there is an intensely quiet, an inwardly deeper depth of field in my writing – an aspect of my poetry which perhaps you are alluding to. I don't know whether it is spiritual or not, but certainly it is an introspective kind of writing. So, in that sense, you are right.

ZK: One of your published chapbooks, *Almanac*, contains poems corresponding to the twelve months of the year. What inspired you to write poems on the different months?

SS: It was completely accidental, actually. At the time, I was trying very hard to write poems for my newborn son, Aria, and I increasingly found that writing poetry for children was very difficult. One of the things that I was experiencing in my writing was that when I was consciously trying to write for a child, I realised that I was speaking down at them rather than to them as a colleague. So, I thought the other alternative could be poems about each month of the year as a calendar so that my son could learn the different months of the year in a creative way. Part of it was that.

Part of it was also that I realised that I had enough poems that had some reference to some month or the other. So, when I pulled all those poems together, some published and others unpublished, I realised there were poems that represented about eight of the months. Since I already had eight poems, I thought, Why not try and write four new poems relating to the remaining four months to complete the sequence? From reading the poems, you would realise that not all the poems are directly related to month concerned as such. They are obliquely related to the months. For instance, there is a poem about rice-harvesting called 'April's Air,' which is set in Japan, that takes place in April. So, the poem conveniently fit into the April month-slot.

Similarly, 'One Moonlight December Night' obviously comes in the December section. But the poem, for instance, that refers to the month of May is a recent poem which I wrote for my son, whose birthday falls on the 21st of that month. Even though the poem is titled 'Aria,'

the reference to people who are in the know is to the month of May. So, I had quite an enjoyable time putting this volume together.

ZK: The most difficult task for any reader of your poetry is that there is no one specific geographical location or boundary to associate you with. The landscapes, seascapes, and airspaces that fill your poems are borderless and transnational. There is practically no one, central location that can be identified as your own personal territory in the broad sense of the term.

SS: That's the way I have been brought up. I was brought up as a Bengali within a Bengali family milieu but in a non-Bengali landscape of cosmopolitan Delhi. I spoke English in school, Hindi on the streets, and Bengali at home. So, it was an essentially an inherently multilingual and multicultural space that I started from.

Also the range of landscapes and topographies that influenced me were both Eastern and Western at the same time. Through literature, art, and film, I had access to the Western culture, but at the same time I was immersed in my own India, and the East so to speak broadly. So, obviously it is very difficult to pin me down in one place. And I'm glad that is a difficult thing as it also relates to the earlier answer I gave you.

As you travel both vertically and horizontally, perspectives change. It is not just the diverse landscapes in terms of different countries and topographies, but it's also diverse in terms of different levels we are talking about – whether it is purely visual, purely cinematic, purely structural, purely architectural – moving from one level to the other, moving from one plane to the other, sometime it is two-dimensional, sometime it is three-dimensional, sometime it is much more.

The only thing that links me to some sort of centre is the 'centre of gravity' itself. Otherwise, the only tangible thing that links me to a centre is my own family and the Bengali culture, something that is either obliquely or directly omnipresent in my work.

ZK: The volume *Retracing American Contours* takes us back again to an American landscape, a terrain that you explored in your highly successful third book, *New York Times*. Why the return to the United States?

SS: The poems in *Retracing American Contours* are poems that were originally written in the period from 1987 to 1990, much of it around the same time as the poems in *New York Times* itself. Originally, I had planned for all these poems to have come out together as one volume. But since the book became very large, my British publisher thought it would be a good idea to cull out the New York-based and New York-related poems to form one independent book. I went along with that idea and was very pleased about the eventual results.

So the poems in this new volume, *Retracing American Contours*, are the ones that I want to preserve from that original group which were not published in book form. Publishing them now, almost a decade after they were first born, is also a private way of visiting those places again. There are so many important events and significant memories attached to those places that it is almost like a journey down memory-lane, but with a freshly considered perspective.

ZK: Your volume *Lines of Desire* is stunning – quite a stylistic revelation. As a poet you strike similes and evoke metaphors that are original, cool, untainted, soothing, and, at the same time, urgent. In addition, they also remind one of conceits in metaphysical poetry.

SS: That is an interesting observation. *Lines of Desire* is basically a series of very tightly written, short, erotic poems. In fact, I was rereading and savouring the poetry of John Donne, Sappho, and the erotic Sanskrit poets quite a lot while writing some of the poems in this volume.

It is very difficult to write about love and passion in an original and fresh way because it is one subject that has been completely exhausted. So I wondered, How does one write about it without actually sounding old? My way of getting into it was to turn them inside out, rather than going from outside into the inside, which is usually the case, as it is a much safer and controllable route. I wanted to capture the raw passion and essence of the particular range of emotions, and at the same time be subtle and unobvious. Also I wanted to give these poems a meditative and chilling quality, an edge that is at the same time sharp as well as mesmerising.

ZK: Tell us about *Aria* – an impressive volume of translations by you that recently won the A K Ramanujan Translation Award and has been on the Best Books of the Year lists in leading newspapers and magazines like *Outlook*, *The Mint/Wall Street Journal*, and others.

SS: *Aria* is my first volume of translations (though I had earlier published a chapbook of translations called *In Another Tongue*). *Aria* gathers poetry from well-known and lesser-known poets from Bengali, Hindi, and Urdu as well as Hebrew, Macedonian, Persian, Danish, Spanish, Portuguese, and others.

William Radice, one of the foremost Tagore translators, pointed out that this volume is quite a departure from what I have been engaged in in the past. I have enjoyed this relatively new process a lot. Translation is at the same time very different and similar to writing original poetry. But the dynamics and energies are completely unusual and difficult to quantify when translating. My introductory essay in that book explains the process and impulses behind my parallel life as a translator.

One of my favourite pieces of translation include Jibananda Das's poem 'Banalata Sen.' Clinton Seely, the authority on this poet, commented that this is one of the best translations of the poem he has seen to date. Here is my translation:

For a thousand years I have walked this earth's passage
by day and night – from Lanka's shores to Malay's vast seas.
I've travelled much – been a guest at Bimbhishar and at Ashok's courts,
stayed in the distant nights, in the town of Bidharba.
I'm long worn-out; around me waters of sea and life have endlessly swirled.
My only peace – a fleeting moment snatched with her –
Natore'r Banalata Sen.

Like the dense ink-night of Bidhisha, her hair – black, deep black;
her face – like the delicate-weave of Shrabasti's filigree-frieze.

Just as a lost boatman, rudderless, tossing in the far seas
chances upon a lush-green Isle of Spice,
I too caught a sight – saw her, a mere glimpse in the dark. Gently, raising
her eyes like a bird's nest, she whispered: 'Where were you, all this while?'
[And there she stands at my dream's end – my own Banalata Sen].

With soft-settling hiss of dew, evening closes the day's end;
kites erase from their wings, sun-stain smell of flight.
When colours of the earth gently fade, fireflies light up their palette,
and old songs find new lyric, old stories new score.
Birds return home, so do the rivers; as life's trade – its give-and-take – cease.
Only the dark stays. And just as it remains, so does sitting by my side, face
to face, my own Banalata Sen.

– Jibanananda Das, 'Banalata Sen' [translation © Sudeep Sen]

I especially enjoyed translating from Bengali and Hindi – languages I know well. Growing up in Delhi was truly trilingual – Bengali, Hindi, and English are the languages I use (but I understand quite a few northern Indian languages – Punjabi, Rajasthani, Urdu, even Gujarati, and Maharastrian from western India). When I am in the West, it is predominantly English that I am using – though in non-English-speaking countries, one realises that English can be so redundant, and thank god for that.

ZK: Let us talk about *Postcards from Bangladesh*, a lavish, 300-page full-colour coffee table book – elegantly written, beautifully photographed and designed. It is really a high-calibre literary book in the guise of an illustrated book!

SS: It is a unique and personal account of Bangladesh as seen through the eyes of three creative professionals – Tanvir (a Bangladeshi photographer), Kelley Lynch (an American designer), and me. The book revolves around the idea and metaphor of a postcard – snapshots, snippets of life in one place that capture a moment in time – reflecting something larger about the culture as a whole. It is not meant to be encyclopaedic or all-inclusive. Rather, it portrays what Bangladesh means to us from alternate focal points – things off the beaten track, aspects left out of final frames, unused notes scribbled in the margins – all forming the glue that binds the book together. *Postcards from Bangladesh* traces journeys that are both interior and exterior using prose, poetry, and photography to create a poetic documentary – a film in freeze-frames.

The heart of Bengali culture – its sensibility and charm – is underscored in chapters that highlight the essential Bengali diet and livelihood provided by rice and fish; the six unique seasons of the Indian subcontinent, especially the monsoon rains; crafts and artefacts like *rickshaw* paintings; indigenous clothing like *lungi* and *sari*; the great rivers – the Padma, Meghna, Jamuna, and Buriganga; the nuances of religion; the bricks and mortar that form the country's backbone; and Bangladesh's popular music and culture. All these seek to give the

reader a sense of the country that is outside the purview of development manuals, disaster media stories, and government tourist guides.

Postcards from Bangladesh is the first book published in that country to creatively fuse literature and art, photography and documentary, travelogue and dialogue, prose and poetry into an organic narrative whole.

ZK: Among your newer work is a major book-length poem, *Distracted Geography: An Archipelago of Intent*. It is a highly unusual and inventive work, a *tour de force*. How did it begin? Tell us something about its form, and the journey itself.

SS: The book-length poem – *Distracted Geography: An Archipelago of Intent* – began on a wet August morning, as I sat in an half-sunken basement space of a partially restored fifteenth-century mansion: Gartincaber in Doune (near Stirling, Scotland). Almost drunk under the spell of this space, both interior and exterior, dactyls were dictated to me by photons in the surrounding electric-charged air. It was here where my journey began.

My journey continued, leaving a winding trail of foot-steps, pug-marks I tried to hide, but could not. It is still an uncompleted journey, a journey that cannot be completed ... perhaps, it is part of one's own fallibility. This journey has infinitely long lines and many miles left to traverse, but I know my blood's inadequate crimson may prevent such an ambition. So, I take all this as a gift, a dream. I feel constantly grateful that I have been allowed such a dream.

Along the way, I have been coloured by many sources, interests, passions, and obsessions – some obvious and others oblique. Among them, there are overheard phrases, paintings, photographs, fragmented images, films, music, memory, poems, women, fluids, and the intoxicated air.

My alter-ego wanted to be an architect and a cartographer – I have a more than part-time interest in science – all these must have, in some way, influenced this poem.

I reread many of my favourite poetry books at the time – classics like Milton's *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, and Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal*; volumes by contemporary masters like Pablo Neruda, Octavio Paz, Joseph Brodsky, Seamus Heaney, Derek Walcott, and others.

Walcott's *Omeros*, Brodsky's *To Urania*, Galway Kinnell's *The Book of Nightmares*, Donald Hall's *The One Day*, Jaan Kaplinski's *The Same Sea in Us All*, Arun Kolatkar's *Jejuri*, Dom Moraes's *Serendip*, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra's *Middle Earth*, and A.K. Ramanujan's *Collected Poems* especially kept me company. I have used fragments from many of these poets' work throughout to punctuate the narrative, so that readers can get some sense of their world as parallel asides, just as it did for me on my journey.

I was also immersed in Gray's *Anatomy*, Encarta's *BodyWorks*, Louis Kahn's *Sounds and Silence*, Matthew Arnold and T. S. Eliot's essays, John Frederick Nim's *Western Wind*. At the time, I relied on my grandfather's trusted old compass that helped navigate my way, imaginatively plotting a course through my National Geographic map collection that lay in disarray. My memory provided calm, as I struggled, translating Jibanananda Das's 'Banalata Sen' to re-create its music and passion. All of them have been guiding companions – and so, the journey went on.

The sparse elongated structure of the poem partly reflects the strength and surety of the human vertebra and spine, much like Neruda's *Odes* that reflect the long, thin shape of Chile. The sections and subsections join together like synapses between bone and bone. The titles are translucent markers or breath pauses, not separators.

The short two-line couplets echo the two-step footprints, a pathway mapped on the atlas. The 12 sections correspond to the 12 bones in a human ribcage, the 12 months in a year, the two 12-hour cycles in a day. There are 26 bones in the human vertebrae, and the 26 parts in the poem slowly assemble themselves from a montage of tenuously strung lyrics. The 206 pages in this book match the exact number of bones in a human body.

This poem leaves a footprint from a perennial walk that meanders through public and private spaces – making sense of the vicissitudes of our loves, losses, wants, desires, inadequacies – as it maps the matrix of living and dying.

ZK: *Prayer Flag* is an unusual CD-sized book with your photography, poetry, translations of your poems in Bengali, an audio CD with reading by you, and music.

SS: *Prayer Flag* was a really enjoyable project to put together. I have been seriously taking photographs for many years, and many have been published individually and as sequences on book covers, magazines, etc. This is the first time that some of them have been put together officially in book form along with my poetry and audio reading by me and my translator. The photographs are meant to stand on their own and do not illustrate the text; rather, they show different sides of my work – text and design, words and the visual, orality and musicality.

The celebrated actor and author Tom Alter, reviewing the book in *Biblio*, wrote: '*Prayer Flag* is Sudeep Sen's stunning book of poetry, photography and live audio reading by the poet accompanied with music (that is included in a CD with a generous selection of 55 poems ranging over two decades from 1983–2003). This multi-media compilation is a first for a poet from India to be published internationally. Gregor Robertson on BBC rightly places Sen 'amongst the finest younger English-language poets in the international literary scene. A distinct voice: carefully modulated and skilled, well measured and crafted' – high and rare praise indeed, and rightly so for our own Indian master of words. . . . *Prayer Flag* is not a conventional poetry collection, but a unique object of art that reveals the two intrinsically linked artistic sides of Sen's work and talent – words and images. It is an album of Sen's poetry, his wonderful photography and design, his recorded ebb and flow in his own voice – with its play of colours – the drifting in and out of Bengali, Indian and international ethos, and then back again. ... The book is a total experience, just as a cup of fine tea becomes so much finer when imbibed with a friend so close at hand, and delicate scones with a dab of honey, and an evening sighing and singing into the night. ... *Prayer Flag* is lifelong friend I will keep with love and admiration, with smile and wonder – a gift from a master artist.'

ZK: You edited the landmark anthology, *The HarperCollins Book of English Poems* [by Indians]. Tell us more about the book and the project.

SS: Contemporary English fiction by Indians is now well known and widely established as part of the mainstream national and international literature with authors like V S Naipaul, Anita

Desai, Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, Vikram Chandra, Aravind Adiga, and many others. They have won a range of prestigious prizes and awards including the Nobel, Booker, Commonwealth, Pulitzer, Sahitya Akademi, among others.

Indian poetry in English has a longer and more distinguished tradition than Indian fiction in English,' asserts Pankaj Mishra in the *TLS*. A British publisher, in a catalogue item states, 'Many Indian poets were mining the rich vein of "chutnified" (Salman Rushdie's word) Indian English long before novelists like Rushdie and Upamanyu Chatterjee started using it in their fiction.' Both these observations may well be true, but the ground reality of the story of Indian poetry in English is completely different. In the wider cultural arena, very little is known about Indian poetry and poets, within and more so outside India. Only a handful of contemporary English-language Indian poets command an international and national status. And the others who are visible happen to be known within very tight and narrow confines of the poetry circles and university reading circuits. Beyond the initiated groups, not many follow or read contemporary English poetry, though ironically a great number write it.

There are not enough discerning anthologies of contemporary Indian poetry published in India and even less abroad – and the few that exist [and not very easily available] have tended to be rather narrow, inward-looking, and unsatisfactory. Anthologies of new writing serve as perfect vehicles and repository that showcase and highlight the best in current literatures. They also capture the pulse of literary culture, and act as good sources for archival material for future generations. Many fine single-author individual volumes by Indian poets have appeared in India and elsewhere, but their scattered appearances (and the aforementioned lack of a worthy library of comprehensive poetry anthologies) do not add up to what one would think of as a body of contemporary works that reflects a movement in new English poetry by Indians. My recent anthology as an editor, *The HarperCollins Book of English Poetry [by Indians]*, hopes to redress some of the shortfall or near absence.

A unique feature of this anthology is the fact that the overwhelming bulk of the poems are new and unpublished in individual author volumes. The range of style, preoccupation, technique, is vast, various and impressive. The poets represented in the book live in India and the broader Indian diasporas – the United States and Canada, United Kingdom and Europe, Africa and Asia, Australia and the Pacific. This diversity and multicultural representation allows the poets to have an internal dialogue between themselves and the varied topographical cultural spaces they come from or are influenced by. Therefore the poems create an inherent syntactical and historical tension – one that ultimately celebrates the written word, imagination, artistry, intellect, and humanity.

I have arranged the poets alphabetically using their first names so that there is a further sense of intimacy and a community-feel among fellow poets. This would hopefully break traditional barriers that come with formal arrangements when using last names or age as hierarchical arcs. What matters in this book are the well-crafted passionately-felt poems themselves and their unique, intelligent and artistic qualities – and not reputation of the poets' per se. So you will find the stars and established poets sharing the same platform with relatively newer promising writers in a large room without walls where both individual and collective echoes are equally eloquent and important.

The subject matter of the poems and their poetic concerns are staggeringly large and wide-ranging. There is introspection and gregariousness, politics and pedagogy, history and science, illness and fantasy, love and erotica, sex and death – the list is centrifugal, efferent, and expansive. There is free verse and an astonishing penchant for formal verse – so you are likely to encounter a pantoum next to an acrostic poem, a triolet juxtaposed against a ghazal, lyric narratives and prose poetry, Sapphic fragments and Bhartrhari-style shataka, mosaic pastiché, ekphrastic verse, sonnet, rubai, poem songs, prayer chants, documentary feeds, rap, reggae, creole, canzone, tritina, sestina, ottava rima, rime royale and variations on waka: haiku, tanka, katauta, choka, bussokusekika, sedoka – the Indian poets are in full flight.

Taking into consideration the quality of the contents in this recent anthology, I would provocatively assert 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. There is bravura, experimentation, risk-taking, innovation, erudition, and delightfully uninhibited and fine use of language by the poets here. And for the best of them, this book is just a mere show window displaying only a small slice of the authors' individual oeuvre that is wide-ranging and impressive. The generous selection spread over nearly 550 pages – significantly shifts, expands, remaps, and realigns the existing topography and tenor of contemporary English poetry by Indians.

ZK: *Ladakh* brings together remarkable new work of two foremost international artists – Sudeep Sen, a leading Indian poet, and Janet Pierce, an established Irish painter. The text of the first two sections is landscaped in *Ladakh* and the high Himalayas; and the third and fourth sections follow the Irish terrain both topographically and in spirit. Both their works have similar resonances, inspired by similar landscapes, and there runs a shared thread of introverted meditation in their creative pieces.

SS: Quietude does not just mean starkness; it includes in its fold vibrancy of colour and passion as well. Janet's abstract works use watercolour, pastel and chalk that often have embossed gold and silver leaf from Old Delhi's Chandi Chowk embedded as a common motif. This geometric textured metallic luminosity matched the sparkle of the quiet philosophical centre of my words. Precious metals have a noble unannounced ring to them.

'It felt easy to paint to the voice of Sudeep reading his poetry. I trusted the similarities of our concerns and let the paintings flow,' writes Pierce. 'On reading his poems, I felt I understood them beyond reason. They were spiritual, sensuous, tender, warm, rich in visual imagery and rich in the Indian culture I had grown to love. The multi-layered meaning was held back with a disciplined simplicity, the fineness of spirit and understated finesse. Sudeep's is a controlled and intelligent imagination, yet full of deepest essential feelings, spontaneity, and erudition. I was blown away.'

Ladakh has been curated and arranged as a symphony – the text and images are not intended to directly illustrate each other but are meant to act as antithetical paired constructs to evoke a new vibrant dynamic, an ongoing conversation that disparate cultures share through the medium of common artistic practice and aesthetics. Synergy, serendipity, politics, poetry, music, art – all have their divine intervention in their familial and artistic relationship.

ZK: *Fractals* was first published as a special commemorative edition for the 2013 Nobel Laureate Week, and launched by Derek Walcott. It contains new and selected poems, as well as translations, over a period 1979-2013. Tell us more about it.

SS: It is best if I just quote part of the jacket text of the book:

Fractals: New & Selected Poems/Translations 1978–2013 – contains over 250 new pieces. It also includes a batch of 50 odd poems from the 1997 out-of-print volume – *Postmarked India: New & Selected Poems* (HarperCollins) – that have been frequently anthologised, taught, and are popular with his readers. In many of his new poems, he contends with the sometimes uneasy and hard issues of illness, death, sex, love, loneliness, and loss – while exploring history, politics and the unsaid tension that has showed its ugly face in present-day Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity.

But at the heart of *Fractals* is the Jorge Zalamea International Poetry Prize winning ‘Blue Nude’ sequence – a formally chiselled set of poems inspired by Henri Matisse’s cobalt-blue cut-out series. Sen obliquely juxtaposes the Indian myth of Radha and Krishna with the post-modern view of European art, as he takes on other modern masters such as Cézanne, Picasso, Dali and Chagall. Literary classics, mythology, music, dance, theatre, graphic art, cinema, photography, and other media serve as additional inspirational sources for many of his new poems.

In complete contrast however, the pieces in ‘BodyText’, ‘Rain’, ‘Wo|Man’, ‘Dreaming of Cezanne’ and others use a highly-wrought stylised mode of prose poetry or poetic micro-fiction that counter-points the traditional and classical verse-forms employed so effectively by Sen in his early works, such as *The Lunar Visitations*, *New York Times & Kali in Ottava Rima*.

In *BodyText*, while ‘excavating a set of images from physics, chemistry and biology, Sen does an extraordinary job of imbricating the corporeal with the natural elements and processes [in] a brilliant formalising of these themes ... the images are startlingly fresh and extremely evocative.’ (Pramod Nayar in *Contemporary Indian English Poetry in English*).

Sen’s passion for topography and terrain, science and design – both real and imagined, tactile and intellectual, external and internal – is intensely evident in the sections ‘Geographies’, ‘Parsing’, ‘Sexless like Alphabets’, ‘Brief|Case’, ‘India Ink’, and others. You are likely to find yourself in the bleakly beautiful Ladakh, the cloistered Sanskriti, decoding skeletal structures in the Scottish Highlands, crossing Dublin’s Liffey, praying at Jerusalem’s The Wailing Wall, mapping South African homelands, on the Nile banks dreaming of Cavafy in Alexandria, with the ship-breakers in Chittagong, in rain-drenched rural Bengal, amid shrilled-toned metropolises of New York, London and New Delhi, or at the ebullient mercy of Mount Vesuvius.

Then there are chance encounters – direct and indirect, real and bookish – with Joseph Brodsky in *The Village*, Derek Walcott in *Omeros* and *Granada*; Seamus Heaney in *Sandymount*, with Tomas Tranströmer captured by Bei Dao in *Macedonia*; with Jibanananda Das’s muse Banalata Sen, Rabindranath Tagore’s humour, Shakespeare’s

Bolingbroke, Milton's Satan, and many others in the world of history, science, politics, visual and literary arts.

In the concluding section of the book, the readers experience another important facet of Sudeep Sen's *oeuvre* – literary translation. A small selection, presented from the A K Ramanujan Translation Award winning book *Aria*, show how deftly he crosses tongues, beautifully marrying a variety of linguistic traditions and forms – while conscientiously acting as a silent and subtle negotiator and sculptor of words and images.

Sudeep Sen's poems are finely calibrated and cadenced. They are by turns lyrical, spare, subtle, and inventive; but always poised and deeply intelligent. *Fractals* is a long awaited, highly innovative, formally mature volume – a major book from one of India's leading poets.

ZK: And your forthcoming book *Blue Nude* which won the Jorge Zalamea International Poetry Prize?

SS: *Blue Nude* is an abbreviated version of *Fractals* with additional new poems.

ZK: What about other artistic collaborations – with musicians and dancers, theatre and film actors?

SS: *Rain*, too, has had many musical collaborators – a young fusion group, Advaita, led by Abhishek Mathur and some members of the Artists Unlimited band led by Annette Phillips, came together in a live concert at the British Council. While the actor Tom Alter and I read the original text from my book, they provided a wonderfully intricate and understated soundscape they had specially composed for *Rain*. In fact, half a dozen of my earlier poems were sung out loud by Abhishek and Annette in styles as varied and reminiscent as Pink Floyd, Eric Clapton, Dire Straits, Ella Fitzgerald, Diana Krall, in rhythm and blues, rock, pop, and minimalist modes.

Further collaborations saw jazz flautist Rajeev Raja join Tom Alter and me at the India International Centre in New Delhi and *The Times of India* Kala Ghoda Arts Festival in Bombay; the same duo performed in Ahmedabad at Sarabhai's Natarani Amphitheatre with the classical flautist Keyur Balkrushna; and also in Hyderabad, the Charminar Jazz Collective collaborated with me in a wonderfully improvised live concert.

At the India International Centre's prestigious annual international Festival of the Arts, I presented 'Wo|Man: Desire, Divinity, Denouement,' collaborating with the wonderful classical voice of Vidya Rao and classical bamboo flautist Srinibas Satapathy, accompanied by the young Odissi dancer Moumita Ghosh, a disciple of legendary Madhavi Mudgal.

At the same festival in 2012, dancers of the Centre for Mohiniyattam, Padmashri Bharati Shivaji and Vijayalakshmi, presented a dance drama version of *Rain*. Original composed music by a multi-Grammy Los Angeles based composer, Mac Quayle, provided astonishing soundtrack to the visual feast. Elements of both classical South and East Indian dance, as well as Carnatic and Hindustani classical music added the rich texture.

Most recently, a 'music, song, photography, poetry' collaborative with Aditya Balani resulted in a CD titled *Kargil*.

The Spanish edition of *Rain* (translated by M. Dolores Herrero under the title *Lluvia*) recently appeared from University of Zaragoza in Spain. Inspired by this book, a concert-length score was composed by the Javier Coble Quartet in Spain, and the resultant CD is forthcoming soon. The world-premiere concert in Jaca (Spain) with Javier Coble and Kepa Oses as musicians, and M Dolores Herrero as Spanish reader and I in English, went down extremely well. Since then, we have had invitations from various organizations and festival directors. Plans are afoot for a national multicity tour in India, venues in the UK and USA, and more in Spain.

I have always been interested in the other arts, so collaborating with outstanding world and Indian artists is a real treat, pleasure, and a satisfying experience for me.

ZK: Finally, Sudeep Sen as a literary publisher and editor. You are the editorial director of the publishing house AARK ARTS with an impressive list of over fifty prize-winning authors. You edit *Atlas*, the critically acclaimed international 'book[maga]zine' of 'new writing, art and image.'

You serve variously as contributing editor, poetry editor, literary advisor for the *Literary Review* (USA), *Orient Express* (Oxford), *Molossus* (USA), *International Literature Quarterly* (UK), *Sheffield Thursday* (Sheffield), *International Exchange for Poetic Invention*(USA/Holland), *New Quest* (Pune), *Urban Voice* (Bombay), *Six Seasons Review* (Dhaka), *facebookpoetry*, *Coldnoon*, *Four Quarters Magazine*, *Lakeview Journal*, and others.

You are also the editor of important anthologies such as *The HarperCollins Book of Modern English Poetry by Indians*, *Yellow Nib Contemporary English Poetry by Indians*, *World Literature Today: Writing from Modern India* (this current issue), *The Literary Review Indian Poetry*, *Biblio South Asian English Poetry* (portfolio), *Midnight's Grandchildren: Post-Independence English Poetry from India*, *Index for Censorship [Poems] Songs of Partition*, *Lines Review: Twelve Modern Young Indian Poets*, *Wasafiri: Contemporary Writing from India, South Asia and the Diaspora*, among others.

In addition, you are a photographer, filmmaker, visualiser, and designer, besides being a tireless literary activist. Do these innumerable roles not distract you and interfere with your poetry?

You are a true modern-day polymath!

SS: That is terribly kind. As you already know, I was always equally and simultaneously interested in certain sciences and the arts – architecture, fibre optics, print and 3D design, moving and still image, music and dance, oral and printed literature. So, performing the other roles is simply an extension of me as an artist in its holistic sense. I enjoy the stimulus and challenge these other genres and roles offer, and the wide experience they bring to my writing.

As an editor, critic, and literary reviewer, I have to read so much new writing every day – and stumbling upon and reading good writing is always inspiring and uplifting – so my role as a traveller, literary editor and publisher fits in with me comfortably, and complements and enriches my life enormously as a full-time writer. I am grateful for the opportunity where my passion has turned out to be my profession.

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Ziaul Karim is executive editor of *Jamini*, an international arts magazine, and former literary editor of the *Daily Star*.

Selected links

Nobel Laureate Week <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/sudeep-sen-to-address-nobel-laureate-week/article4185443.ece>

Jaipur Literature Festival

http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=tIAigwTR1JI

British Council Contemporary Writers <http://literature.britishcouncil.org/sudeep-sen>

The Best American Poetry interview

<http://blog.bestamericanpoetry.com/the-best-american-poetry/2013/02/interview-with-sudeep-sen-in-new-delhi-by-catherine-woodard.html>

Europalia Festival (Belgium) http://www.europalia.eu/en/article/sudeep-sen_362.html

Author website www.sudeepsen.net