



Book Review

Sudeep Sen. *RED*. Nirox Foundation, 2023

Kamaldeep Kaur*

Red is palash, red is alta — / it is nuptial, it is birth. // Red is Kali, red is Durga — / it is Sappho, it is Andal.

Sudeep Sen's latest book of poetry and photography, *Red*, can be taken as a sequel to his prize-winning volume, *Anthropocene: Climate Change, Contagion, Consolation* (London: Pippa Rann, 2021). *Red* is the spectacular outcome of Sen's international fellowship at the Nirox Foundation in Gauteng, South Africa — a site heralded as the "Cradle of Civilisation", declared as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. The 100-acre estate with its rich nature reserves home to a vast variety of plant and animal life, stunning landscapes, fossil caves and a sculpture park, precipitated a remarkable upsurge of creativity resulting in this collection.

Imbued with Sen's characteristic zeal for the creative arts, the poetry is a tribute to the phenomenal power of nature and explores its grandeur over an infinite paleo-geological spatio-temporal scale. The book also comprises spectacular photographs of the terrain — a vivid and powerful visual treat that enhances and deepens the reading experience. At the heart of the text however is the colour 'Red', explored in all its manifestations across the physical and emotional panorama. It is the Yeatsian centre which does hold the diverse elements contained in the book. From the time that he arrives, the poet is mysteriously struck by and drawn to the colour red in "just about anything that donned the barest hint of that rufescent colour", he writes. The colour permeates through every pore of the collection. The poetry then gives reasons to this enigmatic allure for the colour red.

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The book is divided into two parts. Book I is titled “Red (2023)” — poems composed and photographs taken during his fellowship; and Book II is “South African Woodcut” (1995) poetry from an earlier collection from when Sen visited South Africa three decades ago. In a sense, this a journey from the present to the past, much like his own immersion in the past in this “Cradle of Civilization”.

Book I is further divided into 5 parts, beginning with “Children of the Stars”, a meditation on the cosmic cycles, creationism, the sun, the sky, the fossils. The spectacular “tectonic drama” (“Split Fossil”) is prised open, as the poet records “this old continent’s Black History” (“Dolomite”). Each element is/has been integral to the development of civilisation in the estate enriched with fossils and minerals. The stars, the sky, the waterfalls all point to a “slow charting of celestial memory.” (“My Intimate Skies”).

MY INTIMATE SKIES

for Sven Christian

The heaventree of stars hung with humid nightblue fruit.

— JAMES JOYCE, *Ulysses*

Pin-hole sharp rays, exact as chiselled diamond tips,
glow in infinite lumens. In this sprawling crisp-dry

Savannah highveld — these luminous eyes, light up
my vast intimate skies, writing out terrestrial

histories on an ever-shifting skyscape. Within
its private metaphors, this fossil-cradled terrain-
DNA

refracts. The cosmic clockwork measures exactly,
each light-ray’s frequency, wave-length and laser-

strength. It is astronomy’s language, a slow charting
of celestial memory on granite-black backdrop —

a plotted canvas, a maritime mapping of ocean's
unpredictable trade lanes. Memory is starlight.

The second part (in Book I) is titled “Red I” is the core of the entire book, phrases from which resonate throughout the collection whilst the poet expounds the meaning of red at multiple planes. It reads like an incantatory sacrament, an oratorical *tour de force*—invoking the colour as a primeval presence and symbol. Here are the first two sections of the 8-part long poem:

RED 1

1

Red is *palash*, red is *alta* —
it is nuptial, it is birth.

Red is Kali, red is Durga —
it is Sappho, it is Andal.

Red is my vocation,
my *Chandipaath*, your *Onam*.

On your forehead — I apply
triad-streaks of white-ash,

red vermilion mingled
in coconut-oil, glistening.

Love passion death decay, you say.
Red is forever & every day.

2.

Blood is not red, it is vital —
it is sanguine, it is sad.

Red colours my blankness,

my void, my needs.

It is hyoid's reflected hue —
of hymen, fertility, flame.

It is frigidity, it is coldness —
it is passion, it is deep heat.

Red is cerise, carmine —
it is raw, it is incarnadine.

Each shade, a subtext —
each layer, a mood.

Each line, an absence —
each texture, a canvas.

On the one hand it is “Kali” and “Durga”, and on the other hand the poet poses a rhetorical question—“is it an ordinary tomato in shopping aisle's ordinary?” Even though the poem traverses through the multiple zones of geography, physiology, anthropology, ritual and religion — the poet does not lose sight of the political. The troubled past and present of Africa, a continent of contradictions, where rich resources co-exist with abject poverty, is never far from his mind. The layers of soil that conceal fossils is apprehended thus:

Is this rock, a mere fossil
whose story has been

deliberately erased from
this land's troubled

history?

The poet is conscious of the illusion that this pristine, panoramic landscape entails and holds.

The third part titled “Red II” begins with a prose piece “Red Fence”. Departing from Robert Frost’s assertion that “good fences make good neighbours”, this fence is a stand-alone feature in the middle of a field that apparently serves no purpose. Sen however construes it as a free-flowing space, “its non-belief in barriers, boundaries, borders; its disinterest in keeping aspects of humanity gated.” In the poem “Holi” too Sen is reminded of the colourful festival with “no hierarchies, no classifications, no colour-coded demographics.”

The poetry in the fourth part, “Cranial Red, Bone Red”, captures the actual fossils found at the site. The poet attempts to decipher the hidden, ancient stories that are etched on each stone. The fossils are like a “song for our ancestors, from before the beginning.” Sen expresses the music and rhythm of nature as a bare tree with outstretched branches reminds him of a ballet dancer “in an inverted plié.” The poetry emerges from the intersections of anthropology, archaeology and art.

BALLERINA: TREE

Everything in the universe has rhythm. everything dances.

— MAYA ANGELOU

Arms out-stretched, torso arched, head cloud-hidden —

she flies through the air, unhindered by rooted stasis.

Her striated leotard — imprinted unevenly with time’s mercurial history, etched by morse-code electrical pulses.

Photosynthesis, capillary movement, now ended —
nature’s cycles fossilised as tree’s age-rings.

Unclothed, lightning struck — wan, bare, stripped —
robbed of her youth’s allure. Still she stands, statuesque —

a symbol of unbridled jouissance, in an
inverted pli  .

The fifth and final part of Book II titled “Brown, Black, White” is an assortment of prose, poetry, pictures and haiku deliberating on the dreams and desire of the heart. There emerges a clarity of vision as is envisioned in the poem “Unhoused Memory” where even the “dead’s hollow sockets have perfect vision.” The body, unhoused in being, stripped to the bones has perfect equipoise and proportion as it balances precariously on a string. In this section Sen also delves into the world of music and sound in poems like “Synthetic Heart” and “Concerto”—guitar strings, violin, chanting, humming, fingers flying delicately on piano keys—all these sounds reverberate through this section.

CONCERTO

for Jill Richards

Each soundwave, like breath-pause reverberation
is minutely calibrated — each movement, pitch-
perfect.

Over time, these flurries morph into a slow-motion
canter, fingernails galloping in air — landing softly

on keys of glazed ivory-white and obsidian-black.
Music uncharted on sheets — yet instantaneous

as spontaneous birth-cry. You lie on the piano, your
hands dangling, limp as if in post-delivery
exhaustion.

Memories past-present, adequacies-inadequacies
—vase-bottled — a bouquet of unexpected
flowering.

Violet and red, hemp and chillies — these aromas
fill
our lungs with sea-sonic magic, song and poetry.

Stein wines find their *way* into fossil-earthenware.
Unpeeling scales reveal inner chords —

silence, slowly unmuting orchestral strains —
echoes heard only by initiated ears. As you reach in,

and pluck the piano-hammers — a crescendo.
White piano's white noise in a bright white room —

our soiree's aria, word-stained and red-etched.

Book II constitutes poems from Sen's earlier collection, *South African Woodcut*, published almost three decades earlier in 1995. He transports the reader to the Africa that existed 30 years ago when apartheid was officially outlawed in Africa. Sen includes these "to lend and complete a socio-historical literary arc."

In *Red*, Sen captures his intense engagement with nature, with the fossilised past that points to a single place of origin of mankind on earth. It is hymn to our present times—the age of anthropocene and climate change, when humans have caused irreversible changes in the earth's ecosystems. At the same time, it carries us back to our ancestors (human and non-human) giving a compelling account of our anthropological history and the hazards of extraction economies in the age of global capitalism.