

REVIEWS

Review of Sudeep Sen's *Anthropocene: Climate Change, Contagion, Consolation* (2021)

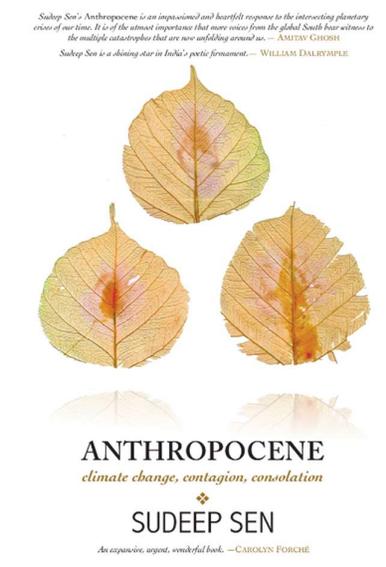
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Sudeep Sen, *Anthropocene: Climate Change, Contagion, Consolation* (Poetry)

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Anthropocene: Climate Change, Contagion and Consolation, Sudeep Sen's latest book in his vast oeuvre of poetry collections and edited anthologies, is not a poetry collection — or rather, it is a poetry collection that coexists with stunningly captured photographs, thoughtful prose pieces, and processions of poignant quotations that come together to create a substantial and urgent voice in environmental discourse. It's a voice that does not reuse what Charles Eisenstein calls the “war narratives” of climate change activism. The story of separation that easily hijacks our ecological emergency is, in Sen's text, a story yearned to be dropped. In fact, *Anthropocene* is littered with whispered remembrances and reminders of where connection rather than disconnection may be found, and of the spiritual and imaginative spaces that invoke the longed-for rain, “the only hope”

(“Black Box: Etymology of a Crisis”, p. 73), that brings both literal relief to a burning earth and metaphorical cleansing to a polluted human condition.

But the trajectory that leads the way to redemption and recovery is a longer and bumpier stretch than the light that appears at the end of the textual tunnel, particularly in the last three chapters, fittingly titled “Consolation: Hope”, “Lockdown: Reading | Writing” and “Epilogue: Prayer.” Before we can safely and comfortably relax on ground that invites us to expand out of mental rigidities through the imagination — “imagination isn’t caged in speech” (“Language”, p. 160) — and that affirms silence, solitude, prayerful meditation and healing—“spartan, simple, secular / spiritual — a deep sonar / healing — its soul sombre, / magical, meditative” (“Consolation, p. 149) — we must first cover turbulent territory that blazes and quivers and quakes with the interlinked ailments of the planet and of the human body. Sen has not created a text of premature spiritual redemption and yet, unlike T. S. Eliot whose “The Wasteland” is inevitably and also predictably summoned through *Anthropocene*, Sen’s spiritual invocation does not contain the jitteriness and resignation of Eliot’s lament. Sen’s appeal to the spiritual is not enveloped in questions that point toward uncertainty, even as it, simultaneously, is not presented as a simple solution to the world’s woes. Like Eliot’s poem, the final poem in Sen’s text, “Om: A Cerement”, ends with the Sanskrit peace chant, “Om Shantih, Shantih, Shantih”, after a harrowing look at the “pandemic-struck, oxygen-deprived” catastrophe that has found Sen writing “endless condolence notes” (p. 174). It is a prayer and a final immersion in hope not as an escape from reality but as a means to *be* with reality. The poem is preceded by “Chant”, one of the four explicitly spiritual poems in the Epilogue, and which affirms the interconnectedness of everything: “all is one — one is many — many is all. *om ma ni padme hum*” (p. 173). Sen’s arrival at this redemptive space is more confident than Eliot’s.

The bulk of *Anthropocene*’s landscape, however, evokes struggle: the struggle to breathe, to cool down, to live comfortably in a body more and more in peril on a planet more and more in peril. It charts through Chapters 2 (“Anthropocene | Climate Change”), 3 (“Pandemic | Love in the Time of Corona”), 4 (“Contagion | Corona Red”) and 6 (“Holocene | Geographies”) the chaos, fragmentation and suffering that mark the present plight of the human species, but oddly, not of animals; the text does not hold much space for other species, which does incite questions about what other dimensions and insights may have been evoked had there been a larger leap out of the anthropocentric leaning of Sen’s book. Still, his devotion to the fracturing of the human experience through the lenses of disembodiment, asphyxiation, asthma, and topsy turvy weather

systems, successfully carries the message of distress that the planet and human beings are experiencing. Displacement and disconnection occur on environmental, social and even, as the poem “Disembodied” reveals, on bodily levels: “My body carved from abandoned bricks of a ruined temple, from minaret-shards of an old mosque ... My bones don’t fit together correctly as they should” (p. 28).

And yet, for a book that points towards the very real and physically palpable issue of climate change, Sen’s text is ironically replete with texts from other texts in the form of quotations that precede each chapter and a large number of the poems and prose pieces. It offers a textual confetti of insights, poetry and wisdom from a diverse range of minds: Mirza Ghalib, Sappho, Susan Sontag, Paul Celan, Charles Dickens, Bertolt Brecht, Amitav Ghosh. Sen’s sentiments and words at times dance in tandem with these voices, and at others, springboard off them into explorations and expansions that create a literary symphony: it is hard not to feel the depth of influence, of intertextuality.

But why not? Sen’s book seems to be suggesting that the creative artist, the writer, has a role to play, and that role, as the quote by the filmmaker Akira Kurosawa that precedes section 6 of the prologue goes, “is to not look away” (p. 23). *Anthropocene* is also a meditation on the place of the writer in society. And so, as Sen writes in his prologue, “amid all the clamour of public rhetoric and widespread distress, this book is a quiet artistic offering” (p. 23). That the book is quiet is debatable — there are many areas of silence in the book and generous spaces given to the reader to reflect; but it is also a noisy book, rich with voices that insist on coming to aural surface and that insist on clamour of a different kind than the “fascist political din” that “overrides the silence of introspection” (p. 23). Sen’s book hollers in the way artists must holler in a world “where the ravages of climate change scar humanity, where the cleaving schism between the rich and poor becomes ever-widening, where racism peaks at an all-time high, where toxicity amongst people proliferates, and fake news abounds” (p. 23).

The artist has a responsibility — to bear witness, to speak and to continue speaking, to fly prayer flags of text that sound truths we need to hear over and over again until the message has sunk into our collective consciousness. Utterance and the contemplative silence of solitude are both vitally important; the written and verbalised word that painfully and honestly carve out truths *and* the quiet that arrives from the “isolation and solitude ... [the] precious zone for philosophical and creative thinking, a space for silence and “stillness” (as Pico Iyer says) that allows an inner

voice to be heard” (“Poetics of Solitude, Songs of Silence”, p. 163), yes, both, Sen reminds us, are necessary. *Anthropocene*, in this sense, is victorious in highlighting our current collective wounding in terms of the environmental crisis and stark social injustices as well as the ageless position of the artist in society.

Editor’s note: This is a review of the US edition. Readers can purchase a copy of the three editions of this poetry collection via the following links:

UK: <https://pipparannbooks.com/product/anthropocene/>

Amazon USA & Worldwide (E-Book) <https://tinyurl.com/npmp9v5w>

Amazon India: <https://tinyurl.com/3vzmz89u>